

“Aaron Was Silent”

Rabbi Lester Bronstein, d’var torah for Shabbat *Sh’mini*, April 18, 2020

Our weekly portion gives us a paradoxical mixture of social distancing and extreme closeness. The wilderness tabernacle, the *mishkan*, is about to be dedicated in an elaborate ceremony stretching over eight days. On the eighth and final day, *hayom hash’mini*, Aaron the High Priest prepares to offer a series of totemic animals and grain on the sacrificial altar, all according to a carefully specified protocol.

The people must stand back. Aaron alone must come forward. The pilot light beneath the altar will mysteriously flame up and make smoke of the slaughtered animals and flour mixed with oil. The altar will become official, and the people will have the sense that all is right with the world; that the relationship between their small selves and the great Cosmos is now in balance.

Aaron lifts his hands to bless his people, no doubt with the same liturgy we use to bless our children to this very day: *Y’varech’cha* – may God bless you and guard you; *Ya’er* – may God’s light shine on you and show you grace; *Yisa’* – may God’s countenance be lifted up to you and show you peace. Wholeness. Well-being. Balance.

Then Aaron’s heirs to the priesthood, his two older sons Nadav and Avihu, whose names mean “sacred gift” and “I acknowledge my father,” rush toward the altar with their firepans blazing. They offer *eish zara*, or “foreign fire,” some original

ritual not called for in the protocol, and certainly not in keeping with the rules of physical distancing in the sacred precinct.

A fire shoots forth from out of nowhere and burns them to a crisp. The people are no doubt shocked beyond belief. This pageant of hope and continuity has gone terribly wrong, dashing their sense of well-being and security; dashing their faith in their leaders and perhaps even in the Divine Presence.

Moses offers a lame but accurate comment: “This is what the Eternal meant by saying, ‘Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people.’” True enough, but woefully lacking in compassion. Yes, God warned everyone not to get too close, not to cross lines of danger, of contagion, of the unknown. The sons crossed the line, brazen in their youthful sense of indestructibility. But still. But still, they are dead, and a father is suddenly the worst sort of mourner, and the people’s belief system has come crashing down.

The Torah gives Aaron words that represent the truth of the moment perfectly: It gives him no words at all. Rather, it tells us, *vayidom Aharon*. “Aaron was silent.” Or, perhaps, “dumbfounded.” Where Moses can satisfy himself with a logical explanation, Aaron expresses what everyone truly feels. In his courageous silence he teaches us that silence is sometimes the only authentic – and helpful – articulation of the truth of the matter. The truth, sometimes, is that there is no explanation, and we cross all lines of integrity when we try to explain away our grief, our disappointment, our profound loss. That is certainly true when we try to explain away others’ grief.

The ancient Jewish calendar did not originally plan for us to emerge from the buoyant joy of Passover and go immediately to the commemoration of the Sho'ah, the destruction of six million of our Jewish kin. It wasn't supposed to be that way. Pesach was to define the narrative of our history. In many ways, it does. But as the pageant of our seder week draws to a close, we light yellow yizkor candles, the strangest fire of all, to commemorate the murdered millions of Auschwitz. Monday evening begins our day of marking the other defining moment in our people's history.

Seventy-five years on, we have done a good job of retrieving the best of Passover's positive message, and of not allowing the Sho'ah to dominate our Jewish sense of self. Still, this parashah that almost always comes right after Passover reminds us to account for both narratives, both truths, paradoxical as it may be. We are a people whose loss is inexplicable and, in every way, undeserved and unforgivable. We are also the people who broke the mold of history by leaving slavery and declaring ourselves free to accept the Torah and a covenanted way of life.

When our loved ones suffer loss, we know how to heal with loving silence. And when our fellow humans suffer oppression, we know how to give hope by raising our voices and standing with them until they, too, taste the sweetness of freedom that defines us. Standing now at a safe distance, of course, but soon standing hand in hand.