# Confronting Tragedy: Thoughts on Parashat Shemini, April 21, 2012

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In this week's Torah portion, we read of the tragic deaths of two of Aaron's sons. When he learned the sad news, "Aaron was silent," vayidom Aharon. Commentators have offered various explanations of Aaron's silence. He may have been speechless due to shock; he may have had angry thoughts in his heart, but he controlled himself from uttering them; he may have been silent as a sign of acceptance of God's judgment.

Within biblical tradition, there are a number of phrases relating to confrontation with tragedy.

"Min haMetsar Karati Y-ah," I call out to God from distress. When in pain, it is natural to cry out to God, to shed tears, to lament our sufferings and our losses. To cry out when we are in distress is a first step in the grieving process.

"Tefillah leHabakuk haNavi al Shigyonoth." Dr. David de Sola Pool has translated this passage: "A prayer of Habakuk the prophet, in perplexity." After crying out at our initial grief, we move to another level of mourning. We are perplexed. We want to know why this tragedy has happened? We want to understand how to reconcile this disaster with our belief in God's goodness. We are in a state of emotional and spiritual confusion.

"Mima-amakim keratikha Ado-nai." I call out to God from the depths of my being. This introduces the next stage in confronting tragedy. It is a profound recognition, from the deepest recesses of our being, that we turn to—and depend upon—God. It is a depth of understanding that transcends tears, words, perplexity. It is a depth of understanding and acceptance that places our lives in complete context with the Almighty. We may be heart-broken; we may be perplexed; we may be angry—but at the very root of who we are, we feel the solace of being in God's presence. When we reach this deepest level of understanding, we find that we don't have words or sounds that can articulate this inner clarity. We fall silent.

“And Aaron was silent.” Aaron was on a very high spiritual plane. While he surely felt the anguish of “Min haMetsar,” and experienced the perplexity of “Shigyonoth,” he experienced the tragedy “Mima-amakim,” from the very depths of his being. His silence reflected a profound inner wisdom that was too deep for tears and too deep for words.

“May happiness multiply in Israel, and may sadness be driven away.”

Angel for Shabbat