

time it is Moses who submits to Aaron: “And when Moses heard this, he approved” (10:20).

When personal tragedy strikes, we may, like Noah and Lot, seek to dull the pain with alcohol or pills. However, when the effect wears off, we awaken to find the pain and sorrow ready to greet us once more.

We may also be tempted to push our loss aside. Each of us is in some sense a priest serving others—our employer, our co-workers, our community, the world at large—and we feel we must soldier on for their sake. But time and place must always be made for us to mourn. Whatever else we may be, we are first and foremost father, mother, son, daughter, spouse, partner, friend: someone who loves and who is loved.

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## How Do We Mourn?

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In these dark times, we are faced not for the first time with the question: how do we deal with unbearable pain? There are no easy answers. For some, the solution is to find a way not to feel it, and one way to do that is to drink oneself into oblivion.

To be drunk, profoundly drunk, is to sleep deeply, with the promise of being sufficiently anesthetized so that the pain cannot rouse us for some time. And sleep, our Sages remind us, is a taste of death (BT Berakhot 57b). This is what the drinker seeks: to be dead to the world in which pain and suffering exist.

Of the three Biblical figures who saw their worlds destroyed, two turned to drink.

Noah and his family were the only human survivors of a flood that swept away the human race. Imagine, for a moment, leaving the ark and seeing total destruction all around—and hearing the profound silence of a world empty of even a single fellow human being. What would you do?

Noah found solace in alcohol. He planted a vineyard, produced wine, and drank so much that he disrobed in his tent. Perhaps some part of him wished to turn back the clock, to return to the state of innocence that preceded the sin in the Garden and the generations of toil and suffering that followed. Perhaps he found some solace in his drunken stupor, but he also found humiliation and familial discord when he awoke.

Lot witnessed the destruction of Sodom and its sister cities, victims of a sulfurous fire that rained down from heaven. He and his two remaining daughters fled to Zoar, sheltering in a cave there. To Lot's daughters it too seemed that all of humanity had been wiped from the face of the earth. They saw no choice but to repopulate it through incest, but how to convince their father to commit this unnatural act? Through alcohol—and no doubt they found their father more than ready to erase the memory of the horror he witnessed. In that drunken stupor he violated his daughters, as he had previously invited others to do.



Nadab and Abihu are killed by flames.

Print maker: Jacob de Later, Amsterdam, 1728. (Rijksmuseum.nl)

Finally, there was Aaron, who witnessed the death of two of his sons by means of a Divine fire. Two deaths might seem an infinitesimal number compared to the devastations experienced by Noah and Lot, but every macrocosm is made up of many microcosms. Each of us constructs a world, and central to that world are the ones we love. In the moment that the bodies of Nadav and Avihu were dragged from the sanctuary, Aaron saw his world destroyed.

At first, Aaron was silent (Lev. 10:3). What thoughts ran through his mind? In truth, only one who has suffered the loss of a child can fathom what Aaron thought and felt. Perhaps, in the face of unbearable pain, Aaron, like Noah and Lot, sought oblivion at the bottom of a cup. Perhaps God looked into Aaron's heart and saw this. And so, for the first and only time, God took Aaron aside and spoke exclusively to him. "Drink no wine or intoxicant," he tells Aaron, "neither you nor your remaining sons, for that way lies death" (v. 9). The rites celebrating the consecration of the sanctuary and the priesthood must continue.

Yet there is a momentary crack in Aaron's priestly façade. Moses discovered that Aaron and his sons had not eaten of a sin offering that had been brought earlier in the day, and he reproved Aaron indirectly by hectoring his sons: "Why did you not eat of the sin offering in the sacred area? For it is most holy, and God has given it to you to remove the guilt of the community and to make expiation of them before the Lord!" (v. 17). Aaron offered a strange response: "See, this day they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering before the Lord, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten sin offering today, would the Lord have approved?" (v. 19). Aaron's answer is puzzling. Who are the "they" of which he is speaking? No one other than Aaron himself had offered a sin offering that day—two, in fact! Apparently, he is referring to the assistance offered by his sons; it was they who brought forth the sacrificial blood for him to sprinkle on the altar (Lev.9:9). And those sons included Nadav and Avihu. It seems that Aaron is saying: My sons—all four of my sons—were with me at the altar; together we performed the sacred rites. Now suddenly there are only two. Am I to sit down to a sacrificial meal, with only two of my sons present, and consume the sacrifice as if nothing had happened? This is too much; I have no appetite for this charade. This