

No Time for Silence

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2021 Christian Commemoration of the Shoah

There are many different kinds of silence.

There's the peaceful silence of an early morning;
the tense silence after an upsetting word;
the hesitant silence between two people who don't know each other too well;
and the comfortable silence of two good friends, just happy to be together.

Sometimes, remaining silent is a sign of discretion,
and sometimes it is an admission of guilt.

We can remain silent out of sorrow, or simply because words fail us.
In the Psalms we learn *l'cha dumiyah tehillah* - to God, silence is praise. (Ps. 65:2)

In this week's scripture reading, from Leviticus, the Tabernacle has been prepared and is now ready to receive the Divine Presence. The High Priest Aaron and his sons have been ordained, and they are ready to call G!d into the Sanctuary. Aaron performs the sacrificial rituals as instructed, and comes out of the Tent of Meeting with Moses to bless the people. But then there is a devastating catastrophe. Aaron's sons cross a boundary that would have protected them from G!d's overwhelming power, and a fire comes forth from the Eternal One, and consumes the two young men. And then - and then - scripture says, *vayidom Aharon* - and Aaron was silent. [Lev. 10:1-3]

And in that silence there is a mystery at least as deep as the mystery of the deaths of the two brothers.

Was Aaron's silence an *angry* silence? Was he so angry at his loss, the loss of his two beautiful, precious sons, that he didn't trust himself to say a single word?

Was his silence a way of *avoiding fully absorbing the reality of what had happened*, because if he did speak of it, then it would become real?

Or perhaps it was it a *mortified* silence, because here was the day that was to be the highlight of his life, the climax of his career, and now his sons, through their behaviour, their desecration of the holy altar, have embarrassed him forever.

Or, was his silence something else entirely? The Jewish philosopher Nachmanides (the Ramban) suggested that before Aaron became silent, he cried out loud, wailing and weeping before the entire community over his sons' deaths. His emotions were far too powerful for him to carry on as if nothing had happened, and so he cried out, and he wept, and *then* he became silent. And this was his grieving process.

Nachmanides recognized that the process of mourning must include the grieving that precedes acceptance of a significant loss. Expressing our emotions is human, and is even central to our processes of mourning. A house of mourning becomes a safe space to speak of the pain of loss. There, the silence of the mourners is respected. We speak only after the mourners are ready to break their silence. There, the community comes together, helping to bring awareness of the Creator's Presence back into the life of the mourner.*

For at least 20 years after the war – until the late 1960s and even into the 1970s – there was little, if any, public talk about what had happened to the Jews. It was a silence that included many of the survivors, who remained mute out of shock and trauma. In Europe, especially in the perpetrator and collaborator countries of Germany, France and Hungary, there was also silence.

Today, there is no more time for silence. The Uyghur [“wee-gur”] Muslims in China are experiencing a modern-day genocide. We are just now learning about these horrific crimes against humanity. How can this be happening? What have we learned from the past? This is no time for silence. Many of the lessons of the Holocaust are particular to Jews, but they are also universal lessons for the world. What is and what will be important for all of us is the ability to feel the grief, and like the High Priest Aaron, move through our silence. Following this process, and with deep compassion and conviction, the next step would be to emerge from the silence and take action against these atrocities.

This is the core learning that present and future generations must acquire. In addition to learning and remembering the facts of Holocaust history, it will be essential to recognize the human impulse to genocide, how and why it starts, the tools it employs to persuade, and the known consequences of silence.

The only silence we wish for the world is for all of humanity to be able to experience the peaceful silence of an early morning. The Shoah may one day be remembered not only as tragic, but also as transformative in our understanding of how to be and not to be human.

Sources:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-we-must-not-forget-the-holocaust-but-the-way-we-remember-will-change/>

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