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Parashat Shmini 2024  
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Those of Us Left Behind

1.

There is something about silence that can be more powerful,  
more arresting sometimes even than any sound.

There is a hard story in this week's Torah,  
One of the most difficult and mysterious  
And if you know our torah, you know that is saying  
something

You see, this week we have a story about Aaron's sons,  
Nadav and Abihu  
who, presumably because we're at the end of the  
culmination of the dedication of the temple  
It is the grand opening, the ribbon cutting ceremony  
The dedication of the holy place we've been working for  
chapters to build and set up so that God would be back  
with us

And probably because of all of this, because of the  
excitement

Or, perhaps, because – as my teacher Avivah Zornberg  
suggests, the people were jumpy and anxious,

Wanting everything to be just right

We don't know why but

Nadav and Abihu, Aaron's sons

וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתֶם

Offer a strange fire to God, one that was not commanded

They go rogue, running into the holy of holies

And like someone running into a tornado or earthquake

They are killed by the holy fire tearing through the holy of holies

And while the rabbis have no lack of ideas about what

Nadav and Abihu did to deserve their untimely death

They were drunk,

they were arrogant,

they were impatient,

they weren't collaborative – they didn't consult each other,

they weren't commanded,

they wanted to be one with god, without boundaries

Many more ideas

Not only do none of these interpretations seem to resolve what is essentially unresolvable, tragic death

We know that when there are this many interpretations it often means the rabbis know they don't have the answer either

Rather, it seems, there is not one, singular compelling explanation for the tragic deaths of Nadav and Abihu

Just as it is with some of the tragic deaths in our world  
As unsatisfying as it is  
We are left without an answer

2.

Furthermore

While it's understandable, human to want that answer  
This shabbat, I want to suggest it is the wrong question.

Because this week I noticed

That even though this story is referred to a few times in  
torah

We barely hear about Nadav and Abihu before this tragic  
moment.

What I'm saying is that they are not prominent characters.

They're listed in one genealogy section and mentioned in  
one holy excursion with some elders up Mt. Sinai

And while you can, and while the rabbis do, make a meal  
out of these few scraps

I'm just saying nothing Nadav and Abihu ever said was  
even recorded

There's nothing much in their lives to work with,

We just have their death,

And even that, dramatic as it is, is only three verses

Not to mention, typically, if someone dies tragically in the  
stories of Torah, Especially if God is involved

God is not shy about expressing what that person or  
people did wrong (!)

We don't have to like it but, for better or worse, in Torah, if God is involved, we know *exactly* why someone dies.

Like take Korach, rebel that he was,

Korach and his followers get swallowed up in a God created earthquake.

No subtlety there.

Or, lots of Israelites die at God's hand after the golden calf fiasco, god is furious.

Right there in Torah

Pharaoh and his courtiers dies in the red sea when he tries to chase after us one last time,

God is directly behind that too.

Generation of the Flood, Noah's ark, Babel, shall I keep going or do you get my drift?

When divine punishment is involved in Torah

(In case it is not obvious, I don't believe in a God that punishes like this in our world, I'm talking about Torah)

When divine punishment is involved in the stories of our Torah

No one could accuse God of being subtle

God is anything but subtle

Furthermore, most of the major characters in Torah die of old age.

And as for the exceptions

The ones who do not live out their lives –  
For example, our mother Rachel who dies in childbirth –  
God is not directly involved, for better or worse  
Rachel's death, sad as it is, does not read like divine  
punishment  
There's no overriding reason

So what I'm saying is that, when it comes to death in Torah,  
God either basically lets nature or society take its course  
or God gets directly involved, usually out of explicit divine  
anger,  
Creating a punishment as a specific consequence.

3.

So since their death does not seem to be overtly ordained  
by God  
There is no evidence of a divine temper flair

Perhaps the question is not what Nadav and Avihu did  
wrong

So perhaps this story is not so much about Nadav and  
Abihu

but instead about Aaron, the father who is left behind.

Moses and all of us who are there to try to comfort Aaron

All of *us* who are left behind.

It is a story then, about our *response* to tragedy, especially  
when we don't have answers, then and now.

And in our torah this week,

I believe we learn one thing *not* to do:

After the death of Aaron's sons  
Moses jumps in and makes a little speech to Aaron  
Interpreting the truncated lives of Aaron's children as a sign  
signifying they were "extra holy"  
As if their death is some kind of a divine compliment  
God drawing them closer, that sort of thing  
And here I part company with the many rabbis who read  
Moses' speech as comforting to Aaron

As in, Aaron was still worried about the Golden Calf  
situation and the possible lack of merit of his sons  
And so Moses saying that somehow their death was not  
due to  
anything they did wrong  
or anything Aaron did wrong but rather was somehow a  
signal that they were extra holy –

Although the majority of the commentators think this is  
what happened and it comforted Aaron

I don't buy any of it

I don't think our God – who treasures life,  
And I don't think our tradition which is adamantly against  
martyrdom – was giving a message through these tragic  
events

I think these deaths of Nadav and Abihu  
are in the category of Rachel dying in childbirth  
Abel dying at the hands of his out of control brother  
Or deaths today, in illness, natural disaster, accidents  
Even, yes, in war  
These deaths are tragic, nothing more

I think God cries for these innocents, mourns the lives that  
go un-lived

In other words, not only was Moses misrepresenting God  
to Aaron

Moses was committing the cardinal pastoral sin of  
explaining the pain away

I have seen this year more than any other in my life  
Maybe you have too  
How we have used words and words and words –  
Geopolitical hot takes,  
Opinions on military strategies  
Diplomatic efforts  
Op Eds  
Statements and slogans,  
Of course posts on social media, swag and printed flags  
Much of it well intended  
Resolutions and solutions  
All of it trying to make sense of the war, make it better,  
paper it over

All of it trying to cover up the pain of the war or justify one side while erasing the other

It is not that some of these words are not helpful at times or even necessary at others

It is just that these words

that are only designed to explain it all away, defend, argue the case

If these are the only words we have

If these are the only words we allow ourselves to use

Since they don't acknowledge the depth or the nature of the kind of pain that knows no bounds and doesn't always pick a side

They cannot then treat that pain

Who was Moses fooling anyway?

Wasn't he also shattered by the deaths of these young men, his brother's children?

Couldn't he have just sat with his older brother, quietly, for a little while?

4.

And in fact, it is worth noting that after this little speech of Moses

וַיֵּדָם אַהֲרֹן

Aaron is still and silent



Or perhaps, as the rabbis suggest, he is alternately weeping<sup>1</sup> and silent  
Either way, he cannot summon a single phrase  
What I'm saying is that Moses' speech didn't work<sup>2</sup>  
Aaron shows no signs of seeming comforted

וַיִּדַם אֶהָרֶן

Aaron was silent

And let's remember that Aaron is the one who was known for being verbally gifted, a talker

Remember Aaron is the one who spoke to Pharaoh when no one else would

Aaron talked his way in and out of Egypt, in and out of the Golden calf

He never has a lack of words.

That's how we know him –

The life of the party,  
the leader of the pack,

the consummate front man

Only now with everyone looking at him – for the first time in his life Aaron had nothing at all to say.

וַיִּדַם אֶהָרֶן

And Aaron was still. Silent

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<sup>1</sup> Ramban to Lev 10:8

וַיִּדַם אֶהָרֶן (AND AARON WAS SILENT). This means that he had cried aloud, but then he became silent.

<sup>2</sup> It was as if his heart turned to lifeless stone, according to Abarbanel

Nor did he accept Moses' consolation

For his breath left him and he was speechless

As if his heart turned to lifeless stone, according to  
Abarbanel  
His breath left him and he was speechless

וַיִּדָם

The word has a measure of waiting in it,  
It is the opposite of singing psalms.  
The heaviest silence you can imagine.

6.

Pirke deRabbi Eliezer says there are some sounds when  
lives are inalterably changed – that span from one end of  
the world to the other  
The sound of a divorce, of a soul leaving its body, of a fruit  
tree chopped down  
Sounds that span from one end of the world to the other  
and yet ואין הקול נשמע  
they are not heard  
Perhaps Aaron's silence was just such an inaudible sound  
It was so vast, it carried so much, it could not be heard by  
those around him

Perhaps only God could hear Aaron's silence

Because you see, Rashi points out that for the first time in  
all of Torah –

After the death of Nadav and Abihu  
Before God gives any rules or instructions  
וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר

God addresses Aaron alone in that silence  
Not *with* Moses, not through Moses, no Moses, no people,  
God speaks to Aaron alone

And I believe on this shabbat that God met with Aaron  
there for a long time  
We could say it was the first silent prayer  
With Aaron still and quiet and God meeting him in that  
quiet –  
I believe God covered Aaron with the wings of love and  
compassion  
Until Aaron was finally able  
To hear the words from heaven once again, to take in the  
words of others  
And eventually speak himself back into the world of the  
living

אֲדַנִּי שְׁפֹתַי תִּפְתָּח וּפִי יִגִּיד תְּהִלָּתְךָ

Oh God, open my mouth, open our mouths,  
just as you once did for Aaron  
So that even during this dark moment in our history, even  
now  
We may declare your glory  
Making a world deserving of your trust and light