

This week's parashah, Shmini reminds us all too clearly of how, even in a system that is supposed to be divinely ordered, tragedy and horror can occur. And it reminds us too, of the limitations of our attempts to respond with words to what troubles us. In the second Chapter of the parashah, Chapter 10 of Leviticus, Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring an offering of "strange fire" – and they are consumed along with their offering.

The primary, immediate responses of two people are recorded – their uncle Moshe, and their father Aaron. Both presumably shocked, dazed, even horrified, Moshe says something very cryptic: 'This must be what God meant in saying, "B'karov alai akadesh," by "those close to me I will be sanctified."

Not only do we not have a record of God saying those words, we don't know what they mean. Some commentators assume this means that the inauguration of the temple was such a charged moment that someone high up was bound to die during it. Rashi imagines Moshe saying to Aaron: "My brother, Aaron! I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent God and I thought it would be either through me or through you; now I see that your sons are greater than me and you!" Other commentators, notably Chizkuni, say that this was more of the stern reflection: with great power comes great responsibility – those who are chosen for God's priesthood risk the most if they deviate in the slightest from the prescribed rituals.

In either case, Moshe immediately attempts to find words to explain their deaths. And Aaron? in the same verse, we are told, "Vayidom Aharon." Aaron was silent.

Aaron's silence speaks out to us. It reminds us – and presumably reminded Moshe – not to try to find justification in the face of horror. Sometimes, no words are sufficient. Sometimes, our grief must just be allowed to *be*. Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pakuda discusses how silence can be an expression of deep grief, though other commentators read Aaron's silence as acceptance.

In any case, Aaron isn't silent forever. He speaks up later in the parashah to advocate for himself and remind Moshe that he is in mourning. Silence cannot be forever. But Aaron's profound silence right after the death of his sons is a remind to all of the necessary pause we must take – not only as we do between pieces of music in this service – but whenever we encounter something that touches us strongly, whether joyful, painful or downright horrifying. The silence, the pause for breath, is what guides us to the necessary words that will follow. For whatever we face in this next season, I hope we find strength for the silence, as well as for whatever words are necessary.