

## COPING WITH TRAUMATIC LOSS

### *A D'var Torah on Parashat Shemini* by Stephanie Tivona Reith

*Parashat Shemini* in *Sefer Vayikra*, the Book of Leviticus, opens in Chapter 9 with the culmination of a week-long ceremony inaugurating the *Mishkan* and ordaining the priests. All the people are gathered. Offerings have been sacrificed. Moshe and Aharon have blessed the entire community, and the glory of God, *Kavod-HaShem*, has appeared.

And then . . . tragedy. At the start of Chapter 10, verses 1 and 2, we read that Nadav and Avihu, two sons of Aharon, took their fire pans, put fire and incense in them, and offered before *HaShem eysh zarah*—strange, alien, foreign fire—which had not been commanded to them. And instantly fire came forth from *HaShem* and consumed them, and they died, on the spot, before the presence of *HaShem*.

What happened? Why did these two young men die such sudden, untimely deaths? The Rabbis have pondered many possibilities. Were they punished because they were drunk, as is alluded to later in the *parasha* by a prohibition against intoxication? Or because they were egotistical, offering to God what they wanted to offer? Or because they were ambitious, disrespectful to their elders, trying to show off in some way? Or was this not punishment at all? Was it an accident? In their youthful eagerness, did they approach the presence of *HaShem* too quickly? Out of excessive piety, did they come too close to divine fire? Or, as Reb Shefa conjectures in *Torah Journeys* (p. 111), did *HaShem* passionately embrace them as beloveds?

Questions. Questions. A young man dies in a car accident leaving behind a wife four months pregnant. A police officer is killed by a drunken driver as she stops to help passengers of a disabled car. A college student commits suicide. Thousands of people are killed by planes flown into buildings. Tens of thousands perish in earthquakes and tsunamis. Why those people? Why then? Why there? Why in that way?

In cases of traumatic death, the questions of Why seem to arise instantaneously, out of a searing need to make sense of the sense-less. As pastoral caregivers, we will be the receivers of such questions. And others may expect us to provide answers. But just as the text never really explains what happened exactly with Nadav and Avihu, and why, so the questions we receive may have no answers.

Steven Mitchell, in his forward to his translation of *Sefer Iyyov*, the Book of Job, our great book of Why, has this to say about these questions:

*There is never an answer to the great question of life and death, unless it is my answer or yours . . . these answers can't be imposed from the outside. They will resonate only where the questioner lets them enter. Because ultimately it isn't a question that is addressed, but a person. Our whole being has to be answered . . . [and even then] the answer consists mostly of questions.* (Stephen Mitchell, *The Book of Job*, North Point Press, 1987, pp. xviii-xix.)

When I lead grief support groups, one of the questions I ask of the mourners is, “What is the least helpful message you hear from others?” And among their responses, always, are some of the following: “It was God’s will.” “Now she is with God.” “He’s in a better place.” “She’s out of pain now.” “God must have wanted him home.” “Her soul is at rest.” “His troubles are over.” “You’ll see them again in heaven.”

In my view, that is exactly the kind of response Moshe gives in verse 3, when he says to Aharon: “This is what *HaShem* meant when *HaShem* said [that] through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people.” But according to scholar Nahama Leibowitz, nowhere in Torah is it found that God spoke these words to Moshe. So was this Moshe’s awkward, but ultimately unskillful attempt to comfort his brother? Was this his effort to make sense of the sense-less for himself? Do we as pastoral caregivers ever have that same impulse to find and share our own concepts of what God had in mind in moments of tragedy?

In response to Moshe’s uninvited offering of explanation about God’s intention, *va’yidom Aharon*—and Aharon was silent.

In a piece from The Women’s Torah Commentary (p. 221) called “After a Death . . . Then What?”, Rabbi Dayle Friedman cites a number of rabbinic responses to Aharon’s silence, all of which characterize Aharon as silently accepting God’s justice. These include Moses Mendelssohn’s argument that Aharon’s silence was an indication of “patience and resignation,” the Rashbam’s assertion that Aharon believed his sons had been honored in their deaths, and Rashi’s teaching that Aharon was actually rewarded for his silence when, later in the *parasha*, God addressed him directly.

But I don’t think Aharon’s silence was a calm, stoic, accepting silence. The derivation of the word *dom* shares the same root as *dam*, blood. The verb *damam* can mean simultaneously to be still, to grow dumb, to bleed. Fifteenth-century rabbi, Isaac ben Judah Abravanel, links *dom* with the noun *domeym*, meaning an inanimate object or a mineral. Aharon’s silence was a stony, shattered, stunned silence, a response to a trauma so deep, it bled the life-force from him. Leibowitz cites Abravanel as saying:

*Yidom Aharon . . . [Aharon’s] heart turned to lifeless stone, and he did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses’ consolation, for his soul had left him and he was speechless.* (Nehama Leibowitz, New Studies in Vayikra, Volume 1, translated by Rafael Fisch and Avner Tomaschoff, Eliner Library, Jerusalem, 1993, p. 13.)

When we as pastoral caregivers are called to be present for people whose grief is like Aharon’s, what do we do? The *halakhah* of our Jewish mourning rituals perhaps holds the answer—we are not to speak to the mourner until the mourner first speaks to us. Rebbetzin Blu Greenberg, reflecting on the death of her grown son by a careless driver, says this:

*. . . I now understand that the halachah enjoining the comforting visitor to hold back in silence serves a different function: to caution against offering a rationale for the decree of death. The deeper human religious response is to be silent, to live with the contradiction, and to affirm that we need not force meaning into tragedy. Sometimes, the deepest response of love is to be silent.* (“Contemporary Reflection on *Parashat Sh’mini*,” by Blu

Greenberg, in The Torah, A Women's Commentary, edited by Tamara Cohn Eskanazi and Andrea L. Weiss, URJ Press, 2008, p. 633)

But Moshe was not silent. He continued to speak. In verses 4-7 and 12-15, Moshe moves on from explicating God's meaning to giving instructions. He orders Aharon's nephews to carry away, by their tunics, the lifeless bodies of Nadav and Avihu and take them to a place outside the camp. He forbids Aharon and his other sons Elazar and Itamar from baring their heads or rending their clothes, or going outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and says that their kin and the entire house of Israel will bewail what happened. He details what needs to happen with the rest of the sacrifices, and orders the priests to eat the portion of the sacrifice that is theirs.

I confess to confusion and discomfort with Moshe's forbidding the priests to mourn. Yet, some of Moshe's actions I consider helpful. Often when people are in deep shock, when they are reeling from sudden and shattering loss, they may need a sense of structure, concrete actions to ground them, a sense of someone being in charge, of someone looking out for their welfare. And sometimes, as pastoral caregivers, that someone is us. Sometimes we are the ones to drive people to emergency rooms, to make calls to family members, to give information about funeral homes or *chevra kadisha*, to be sure those affected are safe and warm, fed and sheltered and cared for.

But Moshe's next actions in verses 16-18 also teach us about what not to do. For when Moshe discovers that his instructions to the priests to eat their portion of the offering were not followed, and that they burned the entire sacrifice instead, Moshe became furious and angrily rebuked Elazar and Itamar. Whatever Moshe's intent about the letter of the law and/or his fear that further ritual mistakes could produce the same fate Nadav and Avihu suffered, the Rabbis nonetheless censure him for this action and for his temper. As cited by Leibowitz (p. 137), the midrashic book *Sifri* attributes to Rabbi Eleazar the judgment that "Moshe became angry three times, and each time he fell into error," and that one of those times was when he became angry with Elazar and Itamar.

As pastoral caregivers, we at times may find that those we are trying to help don't want our help, or don't follow our advice, or simply can't do what we think is in their best interest. We must take care not to fall into Moshe's error, and in our anger, impatience, or pride, or even out of our own fear or grief, do or say things that make matters worse.

It is after Moshe's angry outburst that Aharon finally speaks. In verse 19, he says, "See the things that have befallen me. Had I eaten the offering, would *HaShem* have approved?" And verse 20 then relates that when Moshe heard this, he was content.

Whatever the reasons behind Elazar and Itamar burning the entire sacrifice, or the meaning behind Aharon's enigmatic statement—about which the Rabbis present a wide range of opinions—the Rabbis also give Moshe credit for finally stepping back. Leibowitz (pp. 138-139) cites Rashi as saying that Moshe was not ashamed to confess that he did not know, and Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv Rebbe, says that, "it was announced throughout the entire camp to teach the present and future leaders not to shrink from admitting an error in judgment, since even Moses had erred."

When we find ourselves in difficult pastoral situations, especially in moments of crisis, we will make mistakes. We will say the wrong thing, use the wrong tone of voice, misread situations, bring along our own agendas and baggage, get caught in the quagmire of our own beliefs and judgments, become immobilized by our own fears. And sometimes it will be those we are trying to help who turn around to help us. In those cases, we need the discernment to recognize our mistakes, the courage to admit our errors in judgment, and the compassion to forgive ourselves.

I could have done another whole *d'var Torah* on the lack of women's voices and grieving in this text. Nonetheless, this story in Leviticus Chapter 10 seems very real to me about some of what can happen in times of sudden loss and trauma—many, many questions with no answers, many different ways of reacting to shock and grief. The final teaching I take away from this *parasha* is related to Moshe's instruction in verse 6 that the entire House of Israel bewail what happened. As pastoral caregivers, we also have a role in helping our communities mourn together as a people, to help each other in times of crisis, and, as Isaiah says, “to take comfort, and comfort each other.” *Nachamu, nachamu ami*.