

Rabbi Weinreb's Weekly Column:

## SH'MINI

### And Aharon was Silent

He was an old man, and in many ways came from a very different world than I. And yet he taught me more than anyone else ever did. One of the things he taught me was that no one suffers as much as a parent who loses a child.

He delivered this lesson to me on a wintry day more than fifty years ago. He was my grandfather, my father's father, and the family had just broken the news to him that his youngest grandchild, my baby cousin, had died. It was a sudden death, totally unexpected, and everyone was distraught. Grandpa too took the news very hard.

He then did something which surprised everyone present. He rose to leave the room, beckoning to me - his oldest grandchild, then fourteen - to accompany him. We both entered a small adjoining room in which there were a few sacred books, including a siddur. He opened the siddur, read from it for several moments, and then looked up to me, and tearfully whispered:

"There is nothing worse in the world than the death of one's own child. A parent never recovers from such a

blow. May the merciful God protect us all from such a fate."

I will never forget those words. I remember them verbatim even today. And a lifetime of experience in the vocation of counseling has confirmed the truth of these words over and over again.

In this week's Torah portion, Sh'mini, we read of just such a tragedy. On a bright and sunny spring day, somewhere in the Sinai wilderness, the Mishkan is being inaugurated. It is an awesome spiritual experience in which "a divine fire descends from on high, in which all the people sing in unison, and fall upon their faces."

It is the moment of a peak experience, for all the people, but especially for Aharon, the Kohen Gadol.

At that very moment, his two elder sons, Nadav and Avihu, step forward and commit a sacrilegious act which dispels the mood, and ruins the entire experience. Commentators differ widely as to exactly what was the sin of these two sons of Aharon. Scripture just says that "they offered God a strange fire, something He did not command of them."

God's wrath was expressed instantly. "A fire descended from before Him and consumed them, and they died in the presence of God."

A parent, a father, lost a child. Not just one, but two. Not through a long

and debilitating illness but suddenly, unexpectedly. And not in any ordinary set of circumstances, but in the context of an act of sacred worship.

What is Aharon's reaction? Does he moan and groan and rend his clothing? Does he scream out in grief? Or does he vent his anger against the God who took his boys from him?

None of the above. "Vayidom Aharon." Aaron is silent. The silence of shock? Perhaps. The silence of acceptance of fate? Perhaps. Or, perhaps, the silence which results when the range and depth of one's emotions are too overwhelming to express in words. But silence.

If the sage words that my grandfather shared with me in my early adolescence are true, and I have every reason to believe that they are, Aharon remained silent about his grief for the rest of his life. Had he used the words of his ancestor Yaakov, he could have said "I will go down to the grave in my agony."

Soon after this episode in which my grandfather shared his wisdom with me, I had the occasion to read a book which taught me a bit more about a grieving parent. It is quite possible that it was at precisely during the winter of my cousin's death that I was assigned the book

Death Be Not Proud by John Gunther in my English Literature class.

I somehow doubt that this book is still on the required reading lists of many tenth-graders today. But if it is not on those lists I certainly recommend that it be read, and particularly by teenagers who are learning their first lessons about life and its tragic disappointments.

In the book, the author describes his own son, who was taken from him by a vicious disease. He describes his son positively, but realistically. And he rages against the disease, and in some way, the Divine being who took his son from him. He insists to Death itself that it be not proud about its victory over its victim, his dear child.

It has been decades since I have read Gunther's book, and it could very well be that I do not remember it with complete accuracy. But I do recall the poignancy and the power with which the author conveyed the full range of his painful emotions. And I will never forget those passages in which he insists that he will never recover from his loss; that the wounds of a parent's grief for his child can never heal.

Many are the lessons which students of Bible and Talmud have derived from the sad narrative contained in this week's Torah portion. But there is at least one lesson which every

empathic reader will surely learn as he or she attends to the opening verses of Vayikra 10.

It is the lesson contained in the mystery of Aharon's reaction when his sons are consumed by a heavenly fire. For within the deafening silence of "Vayidom Aharon" are the depths of the terror which every parent dreads, and some parents have suffered. The dread of bereavement, of the loss of one's child.

As always, in contemplating darkness, light stands out in contrast. Reflection upon death leads to an appreciation of life. The story of the death of Aharon's children should, if nothing else, enable us to appreciate all the more those of our children who are alive and well.

As we embark upon this new post-Pesach spring season, with all the springtime symbols in the way of life and renewal, let us celebrate and appreciate all of our own offspring, may they live and be well. 🕯