

And Aharon was silent. (10:3)

With two words, “And Aharon was silent,” the Torah presents its standard for confronting tragedy, for dealing with grief. While this spiritual plateau is reserved for the “Aharon Hakohens” of our People, it is vital that we understand the profundity of his reaction, to achieve an understanding of his response to this tragedy. In this way, we are able to develop a deeper appreciation of his greatness and we have a model of the sublime level of spirituality to which we should aspire.

When a person is, *lo aleinu* (not on us), confronted with tragedy, he, by nature, seeks an avenue to hearten himself, such as: “It was decreed from Heaven; it is an atonement for our sins; *gam zu l'tovah*; this is also for the good.” All of these are phrases that comfort, that console, that seek to decrease the pain, to help us make sense of the loss, to give us the tools for coping with our grief. Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, comments that Aharon HaKohen teaches us a lesson in how one accepts Hashem’s *klep*, slap, pain: with a bent head; complete silence; total abdication; no movement; no rationalization; complete acceptance. *Va'yidom Aharon*; Aharon exhibited silence, no movement, no attempt to raise his head and seek comfort.

Every rationalization, however true and “kosher,” lifts one’s spirits, lends him succor to continue, to accept, to affirm. That does not, however, indicate acceptance of grief. It is lessening of grief. If Hashem gives us grief, it is for a purpose. To in any way diminish that grief with rationalization is to defeat its purpose. To explain this further, Rav Schwadron relates a profound reaction to grief expressed by the holy Shiniver Rav, Horav Yechezkel Halberstam, zl (son of the Divrei Chaim, the holy Sanzer Rav, zl). He once heard a devastating piece of news. He immediately became silent, bent his head in deep thought, as burning, hot tears rolled down his face. He said nothing for a few moments, almost as if he were mulling over and experiencing the pain, the grief that resulted from the news that he had just heard. After a few moments of quiet, the Shiniver raised his head and said, “*Gam zu l'tovah*; This, too, is for the good.” Realizing that these people were watching his reaction, which was inexplicable to the unknowing spectator, the Rav said, “The halachah is clear that *bala marror lo yatza*, ‘If one swallows the bitter herbs (in one gulp, without chewing it through) he does not fulfill the mitzvah of eating marror.’ The reason for this is so that the individual experiences the bitterness. He must feel it in his mouth as it burns the inner linings of the skin. He must feel the pain. Otherwise, how can he empathize with the suffering of the Jews in Egypt?

“When Hashem sends us troubles and pain, it is for a purpose. He wants us to absorb the pain, allow it to sink in as we chew every morsel of the bitterness. Only afterwards, after he has felt the pain, can he declare: *Gam zu l'tovah*.” This is what Aharon HaKohen taught us when he remained silent following his sons’ untimely deaths. He was comforted with the words of Torah which Hashem conveyed to him.

There is a time for expressing grief and a time for expressing joy. When Aharon’s two sons died tragically, it was during the moment of heightened joy for Klal Yisrael, for the Kohanim and Leviim, and for the Priestly family. Tragedy is never welcome, but, during the nation’s ultimate moment of

joy, at a time when the Mishkan was inaugurated, it was certainly not favorably received. The nation was overwhelmed with shock and grief. What does one do during such a mind-numbing moment? He follows halachah. We must attend to the immediate needs of the deceased. Moshe Rabbeinu called Mishael and Eltzafan and had them remove the bodies from the Sanctuary. It certainly was not an easy task, but Torah reigns over everything, even emotion. Once the immediate needs have been addressed, we return to the inauguration. Only afterwards do we allow for the grief and mourning to take over. A time is designated for everything.

Rav Schwadron explains that it is only through the Torah that we are able to function through the ambiguities of life. The Torah is our discipline; it guides us and tells us how and when to act. It gives us the strength to confront challenge and the fortitude to go on after the initial confrontation. We think that the many stories about the holy and righteous who were able to accept the challenges of grief and pain and continue on with their strength and positive emotion intact are about individuals who were angels, whose emotions were different than those of the average man or woman. This is untrue. Our gedolim love their families no differently than does the average person. They cry the way everyone else cries, and they also experience the same sense of joy. The difference is in their relationship with Hashem and His Torah. Their lives are disciplined, controlled and guided. They feel the same pain, but they know that there is a time for its expression and a time for silence.