

Vayidom Aharon

Death of his son Philip

Hamilton: Quiet Uptown:

[ANGELICA]

There are moments that the words don't reach
There is suffering too terrible to name
You hold your child as tight as you can
And push away the unimaginable
The moments when you're in so deep
It feels easier to just swim down

[ANGELICA/ENSEMBLE]

The Hamiltons move uptown
And learn to live with the unimaginable

[HAMILTON]

I spend hours in the garden
I walk alone to the store
And it's quiet uptown
I never liked the quiet before
I take the children to church on Sunday
A sign of the cross at the door
And I pray
That never used to happen before

Alexander Hamilton, who was defined by his words in speeches, letters, and books, was suddenly quiet, alone, with nothing that could console him as he “learned to live with the unimaginable.”

Our pesukim: Vayikra 10:3

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה | לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדָּשׁ וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־הָעָם
אֶכְבֹּד וַיִּדַּם אַהֲרֹן:

- Moses then said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke of when He said, ‘Among those who are near to Me I will show Myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured.’” Aaron remained silent. (Lev. 10:3)
- When Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found that it had been burned up, he was angry with Eleazar and Itamar, Aaron’s remaining sons, and asked, “Why didn’t you eat the sin offering in the Sanctuary area? It is most holy; it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the

Lord. Since its blood was not taken into the Holy Place, you should have eaten the goat in the Sanctuary area, as I commanded.”

- Aaron replied to Moses, “Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the Lord have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?” When Moses heard this, he approved. (Lev. 10:16–20)

In our parsha, we have the mystery of what exactly Nadav and Avihu did to deserve punishment. The mefarshim debate this issue, but we will set it aside for now. Our focus is on Aharon’s reaction to the death of his children.

Aharon, from day one was defined by his speaking on behalf of Moshe and being Moshe’s voice. In fact this is exactly how he was introduced to us as a character all the way back in Shemot. Go back to Shemot 4:14-17

וַיַּחֲרֶאֱפֵי יְהוָה בְּמִשְׁפָּה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלֹא אֶהְיֶה לְךָ אֶחָיוּד הַלּוֹי יִדְעָתִי כִּי־דַבֵּר יִדְבֹר הוּא וְגַם הִנֵּה־הוּא יֵצֵא לְקִרְאֹתְךָ וְרָאָה וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ:

The LORD became angry with Moses, and He said, “There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you.

טו

וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלָיו וְשַׂמְתָּ אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים בְּפִיו וְאָנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְעִם־פִּיהוּ וְהוֹרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשׂוּן:

You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do—

טז

וְדַבַּר־הוּא לְךָ אֶל־הָעָם וְהָיָה הוּא יְהִי־לְךָ לְפֹה וְאַתָּה תְהִי־לּוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים:

and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him,

This same Aharon was suddenly silent. This is significant. What do we make of this silence? What does it mean?

Past examples Biblical leaders showed a willingness to protest and argue with God in the face of tragedy. See Avraham and Yaakov who cried out in protest:

- How are we to understand this response to the deaths of his two sons? Should he not have protested, as Abraham before him in response to God's desire to destroy Sodom, in Breishit 18:25

● חֲלֵלָה לְךָ מַעֲשֵׂת | כַּדְּבַר הַזֶּה לְהַמִּית צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע וְהִיָּה כְצִדִיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלֵלָה לְךָ הַשִּׁפּוֹט כָּל־הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

- Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"
- Or like Yaakov at his perceived loss of Yosef in Breishit 37:35

● וַיִּקְמוּ כָל־בָּנָיו וְכָל־בָּנוֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶרְדּוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי אָבִל שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּבֶךְ אֶתֹּ אָבִיו:

- All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, "No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol." Thus his father bewailed him.
- (<https://www.jtsa.edu/seeing-god-in-loss>)
- Even Moshe was someone who was willing to occasionally argue with God in the face of tragedy, for example when God wants to destroy the people after the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:11)

● וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פָּנָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה יְהוָה יַחַרְרָה אַפָּךְ בְּעַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גְּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה:

- "But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, "Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand."

Tanakh Usage: If we look throughout Tanakh, we see various meanings:

- "stillness" or "murmuring," like the "still small voice" Elijah heard only after the wind, earthquake and fire (1 Kings 19:12).
- inwardness, hearing loudly the boom of death (Ezekiel 24:17).
- personal submission to God's yoke (Lamentations 3:28).
- "comfort," like a weaned child (Psalm 131:2).
- Yehoshua - the sun stopped in its tracks, movement ceased, 10:12-13
- R' Yitzchak Etshalom: Motion/activity suddenly stopped in its tracks. The motion/inertia is still there, but all movement has ceased. It is a struggle.

Mefarshim:

- Onkelos, then Rashi: Aharon was silent. A sign of his great faith and trust in God. Not a mourning silence, but a submissive acceptance, and according to the midrash, he received a reward from God for this in that God spoke to him directly in the following pesukim.
- Nechama Leibowitz cites R Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein (late 1800's) who suggests a difference between Vayishtok which means "abstaining from speaking, weeping,

groaning, or any other outward manifestation,” while Vayidom “connotes inner peace and calmness of spirit.” His heart was at peace and his spirit calm even internally. No questioning of God’s ways. Total acceptance.

- Rashbam: following the example of Yechezkel (24:17) where God tells Yechezkel:

● הָאֲנִיָּקָה אֶל־תִּעֲשֶׂה

- Don’t cry out in mourning, Rashbam suggests that Aharon’s instinct was to burst out into a cry of mourning, but he conquered that instinct and held it back. The feelings are there but he conquered them for the sake of God and the collective community
- Abravanel:

● אברבנאל על תורה, ויקרא י'א:א'

● נהפך לבו והיה כאבן דומם ולא נשא קולו בבכי ובמספד כאב על בנים, גם לא קיבל תנחומים ממשה, כי לא נותרה בו נשמה והדיבור אין בו.

- “Aharon’s heart turned to lifeless stone. He did not weep and mourn like a bereaved father, nor did he accept Moses’ attempts to console him, for his soul had left him and he was speechless.” Total and utter shock rather than piety. A human response. He does not speak b/c there are no words. It’s quiet.
- Ramban: Two different explanations, but both assume that Aharon started by letting out tears and a cry, but then
 - He became silent. This is not acceptance, but a struggle to stay silent
 - He ceased his mourning in an act of submission and he is calmed
- R’ Shai Held cites Bible scholar Baruch Levine: this root d-m-m might actually have two separate meanings: one meaning “to be still,” while the other “to mourn, to moan”. In this case, Aharon acted in the totally understandable and normal manner of true mourning. But Moshe forbids him from initiating formal Avelut. Instead the people will mourn on their behalf.

This debate also sheds light on how we understand Moshe’s attempts to console. Moshe says: “Among those who are near to Me, I will show Myself holy.” According to Rashi, he said, “Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than you and me.”

1. Genuine attempt to console with sensitivity that is fully accepted
2. Misguided attempt to console, slightly insensitive, not actually accepted
- 3.

Rabbi Sacks on the Second Exchange:

The Pesukim state:

When Moses inquired about the goat of the sin offering and found that it had been burned up, he was angry with Eleazar and Itamar, Aaron’s remaining sons, and asked, “Why didn’t you eat the sin offering in the Sanctuary area? It is most holy; it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the Lord. Since its blood was not taken into the Holy Place, you should have eaten the goat in the Sanctuary area, as I commanded.”

Aaron replied to Moses, “Today they sacrificed their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the Lord have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?” When Moses heard this, he approved. (Lev. 10:16–20)

Rabbi Sacks: We can only guess at the precise import of these words. Perhaps they mean this: “I know that in general, a High Priest is forbidden to mourn as if he were an ordinary individual. That is the law, and I accept it. But had I acted on this inaugural day as if nothing had happened, as if my sons had not died, would this not seem to the people as if I were heartless, as if human life and death meant nothing, as if the service of God meant a renunciation of my humanity?”

Rabbi Sacks on Moshe vs. Aharon, Hope and Humanity: These are two different characteristics of the Jewish people throughout history. “In this exchange between two brothers, a momentous courage is born: the courage of an Aaron who has the strength to grieve and not accept any easy consolation, and the courage of a Moses who has the strength to keep going in spite of grief. It is almost as if we are present at the birth of an emotional configuration that will characterise the Jewish people in centuries to come.

Jews are a people who have had more than their share of suffering. Like Aaron, they did not lose their humanity. They did not allow their sense of grief to be dulled, deadened, desensitised. But neither did they lose their capacity to continue, to carry on, to hope. Like Moses, they never lost faith in God. But like Aaron, they never allowed that faith to anaesthetise their feelings, their human vulnerability...Moses and Aaron were like the two hemispheres of the Jewish brain: human emotion on the one hand, faith in God, the covenant, and the future on the other. Without the second, we would have lost our hope. Without the first, we would have lost our humanity. It is not easy to keep that balance, that tension. Yet it is essential. Faith does not render us invulnerable to tragedy but it gives us the strength to mourn and then, despite everything, to carry on.” <https://rabbisacks.org/between-hope-and-humanity-shemini-5779/>

Ultimately, the mefarshim cover the whole range of possibilities, and each is valid as a response, and most likely we may hit all of these responses at various points depending on the moment, the tragedy, our current mental state, and our relationship with God. We are constantly in flux. Within Aharon himself, we see all the various states of responses to tragedy and suffering throughout Jewish history. The balancing of faith vs. our natural human instincts is not easy, especially when we are talking about dealing with the “unimaginable”. In those moments, we may be quiet or we may be momentarily loud or we may go into complete shock or we may cry out with unending tears, they are all part of what it means to be a Jew in an ever changing relationship with God.