The Sounds of Silence...and Screams: Thoughts for Parashat Shemini

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Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu brought a "strange fire" to the altar and were immediately stricken as Divine punishment for their sacrilege. Upon learning of the tragic deaths of his sons, Aaron must surely have been horrified. Yet, the Torah reports: Vayidom Aharon, and Aaron remained silent.

Silent? How was he able to remain silent at such a moment? We would have expected an emotional outburst, a cry of grief...anything but stone silence.

Perhaps we can gain deeper insight by focusing on the word "Vayidom," and he was silent. This word is related to "dam," blood. What the verse may be saying is that while Aaron remained silent on the outside, his blood was raging with emotion inside of him. Vayidom: and Aaron was silent: in his great wisdom he realized that he had to accept the reality of the death of Nadav and Avihu. What could he possibly say at such a moment? Words were meaningless in the face of death. The wise response is—silence. Vayidom, and Aaron's blood was seething. Although his mind understood the futility of crying out, his heart was a father's heart. His anguish was real. If he did not express his grief outwardly, he certainly cried inwardly.

Aaron had the mighty wisdom and self-control to remain silent, even while he was experiencing emotional turmoil deep inside himself, in his very blood. Surely, silence is a wise response to many tragedies that have taken place and over which we have no control whatsoever.

But sometimes silence is the wrong response. Sometimes we must cry out. A Talmudic passage (Sotah 11a) offers an imaginary scenario relating to when Pharaoh was deciding to enslave the Israelites and murder their male babies. "Said Rabbi Hiyya son of Abba in the name of Rabbi Simai: Three were involved in that decision: Bilam, Job and Yitro." Bilam, who advised in favor of these evil decrees, ultimately died a violent death. Job, who remained neutral, was later punished with horrible sufferings. Yitro, who opposed Pharaoh's decrees, had to flee, but was ultimately rewarded so that his descendants were great teachers of

Torah. Bilam went along with Pharaoh's decisions either because he actually agreed with Pharaoh, or because he thought it was in his own best interest not to resist the monarch. By being a "yes man," Bilam would gain power and favors from Pharaoh. He had no qualms about becoming an accomplice to enslaving a whole nation and murdering their babies. Justice demands that Bilam be punished for his moral turpitude. Yitro resisted Pharaoh's decisions, even at personal risk. Yitro would not be party to wicked decrees. He stood up on behalf of the endangered Israelites and was compelled to flee from Pharaoh's wrath. Justice demands that Yitro be rewarded for his moral heroism.

But what about Job? What is the nature of his sin that made him deserving of terrible sufferings? After all, Job did not say that he agreed with Pharaoh; he did not validate Pharaoh's decrees. He simply stayed silent. He was prudent. He may have thought: "Pharaoh is going to do this regardless of what I say. Why should I endanger myself? Why should I incur his anger? Why should I stand up for the Israelites, or for righteousness, or for compassion? The safest thing for me is to remain silent."

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (d. 1979), for many years associated with the Mirrer Yeshiva, commented that Job was punished precisely because he remained silent. When one sees injustice, one must scream out in opposition. Silence is not an option for a good person. Even if one suspects that his/her words will have no positive impact, one must not remain silent. Perhaps words will bear fruit; perhaps resistance to evil will empower others to add their voices of protest. Perhaps the words will have no impact at all right now but may provide courage to others in the future. If one does not scream out in the face of injustice and suffering, this indicates a lack of identification with the victims; it reflects a moral callousness deserving of rebuke.

In the face of past tragedy, silence may often be the appropriate and wise response. No words can change what has already happened. But in the face of contemporary evil, silence is morally repugnant. One must scream out, one must protest, one must demand justice. Remaining silent makes one an accomplice, puts one in the category of Job. The silent onlooker is a tragic figure who, because of moral weakness, brings suffering upon him/herself and upon others.

Angel for Shabbat