SPEAKING VOLUMES

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

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A Project of the Aleph Society
The Silence of Aaron

By Rabbanit Aliza Sperling

Facilitator’s Notes:

This unit is presented as a 75-minute session. For a 60-minute session, omit Part Three.

In this unit’s discussion about reactions to tragedy, you may find an interesting opening to discuss the role of silence in mourning practices and traditions. The unit itself does not cover mourning, but you can adapt the direction of the unit to suit your audience’s needs.

If you are interested in exploring further the incident of Nadav and Avihu, see “Balancing Love and Obedience: The Curious Case of Nadav and Avihu,” also by Aliza Sperling, in our 2015 curriculum.

Introduction: Aaron the Speaker (10 minutes)

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Silence can be a kind of speech. What is unsaid is often as important as what is said, and when we read the Bible there are many silences within the narratives. Today, we will look at one particular instance of silence: the silence of Aaron.

Aaron, the older brother of Moses, was the first High Priest of the Jewish people. After the Children of Israel leave Egypt, they enter the desert where they build the Mishkan (portable sanctuary), God’s dwelling place among the Israelites in the desert and the “place of meeting”. Aaron and his sons, who are also priests, are present at the inauguration of the Tabernacle. An unexpected disaster occurs when Nadav and Avihu, two of the priests and Aaron’s sons, bring a “strange fire” and are consumed by a fire from above. The Torah relates Aaron’s response to this tragedy in two words: “Vayidom Aharon — and Aaron was silent”.

Before we examine Aaron’s silence, let’s look at his role as someone who is identified with speech. We begin where God tells Moses, Aaron’s brother, to speak to the Egyptian Pharaoh on behalf of the Children of Israel.

Read Text #1 aloud.

10 Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue. 11 The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? 12 Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say. 13 He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of whom You will send. 14 The wrath of the Lord was enflamed against Moses and He said: Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak. And also, here he is going out to meet you; he will see you, and he will rejoice in his heart. 15 You shall speak to him, and you shall place the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will instruct you that which you shall do. 16 He shall speak to the people for you, and he shall be a mouth to speak for you, and you shall be a leader for him.

Ask:

1. Moses describes himself as not being “a man of words”. How does the text then describe Aaron?
2. What does it mean for Aaron to be a “mouth” for Moses?

In this text, Moses declares that he is “not a man of words” and that he does not believe he will be able to be the speaker for his people. The text then introduces Aaron when God points out that he has the skills necessary to communicate a holy message, and assigns Aaron to be a “mouth” for Moses, who is destined to be the leader. Aaron is recognized as the best speaker, even by God. So what does it mean, then, when the “mouth” says nothing?

Part One: The Death of Aaron’s Sons (10 minutes)

Let us look closely at an extraordinary incident in which Aaron responds with silence.

Read text #2 aloud.


9:22 Aaron raised his hands toward the people and blessed them. And he descended from performing the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offerings. 23 Moses and Aaron came into the Tent of Meeting and emerged and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire people. 24 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats; all the people saw it and sang praise, and fell upon their faces. 10:1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This is that which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. And before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent.
**The Silence of Aaron**

**Part Two: The Meaning of Two Words** (25 minutes)

The Torah relates Aaron’s response to this tragedy in two words: *Vayidom Aharon*. Our sages offer many explanations for Aaron’s reaction. Let’s read and compare some commentaries offering different perspectives on Aaron’s silence.

**Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #3 through #7 in chavruta and discuss the questions that follow.**

*Chavruta* is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

Our first commentator is the Ramban, Moshe ben Nahman, also called Nachmanides, who was a 13th century Spanish scholar, physician, Sephardic rabbi and kabbalist. He was an important figure in rebuilding Jewish life in Jerusalem after the city’s destruction in 1099.

The second is Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism. Our third commentary is from the Rashbam, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, an 11th century Talmud scholar and grandson of Rashi.

The fourth is from Isaac Abarbanel, a 15th century diplomat and scholar. Born to a wealthy Iberian banking family, he and his brothers fled to Italy during the Inquisition, and it was there that he wrote his *Perush*, commentaries on the Five Books of Moses. Last we hear from Rabbi Eliezer Lipman Lichtenstein, an 18th century Polish commentator and scholar, in his *Shem Olam*, a commentary on *Vayikra* (Leviticus).

**Text #3: Ramban. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.**

וטעם “וידום אהרן” – היה בוכה בקול, ואז שתק.

And the reason [that] “Aaron was silent [vayidom]” — for he had been weeping aloud, and then he was silent.

**Text #4: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.**

It is possible that before this statement, Aaron cried in shock at the sudden deaths of his sons, but upon hearing Moses’ statement he voiced no complaints and remained silent. There is no doubt that Aaron’s silence stemmed not from indifference, but from his acceptance of this divine decree.
Text #5: Rashbam. Commentary on Leviticus 10:3.

And Aaron was silent — out of grief; and he did not weep or mourn, for as it is written in Ezekiel: “Son of man, behold, I take away from you the desire of your eyes in a plague, etc...sigh in silence, make no mourning for the dead” (Ez. 24:16-17). Here, too, he was silent although he wished to grieve and weep.


The meaning of “Vayidom Aharon” is that his heart turned to inanimate stone, and he did not raise his voice in weeping and mourning as a father mourning for his sons. He also did not accept comfort from Moshe because his soul had left him and he had no speech, and therefore the verse says “Vayidom Aharon,” from the language of domem (inanimate) and quiet.


Scripture chose vayidom rather than vayishtok (synonyms of silence). The latter signifies the abstention from speaking, weeping, moaning or any other outward manifestation as “They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man” (Psalms 107:27), followed by, “then are they glad because vayishtoku — they are quiet” (ibid., 30). The verb domem however, connotes inner peace and calm...Accordingly Scripture describes the saintly Aaron as vayidom and not merely as vayishtok, thus emphasizing that his heart and soul were at peace within, that rather than questioning the standards of God, he justified the Divine verdict.

Ask in chavruta:

1. Why do you think Aaron was silent?
2. What is each of the commentators saying? What are the differences between the interpretations? What are some similarities? Use the chart to help you.
3. How might Aaron’s silence be a form of communication? What is he communicating?
4. Think back to your own interpretation of Aaron’s silence. Do you identify more with one commentator’s approach than the others? Has your understanding changed in reading any of these commentaries? Why or why not?
5. Compare your own interpretation with that of your chavruta. Where do you agree or disagree?
6. Aaron, who has been described as a “mouth”, must remain silent in a moment that would normally cause a person to at least cry out. Does that change the significance of the story for you? How might it inform your understanding of Aaron’s character?
The Silence of Aaron

What was Aaron doing first?

What causes Aaron to become silent?

What is Aaron feeling silently?

How is this demonstrated?

The text itself is sparse, offering us only two words about Aaron’s silence; it is silent in its absence of additional details. The range of interpretations and understandings of the commentaries, along with our own readings, show the ongoing process of trying to unpack the meaning of these two words. The commentators found these brief two words in response to such tragedy to be something challenging, and something they wished to better understand. The commentaries vary, but none of the commentators suggest that Aaron’s silence was unfeeling; many even view it as a forceful act of willpower. More than a role-reversal where the “mouth” did not speak, Aaron’s silence communicates its own meaning. More than an absence of words, he abstains from speaking.

Part Three: The Reactions of Others  (15 minutes)

In examining Aaron’s personal experience of his loss, we may also wonder about the reactions of other witnesses, such as Moses. Text #8 tells us how Moses responded.

★ Ask a participant to read Text #8 aloud.


1 Each of the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, took his fire-pan and placed it in fire, and placed incense upon, and they offered before the Lord strange fire that He had not commanded them. 2 Fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed them. And they died before the Lord. 3 Moses said to Aaron: This incident is that about which the Lord spoke, saying: Through those who are near to Me I will be sanctified. That is, My sanctity will manifest among those who are close to Me, and then before all the people I will be glorified; and Aaron was silent. 4 Moses called Mishael and Eltzafan, the sons of Uzziel, an uncle of Aaron. They
were Levites and family members. And Moses said to them: Approach, carry your brethren from inside the Sanctuary to outside the camp. They approached and carried them by their tunics to outside the camp, as Moses had spoken. It is clear from the verse that Aaron's sons were not burned in an ordinary manner, as they were carried out in their garments, indicating that the garments were whole and durable enough to pull their wearers with them. Moses said to Aaron, and to Elazar and to Itamar, his, Aaron's other, sons: Despite the tragedy that has occurred, you shall not grow out the hair of your heads. And you shall not rend your garments that you will not die. If you observe the usual customs of mourning, you will be liable to death, and not only will you be punished, but He will rage against all the congregation as you are now their priests. And your brethren, the entire house of Israel, shall weep the burning that the Lord has burned. Mourning and weeping are of course a natural response to death. However, you have been consecrated, and you must remain in your posts. Consequently, you must not let their deaths affect you. From the entrance of the Tent of Meeting you shall not emerge so that you not die, as the anointing oil of the Lord is upon you. They acted in accordance with the word of Moses.

Ask:

1. When does Moses react in the chain of events?
2. What are the instructions Moses gives at this tragic moment?
3. Do you think any of those instructions contribute to Aaron’s silence?

While the text gives us Moses and Aaron’s reactions, the Bible is silent about the reaction of Elisheva, Nadav and Avihu’s mother (Exodus 6:23). The Midrash fills in this gap, in its expansion on Songs of Songs (Shir Hashirim) 3:6, which describes a woman rising from the desert like a column of smoke. Our sages connect this woman to Elisheva.

Ask different participants to read Text #9a and #9b aloud.


Who is this coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke? This is not regular smoke, but perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, fragrant spices, and with all the powders of the merchant.


Who is she coming — The text speaks of Elisheva the daughter of Aminadav, who saw five joys in one day. She saw her brother in law a king, her brother a prince, her husband a high priest, and her two sons deputy high priests, and Pinhas her grandson the war priest. When her sons went in to offer sacrifices they were burned and her joy became mourning, then she became like a pillar of smoke.
The “columns of smoke” in Song of Songs evokes a particular image — that of incense at a temple altar. The smoke seen in the wilderness is not billowing like a campfire, or high like a wildfire. Instead, it is in a steady column, undisturbed by the wind. It smells fragrant, like precious spices used for the incense of sacred rituals. Such incense would have been present in the Tabernacle where Nadav and Avihu presented their strange fire. The image of a column or a pillar also echoes the shape of a person standing, or the space where a person once was. Our sages commenting on Song of Songs connect the imagery of this eerie smoke with the presence of Elisheva in the Tabernacle.

1. What do you think the Midrash means when it says that Elisheva “became like a pillar of smoke”?
2. What is the difference between Aaron’s silence and Elisheva’s?
3. Compare the descriptions of Moses, Aaron and Elisheva’s responses. Which resonates most with you? Why?

Moses’ immediate reaction stands in stark contrast to that of his brother’s. Where Moses takes charge and gives instructions quickly, Aaron remains silent. Our sages imagine that Elisheva, who we do not see or hear from, dissolved into smoke with grief.

Conclusion: “A Powerful Silence” (15 minutes)

What happens when someone chooses to stay silent rather than express him/herself verbally? In an interview, Elie Wiesel discusses the power of silence, and how it can become a powerful method of communication. Elie Wiesel (1928–2016) was a Nobel Laureate, author, philosopher and Holocaust survivor.

Text #10: Elie Wiesel, interview with American Academy of Achievement, 1996.

You can be a silent witness, which means silence itself can become a way of communication. There is so much in silence. There is an archeology of silence. There is a geography of silence. There is a theology of silence. There is a history of silence. Silence is universal and you can work within it, within its own parameters and its own context, and make that silence into a testimony. Job was silent after he lost his children and everything, his fortune and his health. Job, for seven days and seven nights he was silent, and his three friends who came to visit him were also silent. That must have been a powerful silence, a brilliant silence.

1. Do you agree with Elie Wiesel that there are times when silence is “powerful” or “brilliant”?
2. Do you think silence can express thoughts and feelings in the same way words express them? Why or why not?
3. What are some situations when you have chosen to use silence as a way to communicate a message?
4. When have you received silence in response to something you said or did? What impact did that have on you?
5. How do you think Elie Wiesel’s words here apply to Aaron’s silence as we’ve learned about it today?
Introduction: Aaron the Speaker


Moses said to the Lord: Please, my Lord, I am not a man of words. Neither yesterday nor the day before, nor since you have spoken to your servant as I am cumbrous of speech and cumbrous of tongue.

The Lord said to him: Who gives a mouth to a person? Or who renders one mute or deaf, or sighted or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

Now, go, and I will be with your mouth and I will instruct you that which you shall say.

He said: Please, my Lord, please send by means of whom You will send.

The wrath of the Lord was enflamed against Moses and He said: Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak. And also, here he is going out to meet you; he will see you, and he will rejoice in his heart.

You shall speak to him, and you shall place the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will instruct you that which you shall do.

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Part One: The Death of Aaron’s Sons


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