

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Aaron holds his peace. He is silent.

In a book of Torah known for its unfeeling lists of rules, Aaron's silence shows us an unspoken but relatable moment of grief. Using my own family story as a way in, I have tried to listen a little more closely. As I see it, the silent moment shows Aaron seeing the bleak reality of his new job for the first time. In this new world of priestly service, not even the death of his sons will defer his obligation to serve God at the mishkan. Looking over this moment of profound loss, I imagine Aaron coming to terms with the significance of holy work and the high price he will pay for it. It leaves him speechless.

While my forefathers were not kohanim, they nevertheless worked perilous jobs as coal miners in Pennsylvania's Anthracite region. As a child, my mother always impressed me when she could glance at a black stone I brought her and tell me if it was coal or shale. Because of the mines, practically everyone in her hometown could do the same. Like Aaron and his sons, her town's relationship with their industry was total and all-consuming.

As with Nadav and Avihu, my family's relationship with mining is not without accidents and tragedies. The Pennsylvania state government still maintains records of the hundreds of men who suffered in mining accidents in the region between 1899 and 1972. In these state records, I found new pieces of my own family's history. At the age of thirteen, my great-uncle Jimmy had one of his fingers crushed by a falling sack of coal. Joe Rompalo fell from a roof. Albert Norris was struck and killed by a runaway coal car. While I did not find my grandfather listed among the injured, I know well that he died of coal miner's emphysema—"black lung" from prolonged exposure to dust in the mines. Holding these stories in mind, I have a fuller sense of the sacrifices my ancestors made to their work, and like Aaron, fall quiet to appreciate the gravity of their commitment.

Whether as holy service or daily labor, each of us in the Jewish world take up some form of *avodah* (work). When I hear Parashat Shemini through my own family's past, I find that Aaron's silence provokes me to examine the significance of my own work. I ask myself: What can I offer? Whom do I really serve? Inasmuch as we can hear in Torah the story of our own lives, in Leviticus we can hear the story of our lives' labor. Parashat Shemini shows us that even holy service can come with costs. In Aaron's silence, I hear Torah's call to hold my peace and make my *avodah* something bigger.

For Discussion: Living lives of much greater comfort and freedom than our ancestors, how can we understand and connect to the idea of *avodah* - work/service and dedication to God? Can we emulate Aaron? Do we wish to?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Shemini

Shabbat Mahar Hodesh

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

April 14, 2018 | 29 Nisan 5778

Annual | Leviticus 9:1-11:47 (Etz Hayim p. 630-642; Hertz p. 443-454)
 Triennial Leviticus 10:12-11:32 (Etz Hayim p. 635-641; Hertz p. 447-452)
 Haftarah | 1 Samuel 20:18-42 (Etz Hayim p. 643-648; Hertz p. 454-458)

D'var Torah: The Silence of Aaron

Zushe Wiener, Conservative Yeshiva & RRC Rabbinical Student

In Parashat Shemini, we see that holy service is not without its perils. This portion of Leviticus sees Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu killed after using their fire pans to bring a "strange" offering to the mishkan, consumed by the fire that emerges from the holy altar. Commentators like Ibn Ezra observe that the two brothers were not instructed to burn incense, nor they did use a consecrated fire (one that would not have been "strange"). Ultimately, Nadav and Avihu's offering was not "one commanded to them" by God, and the misdeed proves to be fatal. What the text does not shed light on, however, is Nadav and Avihu's exact intentions—was it deliberate misconduct or human error? Reading these actions with a more contemporary lens, I would suggest we read Nadav and Avihu's deaths as a Tanakhic account of an industrial accident.

Immediately after the tragedy, Moses steps in to "deal" with the situation - both by explaining it and cleaning up the mess. He tells Aaron that this was apparently what God meant when he said: "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people" (10:3). I imagine the scene outside the mishkan tent, Aaron half-listening to Moses and then watching as the bodies are removed and lain to rest outside the camp. But before the work of the mishkan resumes, the text tells us: *Vayidom Aharon*.

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D'var Haftarah: Keep it Clean

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The rabbinic sages paid very close attention to how the characters in the Tanakh (Bible) expressed themselves, looking for potential lessons to be learned.

In our Haftarah, when King Saul notices that David is absent from the special festive meal celebrating Rosh Hodesh (the new month), he explains/justifies it to himself, thinking “It is a mischance. He is not pure (*bilti tahor*), surely, he is not pure (*lo tahor*.” (20:26) This reason would have made sense because the Rosh Hodesh celebration included a sacrificial feast which would have required ritual purity to be eaten.

However, as the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Pesachim 3a describes, this is not the point which captured Rabbi Aha bar Yaakov’s attention. Instead, he was taken by the way Saul’s thoughts on this subject were expressed. It would have been much clearer and more efficient if the Tanakh had just said “*tamei*” (impure) instead of the expressions “*bilti tahor*” and “*lo tahor*,” both meaning “not pure”. After all, this is just a recording of what Saul was thinking. But even so, the Tanakh goes out of its way to replace the more vulgar “*tamei*.”

But Rabbi Aha bar Yaakov took this further, suggesting it as the basis for a statement by Rabbi Joshua ben Levi that “One should never express oneself vulgarly.” By Rabbi Aha bar Yaakov’s logic, If the **Tanakh** goes out of its way to use nicer/cleaner language, it should be obvious that we should as well.

In our day when people are testing the limits of the use of what previously might have been considered foul language in common parlance and in public expression, this should be a valuable lesson. The sages wisely discerned that we are judged by how we express ourselves, and that how we express ourselves is a choice. And using this piece of our Haftarah, they found a way, both cute and profound, to teach us this message.

For Discussion: What changes have you seen in how both private individuals and public figures express themselves? How important is the “way” we say something? What does it say about us? What does it say to the person/people we are addressing?

Parashat Shemini Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

After 7 days of preparations, Aaron and his sons arrive at the Eighth (Shemini) Day - the final stage of becoming Kohanim. Following this, in chapter 11, we receive instructions about animals that we may and may not eat.

- 1) On the eighth day, after the preparation period was over, Moshe calls over Aaron and his sons, and the Elders of Israel. He instructs Aaron regarding his sacrifices, and tells him to tell the people what to bring (9:1-4). Why do you think that Moshe did not tell the people directly?
- 2) The exact role of Aaron and of his sons in the sacrificial process is told many times in detail (9:8-21). Why not simply state that the Kohanim did the sacrificing?
- 3) Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron’s sons, bring before God ‘a foreign fire that He did not command’ (10:1). What does ‘a foreign fire’ mean? Looking at the context might help you reach a deeper answer. What happens to Nadav and Avihu as a result of this?
- 4) Aaron changed the rules of the Hatat sacrifice on his own (10:16-20). What was his reasoning? How does Moshe react when he understands the reasoning? Why might we think of Aaron’s action as daring, considering what happened earlier with Nadav and Avihu?
- 5) We may only eat animals labeled as ‘pure’ (today we use the term ‘Kosher’). What are the signs of a ‘pure’ animal (11:3)? How about the signs of ‘pure’ fish (11:9)?

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