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Honoring Aaron's Tragic Sacrifice in the Laws of Mourning

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In Parashat Shemini, a community's joyous celebration turns into shocking tragedy. The Tabernacle had finally been completed (Exod. 40). Even before resting in a permanent settlement, this people, recently freed from slavery, was eager to have a portable sanctuary for God's presence. They had contributed generously from their limited possessions (Exod. 35). Moses had begun to communicate with God through the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 1). The day for a public celebration – 8 days of festive inauguration – had finally come (Lev. 8).

Aaron and his four sons were the community's intermediaries in the service of the Tabernacle. They dutifully followed each instruction commanded by God through Moses. All were filled with joy and trepidation.

The parashah begins on the eighth and final day of inauguration week. The ceremony narrated in Leviticus 9 culminates in a felicitous and ecstatic moment of response from God to their carefully orchestrated sacrificial rites: "Moses and Aaron then went inside the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the Presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt-offering . . . on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted and fell on their faces" (Lev. 9:23-24).

But in this moment of awe and ecstasy, something goes terribly wrong. In the verse that immediately follows, Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu offer a "strange fire" to God. And suddenly there is a horrific and tragic reversal. With the exact same words that described the joyous revelation of God's presence in community, things take an unspeakable turn: "And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them; thus they died." (Lev. 10:2).

There is both a communal and a personal dimension to this tragedy. The community's loss is twofold: With a shocking suddenness, their moment of celebration has turned to a moment of grief; and they have lost two cherished leaders. For Aaron, the grief is deeply personal. His beloved sons have died in their prime, in the line of duty—a duty he raised and trained them to fulfill. And yet, he is in the midst of performing a sacred rite in which he is the star of the show and the central actor. There is no quiet place to which to retreat to wail, to mourn, and to wallow in the pain. He could not be in a more public setting, or more needed by his community, than he was in that moment.

In the unspeakable void created by these sudden deaths, before Aaron speaks a word, Moses breaks the silence, stating: "This is it that the Lord spoke, saying: Through them that are nigh unto Me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified" (Lev.10:3). And as for Aaron, the same verse reports, "And Aaron was silent" (*vayidom*) The medieval biblical commentator Nahmanides suggests that Aaron had been wailing out loud, and after Moses spoke, he became silent.

Did Moses silence Aaron's expression of pain? It is hard to know if Moses hoped these words would bring comfort or if he was trying to repress raw expressions of grief. From the continuation of the chapter, it is clear that Moses felt it was a top priority to ensure that the day's rites be properly completed. Mourning would have to be deferred for the sake of the religious needs of the community.

Leviticus 10 is a highly generative chapter for rabbinic discussions of *Hilkhot Aveilut* (the laws of mourning). Ironically, most of the Jewish mourning practices derived from this chapter come from behaviors that were *forbidden*

to Aaron and his surviving sons. They were told not to mourn, and from this we learn exactly how Jews should mourn. They were told not to rend their clothes (Lev. 10:6), and so we learn to rend our garments upon losing a relative (B. Moed Katan 15a). They were told they must continue to trim their hair, and so we learn to *avoid* shaving for a period of time after the death of a loved one.

We see a similar dynamic in Ezekiel 24. The prophet is told not to mourn the death of his wife, “the delight of his eyes” (Ezek. 24:16). Ezekiel, a priest and a prophet – a community leader – is told to grieve “in silence” (*dom*) (Ezek. 24:17). The rabbis derive further universal mourning practices from what Ezekiel could not do (B. Moed Katan 15a). Ezekiel was told to leave on his shoes (Ezek. 24:17), and so we remove our shoes when we mourn our dead.

This is tragic, but also powerful. Community leaders often are forced to sacrifice their own emotional needs—especially private experiences of grief—for the sake of maintaining stability, structure, and continuity—and even joy and celebration—for communities that rely on them to remain present and resilient.

I want to suggest that the rabbinic laws of mourning honor Aaron’s sacrifice by deriving mourning rites from the sacrifice he made by *not* engaging in those very rites. In mourning our loved ones, we recall and pay homage to Aaron’s *inability* to mourn his sons. Rashi states that Aaron was rewarded for his silence. Perhaps the eternal monument to Aaron’s pain that constitutes the laws of mourning can be seen as another facet of Aaron’s “reward.”

But Aaron was not completely silent. If we read until the end of Chapter 10, we see that Aaron remained silent as Moses guided the retrieval of the bodies from the sanctuary; silent as Moses told him not to mourn; silent as God shares rules for priestly conduct; silent as Moses told him to continue observing the public sacrificial rites that were to be performed that day. Only in the penultimate verse in the chapter does Aaron speak, for the first time, since the deaths of his sons. According to Maimonides (Laws of Mourning 1:1), those first and only words that Aaron speaks

in the aftermath of losing two children (Lev. 10:19) are the source for the biblical commandment to mourn, in general.

What did Aaron say? What words could he speak, in this unspeakable time, that could form the eternal basis of all Jewish mourning?

Aaron’s words are a response to a rebuke from Moses. Aaron had spent the day on which his sons died *not* mourning, fulfilling every single public ritual rite with impeccable precision – every rite, with one exception. He could not bring himself to eat the sin-offering, as he was supposed to do. This angered Moses, who rebuked his brother.

Aaron responded, “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 that have been good in the eyes of the Lord?” Aaron’s sons had died in the immediate aftermath of bringing these offerings. How could he bear to eat from the sin-offering? Aaron finally breaks his silence by resisting one act of *not* mourning. Through this one small act of resistance, Aaron, the community leader who sacrificed all of his private grief for the sake of the community’s stability, finally mourned.

Moses accepted Aaron’s explanation. And Maimonides derived from it the basis of the entire biblical commandment to mourn. This is a profound way to honor what Aaron did. As tragic as the position of community leaders can be, as painful as it is that our tradition asked this of Aaron, there is something redeeming about the way in which Aaron’s sacrifice did not go unrecognized. In all of our mourning, we honor Aaron’s silent pain over the loss of his sons. Indeed, as the additional example from Ezekiel 24 demonstrates, we honor the pain of all who have been called to make similar sacrifices.