

## **A Time to Mourn - *Parashah Shmini*** **Rabbi Leora Kling Perkins | April 15, 2023**

This is an odd week. We're in between holidays— we just wrapped up the intensity of Pesah, with all of our family gatherings and seders, and ahead are Yom Haatzmaut, which we at Emunah will be celebrating with a concert, Lag Baomer, which we will mark with a barbecue and campfire, and before too long, the festival of Shavuot. And yet, the particular time we are in right now is also a time of mourning. Not only are we in the midst of the omer, traditionally a subdued time on the calendar, that has some mourning rituals attached to it, but RIGHT NOW we are also in the midst of a week and a half period that contains three distinct occasions for mourning: Two days ago, many of us gathered for Yizkor, each of us coming together to share the experience of remembering our loved ones who we have lost. On Monday night we will gather together here at Temple Emunah to mark the start of Yom Hashoah, when we commemorate the war against the Jewish people that we call the Holocaust. And just a week later, we will gather again on Tuesday night for Yom Hazikaron, a day of national mourning, when we remember and honor those who gave their lives serving the State of Israel.

What is it about the power of mourning together that leads us to designate so many different occasions to do this? And in what way can we best support each other in this time of sadness?

Let's take a moment to see what our Torah portion has to teach us about the experience of mourning, both publicly and privately. In Parashat Shemini, we see a family in mourning. The entire Israelite people are gathered for what is supposed to be a joyous culmination of weeks or even months of hard work and careful attention to detail. The mishkan has been built, and now Aaron and his sons are being installed as priests. After centuries of slavery in Egypt, after multiple struggles on the part of the Israelites to develop a relationship with God, after receiving of the Ten Commandments on the one hand, and worshiping the Golden calf on the other, the Israelites finally have a place to worship God, and people who will officiate in that place. The Israelites are finally realized as their own people, with their own laws and ways of connecting with God. This is supposed to be a time of intense joy.

And yet, at what is supposed to be the pinnacle of the celebration, disaster strikes. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, are killed in a mysterious fire. The very people who were meant to be officiating at the sacred rituals of the tabernacle have now suffered a devastating loss. What should everyone do now? How should they respond to the loss? What should happen in the tabernacle, this place which was just about to get started being used as a place of worship?

Moses's answer seems to be that the show must go on. He suggests that everything that happens is God's will, and that Aaron and his other sons must move on and continue serving the people as planned. He even is short-tempered with them, speaking angrily to Aaron's surviving son for not eating the purification offering in the sacred area, part of the ritual of achieving atonement for the people.

Moses's response may seem quite unfeeling. Not only does he seem to ask Aaron and his sons to put aside their grief at their horrific loss, but this is his loss as well— Nadav and Avihu were his nephews. How could he be so callous?

Rabbi Shai Held points out that in certain times of crisis, public leaders may need to suspend their mourning. Moses may have felt that for the good of the people, at this key moment in their formation, he needed to be there for them, and to make sure that the inauguration of the mishkan and the priests proceeded, despite his own grief at the death of his nephews. He may have felt that the very continued existence of the people was dependent on his ability to be steady, and to maintain stability for them.

Aaron, on the other hand, has a very different response. In most readings of the texts, he seems subdued. He is silent, and speaks up only when Moses reprimands his sons. Then, Aaron pushes back, reminding Moses that their family is in mourning, and that even as leaders of the people, they need to withdraw, to allow themselves the space to mourn. He says “See, this day they brought their hattat offering and their burnt offering before God, and such things have befallen me! Had I eaten the hattat offering today, would that have pleased God?”

Dr. Shira Billet explains: To an outside observer... Aaron’s silence could be evidence of ‘stoic tranquility’ in accepting the divine decree. But he reveals that he is in deep pain and grief through one small act of resistance, one act of mourning – refraining from one public duty.... This exchange reveals a pathos, a grief, that was [previously] obscured...<sup>4</sup>

Another reading of the text, however, suggests that Aaron is even more forceful in his push-back. The scholar Baruch Levine points out that the word that is generally translated here as silent, *damam*, actually has another meaning. In other parts of the bible, the word *damam* means to mourn, or to moan. According to Levine, Aaron may not have been silent at all. He may have heard Moses’s platitudes about God’s will, and then gone right ahead, mourning and moaning for his sons, expressing his utter devastation at their inexplicable loss.

We all have different ways of mourning and of processing loss. Today, of all days, we in Boston know this well. I remember clearly where I was ten years ago. Ten years ago, on April 15, 2013, I had just left my apartment in Somerville, and was walking to Central Square, where I was planning to get on the T. My friend had invited me to join her in ushering at a party in downtown Boston, so I needed to get there early. The party was the official party for the Boston Marathon, and would take place after the end of the race. As I was walking, I ran into a friend going the opposite direction. She told me that some sort of explosion had taken place at the marathon, but she wasn’t clear on the details. The gravity of the situation hadn’t quite sunk in, so I kept walking. After a few minutes it occurred to me to check the news, and that’s when the texts started coming into my phone. Before long, it became clear to me that a terrorist attack had taken place at the Boston Marathon. I turned around and went home. Weeks later, I was given the jacket that had been designated for me as an usher for the party. It says “Boston Marathon 2013.” I still have it.

Far away in Israel, the next morning, my parents, who were there for a few months, stopped by a cafe to grab a pastry for breakfast. The owner looked at them, and said, you’re from Boston, aren’t you? I’m so sorry for your loss.

Some of us here today were at the marathon in person that day, even in downtown Boston. We all have our own stories from that day.

I remember hearing stories of doctors and of news reporters struggling, like both Moses and Aaron, to hold it together, to do their jobs, to serve others in their pain. And at the same time, to process the pain and the shock that surrounded them.

As we move through this communal time of grief, we each experience loss in our own way. There is no right or wrong way to mourn. For some of us, it may be by joining in the communal remembrances that we actually tap into those feelings of sadness. And for others, those gatherings may be a time of comfort, in being together with others who share in feelings of loss. By coming together as a community, we demonstrate our support for one another. We show compassion for each other, and we support each other in whatever pain we may be feeling. As we approach Yom Hashoah and Yom Hazikaron, and as we acknowledge the anniversary of the Marathon bombing, both today and on Monday, let us draw on the example given to us by the loss in Moses and Aaron's family, and remember the importance of being compassionate towards each other, and giving ourselves and each other the space to mourn however we may be inclined to do so.