

And Moshe said to Aharon: Of this did Hashem speak, saying: “I will be sanctified through those who are nearest Me; thus, I will honored before the entire people”, and Aharon was silent. (10:3)

Horav Shlomo Levinstein, Shlita, relates that he heard from *Rav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel*, son of **Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, zl**, that the *Rosh Yeshivah* told him the following thought two weeks prior to his *petirah*, untimely passing. The thought is a powerful insight into Aharon *HaKohen's* reaction – or better, non reaction, to the tragic death of two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu. *Rashi* observes that following the tragedy, Moshe *Rabbeinu* rendered a powerful eulogy for his nephews. Moshe said to Aharon, “My brother, I knew that Hashem would sanctify His Sanctuary with His beloved close ones. I figured that it would be either me or you. Now, I see that they are even greater than you and I.” Now that Moshe, the leader of *Klal Yisrael*, had spoken, it would have made sense that the next eulogy would be delivered by the father of the deceased. He should have spoken about their history, relating that, at a young age, it had already been apparent that Nadav and Avihu would grow into Torah leaders of unparalleled greatness. Yet, Aharon did nothing. He remained silent, mute. How are we to understand this?

This question is not about Aharon's silence as a reaction to the tragedy. His response is explained as the penultimate level of accepting Hashem's decree. He manifested total acquiescence; he had reaction; he was mute. Now we wonder why he did not eulogize his sons. A eulogy is an intellectual appreciation of the life and character of the deceased. Why did Aharon not pay his sons their *kavod acharon*, last respects, as befitting personages of such unprecedented spiritual stature?

Rav Eliyahu Baruch explained that, indeed, Moshe presented a powerful and inspiring eulogy for his nephews. As great as his eulogy was it paled, however, in comparison to the one rendered by their father, Aharon. When did Aharon deliver his eulogy? Of what did it consist? His eulogy was silence! When one is silent at a time when speaking is appropriate – and even recommended – the silence becomes that much more compelling. When one speaks, the laudatory comments he is about to say are secondary to the words that he actually expresses. When one is silent, however, has no restrictions, no limitations, to his eulogy. Everything that one can conjure up in his mind is included in the poignant silence.

Moshe was unable to remain silent. For the quintessential leader of *Klal Yisrael* to remain silent would have represented a taint, an insult, to the memory of the venerable deceased. People might have wrongfully thought that he was upset with Nadav and Avihu. Aharon, their father, had the opportunity to express himself in the most glowing terms. Yet, he did not. This constituted the greatest *hesped*, eulogy.

Two weeks later, at the funeral of the *Rosh Yeshivah*, his son recaptured this Torah thought. The

most compelling eulogy is silence, the internalization of the greatness of the deceased.

The *Zohar HaKodesh* (cited by *Maayanei HaChaim*) writes, *Kol bechiah d'lo yachil l'mirchash b'sifsosai – zu hee ha'bechiah ha'shleimah*, “All weeping which is not/cannot be expressed vocally – this is the complete (perfect) weeping.” Such weeping will (more readily) generate a positive Heavenly response. Likewise, explains **Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl**, joy which is so great, so intense, so overwhelming that one cannot possibly restrict himself to verbal expression, this is the most complete “expression” of joy.

Expressions of joy and grief communicate powerful emotions. Once they have been externally expressed – vocalized, articulated, put to words – they compromise some of their compelling nature. When one is speechless – he has achieved the ultimate, most profound, most complete level of emotion. [A short note of addendum: not all silence is positively significant. In some cases, silence denotes depression, denial, or the lack of being in touch with one's emotions.] Contained emotion, controlled emotion, demonstrates perfect harmony, an achievement of perfect balance, whereby the person is able to soar to much loftier heights of emotion.

Body language has greater profundity and is more compelling than verbal expression. *Rav Zaitchik* quotes the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 58b, in which *Chazal* state that one who raises his hand to strike his fellow is considered to be a *rasha*, wicked person, even though he has not struck him. This is supported by the *pasuk* in *Shemos* 2:13, in which *Moshe Rabbeinu* refers to the Jew who raised his hand to strike his fellow as a *rasha*, “He said to the wicked one, why would you strike your fellow?” He had not yet struck him, but his nefarious intention was clear. Likewise, in the battle against Amalek, when *Moshe* raised his hands, *Klal Yisrael* began to overpower the enemy. *Moshe* prayed with his entire body – every fiber of himself petitioning Hashem on behalf of the Jewish People. What *Moshe* did not express with his lips, he expressed with his “body language.” The hands and the movements of the body are agents of the heart.

Following the song of gratitude to Hashem, *Moshe* and the Jewish men and, after the Splitting of the Red Sea, *Miriam* and the other women, took tambourines and expressed their *shirah*, song, via the medium of instruments. Why did they not sing? *Horav Yehonasan Eibeshutz, zl*, explains that it is forbidden to hear the sound of a woman singing; thus, the women expressed their gratitude with tambourines. In an alternative approach, *Rav Zaitchik* explains that the women sensed even greater joy than did the men. First of all, women are by nature more sensitive than men. Thus, their feelings of gratitude were greater. Additionally, Pharaoh subjected the women to performing a man's job, which represented greater physical difficulty. Furthermore, from a spiritual/moral perspective, Egypt presented a greater challenge for the women than for the men. Therefore, their expression of gratitude exceeded that of the men. They used tambourines, because they felt gratitude that was beyond words.

When Hashem took his sons from him, *Aharon HaKohen* was able to maintain total emotional composure. The tragedy was great; the grief was profound; the expression of grief was restricted to

containment within the parameters of “self.” Aharon internalized the tragedy in such a manner that no external manifestation portrayed his inner sorrow. This represented control at its apex.

The challenge of confronting the inevitability of death is overpowering. We refuse to take serious note that life as we know it on this physical world is one day going to come to an end. The mention of death brings concern, fear and even hysteria. We would much rather go on believing in the delusion that life goes on forever – or He does not mean “me.” This attitude is understandable, since we are dealing with the unknown – something which raises our insecurity quotient. There are, however, unique individuals of outstanding character and clarity of purpose, who transcended these emotions, who confronted death with readiness and complete lucidity. They did not view death as an end, but as a beginning of a new and “real” life. This was the consciousness that permeated the Torah mindset of the residents of Kelm, Lithuania. This was a Jewish city wholly centered and focused upon its *yeshivah* which was called the Kelm Talmud Torah, and the *yeshivah* was the manifestation of its founder and leader, *Horav Simcha Zissel Ziv, zl*, popularly known as the *Alter* of Kelm. The *yeshivah*’s goal was to become a unique dwelling place for truth and character improvement. Its students reflected the epitome of these qualities.

Our episode focuses on the *Alter*’s son and successor, **Horav Nochum Velvel, zl**, who died an untimely death, leaving an irreplaceable void in the *yeshivah* and its attending community. *Rav* Nochum Velvel was well-known as a saintly person, a primary student of his revered father. During the closing days of his short life it was evidenced that this unique person possessed a soul that soared in the Heavens. In *Mussar* circles it was said, “It is *k’dai*, worthwhile, to come from the greatest distance to witness the last days of *Rav* Nochum Velvel, to learn how one should behave when he is leaving this world.”

His last illness took a terrible and painful physical toll on him. He underwent difficult and excruciating therapies. Yet, he remained calm, completely composed, experiencing the ordeal with acceptance and equanimity. His gentile physician informed him that his days were numbered – the end was near. *Rav* Nochum Velvel stoically accepted his G-d-given fate. Indeed, when he queried the physician why he had broken protocol to inform him of his impending death, the doctor replied, “I see that you perceive death as the transport from one world to the next.”

On his last night of mortal life, *Rav* Nochum Velvel delivered a *shmuess*, ethical discourse. His theme was the well-known statement, “The day of death is preferable to the day of birth.” It was not the first time that he had addressed this subject, but, at this time, he added, “It is particularly beneficial for a person to contemplate this concept at the time of death. This is the thought that comes to me, now, in my final hours.”

Rav Nochum Velvel’s mind was clear until the final moments, as he directed his family concerning how to conduct themselves during the funeral and, afterwards, during the *shivah*. He commanded them not to be pained by his passing and stipulated that his wife and daughter, who had difficulty walking, should not have to walk when accompanying the bier to the cemetery. To ensure their

compliance, he ordered a carriage to be at their disposal. He also instructed that, on the *Shabbos* following his passing, the family should take extreme care when eating. He feared that, due to their preoccupation with their grief, they might be careless with regard to the bones.

A person who lives his mortal life with such spiritual consciousness can truly view his day of death as preferable to his day of birth.