

## Chukat: The Pain of Silence 7.1.11

I had an older brother I never knew. There was no picture of Stevie in our house; my father never spoke of him and my mother did only rarely. A few hints of him though lingered. Occasionally my aunts would fondly remember how smart and sweet he was. And, there was that black and white family portrait with his blonde buzz cut in my grandmother's photo album. But, mainly I recall the open wound that festered in our lives. I don't remember when or who told me about the story of how he died, but, I do know it was told only once. He was 5, while grounded, snuck out the back door, jumped on his bike, pedaled down the street and within a few blocks was hit by a truck and died. I was 3 at the time.

The silence found its voice in family discord, with my father angry, my mother sullen and me anxious. In maybe a flailing attempt to make sense of it all, at 10, I asked them to take me to his grave. Maybe I thought this would make his death more concrete and possibly quell inside me the undercurrent of distress.

We drove to the cemetery. With a clenched jaw, my Dad sat in the car as my Mom and I quietly walked through the grass. Neither of us spoke and I could see the strain on her face. I felt guilty I had put her through this. We finally arrived. There on his modest grave stone was his name, Guy Steven Vance, and the dates of his short life. Another piece of his life was uncovered; his first name was “Guy” not “Stevie.” My mother didn’t cry and with this new revelation I felt I knew him even less than before.

Then, instead of returning to the car, my mom started to walk up and down the rows looking for something. Suddenly she stopped and we both stared down at a small round grave marker nestled under overgrown grass. It simply said “baby Vance.” Puzzled, I asked, “Who is this?” My Mom quietly replied, “This is your younger sister.” What? I had a younger sister! I was shocked and wanted to know more. Mom looked at me and said, “She died a day or two after she was born.” And just like that “baby Vance” slipped back into the shadows.

This week's Torah portion records both Miriam and Aaron's deaths. The text is silent on why and how this great prophetess died. It only states, *The Israelites arrived as a whole congregation at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed in Kadesh; then Miriam died there and was buried there (Num. 20:1)*. Its terseness suggests an absence of mourning by the people. Rabbi Lisa has suggested that the unresolved grief over Miriam's death sets in motion the anger that consumes the community in the ensuing story.

Israel rails against Moses and Aaron because there is no water. The presence of God appears and God tells Moses and Aaron to assemble everyone and speak to the rock and it will yield its water. Contrary to God's instructions, Moses in anger calls the people "rebels," and raises his hand and strikes the rock twice and water spews forth. God lashes out at Moses and Aaron and says, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land I've given them (Num. 20:12)." To hit instead of speak to a rock warrants their banishment from the Promised Land? God's anger

seems disproportionate to Moses' act. Don't we do the same though when we seethe at the slow checker at the grocery store, or when a loved one forgets to wash the dishes? Often fearful to fully embrace pain of the "big things," we re-direct our anger towards the small ones. Maybe at this moment even God had not wept yet for Miriam.

And, what about Aaron's reaction, or more to the point, the absence of it? Even though it was his brother who performed the damning act, he receives the same fate. Just as earlier when God kills his two sons for offering alien fire, he remains silent. Like my parents who endured unspeakable losses, so did Aaron. But, as we saw with my family there is no solace in silence.

The Torah teaches us through the un-mourned loss of Miriam and its tragic aftermath that it's vital that we share our hurts and allow ourselves to mourn. I've rarely told of my brother's death and almost never of my sister's. In a way, tonight is a "coming out story," an opportunity to mourn these losses and find comfort in my BCC community. Remember that picture I told you about in the

beginning? Here it is. The one of my smart, sweet and mischievous  
older brother, the brother I know.

Shabbat Shalom