

SOUNDNESS OF SILENCE

by Rabbi Label Lam

The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu... brought before Hashem an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from Hashem and consumed them, and they died before Hashem. Moses said to Aaron; Of this did Hashem speak saying: "I will be sanctified through those who are nearest to Me, thus I will be honored before the entire people." And Aaron was silent. (Vayikra 10:1-3)

This is what Moses said to Aaron: "Aaron my brother, your sons only died to sanctify the name of The Holy One Blessed Be He." Since Aaron knew his sons were amongst those who know The Omnipresent he was silent and he received a reward. (Talmud Zevachim)

How was Aaron able to remain still and why? It couldn't be that he was uniquely stoic and unemotional. Aaron is characterized as the one who loved and pursued peace who loved people and brought them close. He had extraordinary feelings.

A friend of mine asked me as a favor to remind people when I get a chance of an important detail in Jewish Law. I'll take that opportunity and do it now. When he was sitting Shiva for his father well meaning people crowded into his parents' house to offer condolences. He felt like sitting quietly at times but too many had the competing need to initiate conversation. The Law requires that the visitors take a cue from the mourner. If he is silent they should remain silent. If he talks they may join in. That is the sensitivity of the Hallacha- Jewish Law.

How do we know, then, that it was appropriate for Moses to address Aaron at that time? The Malbim explains that that the verb "Vayidom" -He was silent- is different from other expressions of quietude. This term means that that he interrupted his speaking and became quieted. He stopped from speaking. It is implied that Moses had interjected his point and Aaron said no more.

The Malbim posits what the content of that missing monologue was. Aaron, was no doubt in the act accepting that his past misdeeds and his children's failures had finally come to haunt them. Moses then comforted and quieted him by telling him that they died because of their greatness and closeness to Hashem. When Aaron understood this message he was quiet.

The Malbim points out that this trait can be witnessed in many great people and explains how they are able to live with the pain of personal tragedy:

1) These great people live with an awareness of how puny, vulnerable, and limited our perspective is in comparison to The Almighty. "Be not rash with your mouth, and let your heart not be hasty to utter

a word before G-d; for G-d is heaven and you are on earth. So let your words be few. (Koheles 5:1)

2) They are ever cognizant of the kindness that is constantly visited upon them by The Creator. They feel overwhelmed with gratitude. Even a great withdrawal does not deplete the bank account of trust they have in G-d. The opposite is true. It is we who are deep in overdraft.

3) They appreciate how the force of their own deficiencies and active faults contribute to their hapless state. They accept it as a lesson and hope to improve.

Let it be understood and acknowledged that this is all addressed to head and not the heart. When the heart is hurting it is neigh impossible to speak to the head. One of my great teachers once offered the following helpful distinction that might lend some assistance to even the still swollen heart. There is a difference to be made between "an answer" and "an approach".

If someone asks, "Why this did this tragic event happen to him and now?" There may not be an immediate answer. "An answer" eliminates and cancels out the need for a question. "An approach" does not presume to explain the specific reason "why". There may be thousands of possibilities and we admittedly don't know which. We can comforted by "an approach" because it allows us to live with a question.

Aaron was busy speaking out "an approach" when his brother Moses offered him the ultimate consolation, "an answer". With the certainty of prophetic insight that this double death was charged with meaning Aaron was quieted and from that perspective we can all appreciate the soundness of silence.

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