



The Sound of Silence: The Death of Aaron's Sons Torah Reflections on *Parashat Shemini*

Leviticus 9:1 - 11:47

24 Nissan 5767

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When we greet a mourner during the *shiva* period, the seven days of mourning, we do so in silence. We allow the mourner to initiate conversation if he or she so desires. In a modern Western culture which perceives silence as awkward and tries to fill it with constant conversation, this is a rare silent gesture meant to acknowledge deep pain and honor the possibility that this death may be so wrenching words are insufficient. It also gives us the opportunity to hear without the interjection of our own words, judgment, and ideas.

In our Torah portion we read about the death of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. Nadab and Abihu offer an unauthorized sacrifice and they are consumed in a fire which issues forth from "before God." The tragic account concludes with the brief note that "Aaron was silent." His apparent lack of response to God's harsh judgment may seem surprising; and further we might be challenged by Midrash Rabbah's commentary that Aaron's silence was rewarded with exclusive communication with God. We arguably could understand Midrash Rabbah to mean that Aaron's silent acceptance in the face of horror was a sort of blind obedience required by a zealous God. The tradition, however, suggests an understanding of Aaron's silence as something which transcends unquestioning obedience. Rabbi Nahman of Breslav reflects that silence is a higher form of engagement with the world and can move us beyond more limiting forms of communication and expression:

In youth, one learns to talk; in maturity, one learns to be silent. This is man's problem: that he learns to talk before he learns to be silent. Speech signifies comprehensibility. Melody is beyond language, expressing moods which words cannot describe. *Silence is yet higher.*

As we accompany the mourner, or even as we seek to address loss in our own life, Rabbi Nahman identifies here one hierarchy of engagement: speech - melody - silence. This framework allows us to engage with others and with our experience at different levels and in situationally appropriate ways. Aaron's loss is profound. What words would be sufficient? What songs could possibly be appropriate? In his silence, however, we can read much.

Ecclesiastes tells us, in word and in verse structure, that birth is not judged better than death and that speaking is not necessarily preferred to silence. Rather what we judge to be good or bad may reflect our own individual and cultural biases, and that if we are silent and listen we might gain a new understanding. In our most central prayer, for example, we say "*Shema Yisrael*, Hear O' Israel." We do not say "speak O' Israel" or even "sing O' Israel." Silence and hearing are core values and do not necessarily just denote obedience, but can suggest a call to understanding through silence's own capacious realm.

Herman Hesse makes explicit in his Buddhist tale Siddartha two sentiments implicit in Ecclesiastes. Hesse explores what can be held in our consciousness about the world

through silence and listening. The protagonist's moment of enlightenment echoes Ecclesiastes' suspension of judgment regarding human experience:

Siddartha listened. He was now nothing but a listener, completely concentrated on listening.... Already, he could no longer tell the many voices apart, not the happy ones from the weeping ones, not the ones of children from those of men, they all belonged together, the lamentation of yearning and the laughter of the knowledgeable one, the scream of rage and the moaning of the dying ones, everything was one, everything was intertwined, and connected, entangled a thousand times. And everything together, all vices, all goals, all yearning, all suffering, all pleasure, all that was good and evil, all of this together was the world. All of it together was the flow of events, was the music of life.

Herman Hesse, Rabbi Nahman, and Ecclesiastes suggest silence and listening as means through which additional levels of discernment can come to us and our presuppositions may be re-examined. Aaron experiences direct divine communication perhaps not because of unthinking obedience, but through the potential held by the silence itself. In silence we can sometimes discover deeper meaning, or serve as an accepting presence during a companion's time of grief. In comprehending what silence may hold for us, we might gain comfort using it to convey empathy and understanding, or simply to honor the pain of loss.

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