



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Shmini 5775

By Danny M. Cohen

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It may be fitting that in the week during which we observe Yom HaShoah (the Jewish day of Holocaust remembrance) we read in Parashat Shmini of another devastating loss.

At the Mishkan (tabernacle), the people of Israel gather to celebrate the inaugural burnt sacrifices to God, along with the first priestly blessing led by Aaron and witnessed by Moses, his brother.¹ But tragedy strikes: The oldest sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, offer to God “a strange fire” that “God had not commanded them.” And at that moment, “a fire came forth from God and consumed them” and the brothers die.²

Their deaths by holy fire—mirroring the accepted burnt animal sacrifices—are punishment for their transgression. Moses offers a justification for God’s actions, and “Aaron was silent.”³

Immediately after his sons’ deaths, Aaron, the newly appointed high priest who had spoken to Pharaoh on behalf of his people, expresses no emotion and cannot speak. Aaron’s silence is, of course, understandable; he has witnessed the incomprehensible killing of his children.

A scholar of Holocaust and human rights pedagogy, I observe students’ emotional responses to disturbing, senseless atrocities all the time. I’m often asked what I do when students cry. Yet tears in my classroom are rare. There are more difficult—and more common—emotional responses to violent content: numbness, detachment, shock and disbelief—made visible through gasps, wide-eyed stares and prolonged silence.

Through their testimonies, survivors of the Nazi camps have reported feelings of utter shock and disbelief when learning that the Nazis had gassed and burned their families. After liberation, the emaciated prisoners and open mass graves rendered many liberating soldiers speechless. Published photographs and descriptions of the camps shocked the world. A collective vicarious trauma, perhaps.

In the aftermath of the Nazi era, the world—including many doctors—had not yet grasped the importance of talking openly about traumatic experiences. No need to open old wounds, many Jewish Holocaust survivors were told, and therefore many did not speak. Silence, prescribed. Homosexual survivors of Nazi incarceration, torture and castration were doubly silenced—homosexuality was still criminalized across Europe and in the United States. Some survivors suffered deep shame. Many committed suicide.

Today, some survivors of atrocity speak openly. The artist and Jewish Holocaust survivor Ava Kadishson Schieber reminds us of unspeakable Holocaust memories—a “soundless roar.”⁴ And although we honor survivors and victims

¹ Leviticus, 9:15-24

² Leviticus, 10:1-2

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ava Kadishson Schieber (2002). *Soundless Roar*. Northwestern University Press.

with our calls for never again, we still face atrocities and systemic violence today, many of which are taboo: rape and sexual violence of children, women and men; forced child marriage and genital mutilation of girls; the denial of basic rights and freedoms for people who are transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual.

In an attempt to curb these atrocities and break taboos, activists organize, lobby, speak out. We have a collective responsibility to bear witness, to attempt a meaningful response. Yet we risk becoming numb to the injustice, to the poverty, executions, abuses that fill our world.

And we try to engage our communities, colleagues, friends, families. We stare in disbelief at violent images that play on our televisions and laptop screens. Smartphones and cameras in the hands of the world produce countless images—evidence of atrocity—that can go viral in minutes. But a like or a share can easily replace our real emotional responses.

Later in Parashat Shmini, Aaron finally speaks. When Moses confronts him about not partaking in another ritual, Aaron refers to the killing of his sons and replies, “When things like these have befallen me, were I to have eaten today’s sin offering, would God have approved?”⁵ Aaron is no longer silent. He is able to acknowledge his grief, his unimaginable loss and his anger with God. And “Moses hears” Aaron’s reasoning.⁶

Expressions of fury and intense sorrow, modern-day psychologists tell us, are certainly preferable to the harmful suppression of emotion. Yet we scroll through our newsfeeds and, sometimes, we barely react to horrific headlines and gruesome images. How should we deal with this? How can we give ourselves permission to feel?

We must find time and spaces to react to injustice. When the students in my classroom respond with silence, it is a sign that they may be paralyzed by the horrific facts of Holocaust history. While I must respect that need for silence and reflection, it’s my job to find the right questions to help the students find their words. Moses did not ask Aaron how he felt after the deaths of his sons. Sometimes, when faced with profound loss, How are you? is a futile question. Still, Moses engaged his brother in a conversation that provided Aaron the opportunity to express his grief. Only once he found his words could Aaron begin to engage with the world.



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Photo courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

⁵ Leviticus, 10:19

⁶ Leviticus, 10:20

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