

Our Parasha this week, Shmini, the third portion in the book of Leviticus, describes the initiation of the sacrificial system; the very first time that Aaron, the High Priest, and his sons bring forward the commanded sacrifices and watch Divine fire shoot down to the altar in a public spectacle of acceptance that awes the watching multitude.

At least, that is what occurs in Chapter 9, at the beginning of the parasha. Aaron's initial sacrifice goes off successfully. Then, at the beginning of Chapter 10, his sons Nadav and Avihu approach with their fire pans. Here is how a plain translation of the text describes what happens:

“Now Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Hashem foreign fire, which [God] had not enjoined upon them. And fire issued out from Hashem and consumed them; so they died in the presence of Hashem.”

Something goes wrong. Our commentary tradition is full of disagreements about what. Several commentators blame the incense that they brought, saying it was a different mixture than what was commanded by God. Rashi, the medieval French commentator, says they died because they were intoxicated at the time of their service, citing verses 8-9 of this same chapter, the next instructions given to the priests, forbidding that priests be intoxicated at the time of service. In any case, some small deviation occurs from the order that God laid out, and the consequence is swift, public and terrifying.

I am not so interested in what they did wrong - or even the question of whether they did anything wrong - which is not entirely clear, either. I am interested in what the next verse narrates: "Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what Hashem meant in saying: *b'krovai akadeish*" - through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people." And Aaron was silent."

What do Moses's word's mean? And what does Aaron's silence mean?

Late medieval commentator Hizkuni offers, "This verse is addressed specifically to the High Priests, whom G-d warns that they especially have to be on guard not to infringe on the rules laid down for them even in the slightest. Any deviation on their part would have to result in G-d becoming "sanctified" through immediate, and for the priest in question fatal, punishment, as otherwise it would be seen as a desecration of the Lord's name." Multiple other commentators make a similar point: that those who have been exalted to the priesthood are held to a much more exacting standard of conduct, of fulfilment of their duties, than ordinary people. The price for the honor and glory of the priesthood is this vulnerability, this high standard.

And so Aaron is silent. Later in Leviticus, in parashat Emor, we will see prohibitions against the High Priest participating in funerals, even for close family members. Another price of the honor and glory is that the High Priest has to keep the show going on, has to set aside personal mourning to fulfill the priestly obligation to God and the people, so Aaron, with his silence, does.

Often, in studying this parashah, we are so struck by the horror of Nadav and Avihu's sudden death, that we miss the moral logic of "b'karovai akadeish" - "through those near me, I will be sanctified," interpreted by our sages as this principle that those with more power and privilege have more exposure and vulnerability. It is a powerful message in this parashah - being powerful doesn't let you off the hook. It keeps you *more* on the hook. Your mistakes have greater consequences, and they will redound upon *you*, and no one else. Perhaps that is why Aaron responds the way he does: with silence: *vayidom Aharon*, is appropriate, because he has to accept that the price of privilege is this vulnerability.

So that's the Divine model of moral consequences described in Torah: greater consequences for the powerful, lesser consequences for the powerless. In this age of externalized costs, when the most powerful can - and usually do - make others bear the brunt of their mistakes and willful transgressions, we are seeing an inversion of this Divine logic.

I am thinking particularly of how this parashah coincides with Earth Day this year. Unlike in the story of Nadav and Avihu, fire is not coming to consume those who create a tiny problem. A small proportion of the world's population has created a catastrophic problem, and the fire, and the floods, as we know, come for those who have done the least to disrupt the earth's systems. Instead of those who have made the mistakes paying the price, we close our borders to climate refugees. We continue to avoid having to face the costs of our damage. You think the story of Nadav and Avihu is horrifying? The story that we are living is far more horrifying.

In the face of the divine logic of *b'krovai akadeish* - that those with the most power suffer the heaviest consequences, Aaron's silence explains itself, almost. *Vayidom Aharon* - Aaron is silent. The text doesn't usually mention an absence of speech! But we can assume the text was telling us this because it would have been so normal, so understandable for Aaron *not* to have been silent, to have raged and wept at the loss of his two beautiful sons in their moment of glory, as any of us can reasonably rage and weep at tragedy, at injustice. Aaron is only silent because he can accept the logic that with great power comes great vulnerability.

But when that logic is defied, as it is now - when the least privileged bear the brunt of the mistakes of the powerful, then silence is no longer appropriate. In such a situation, noise - the noise of mourning, of protest, of outrage, *is* appropriate. To face the injustice, to name it and to mourn, is the first step to correcting it.

This is not only the Shabbat of Earth Day, it is also the shabbat of the 7th anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon's oil spill - a tragedy caused at least in part by human negligence, but which to many residence of the Gulf of Mexico must have felt like some strange act of divine punishment consuming their lands and livelihoods. None of the leadership of BP have faced personal consequences for this.

This is, I think what it means to be partners in creation: when divine logic breaks down, to demand it as humans. Particularly, we who live in the country that has done more to cause this problem than any other, have a responsibility to assert the logic of accountability. I know we are all overwhelmed, but next Shabbat, when people gather all over the country, including here in Eugene, I hope you will join me in supporting the People's Climate March, whether by showing up with your feet and your voices, or in some other way. We can hold ourselves to that divine logic, knowing that with our privilege as Americans, comes consequences - for us and for the whole world. Perhaps we cannot stop the horror, but unlike Aaron, we do not have to be silent.