

**Parashat Sh'mini (Nadav & Avihu)**  
**March 28, 2003**

**Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards**  
**Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA**

The winds this week have made me think about . . . wind. The way it is both destructive (knocking down trees and power lines) and productive (windmills or blowing away the smog); the way winds are both inspiring and scary, invigorating and enervating. It is easy, in the midst of a strong wind, to be struck both by the wonder, the beauty, of God's creations, of nature, and also by the arbitrariness, the danger of God's creations - struck by the chaotic, unpredictable nature of nature.

Which leads of course, perhaps especially in this time of war, to reflections on the arbitrary nature of just about everything.

My brother attended a wake this past week for one of his students - an honor roll high school junior at one of the Catholic high schools where Larry teaches about Judaism. The young man, say the witnesses, was riding home in a car with friends when a car full of gang members pulled up beside them. The gang members instructed the student to give the gang sign, but he chose not to since he was opposed to gangs. And so a gang member pulled out a gun and shot him -- dead.

Someone dear to Tracy and me was shot by a gang member just over a year ago - badly wounded, but not killed. The other night we saw him just after he played a soccer game - something the doctors weren't sure he'd be able to do again when they first saw his injury.

Neither of these kids were gang members. If they hadn't been at that particular place at that particular time, where might they be now?

Our friend and BCC member, Ev Poplawski, has been struck with an extremely debilitating ailment - a chronic nerve disorder which causes almost constant pain, and threatens to get worse. She and Sherry could use visits and phone calls, by the way, a great relief and distraction for her - let me know if you need contact information for them. Ev's ailment is one of several being experienced by formerly healthy BCC members - one never knows when - or why --one might go from chronically well to chronically ill.

I was caught in a terrible traffic jam this week - some folks were impatient during it, but I think there were fewer impatient people than I usually see in such a setting. Perhaps it was because the highway patrol had set up a sign to let us know there had been a bad accident and 3 out of 4 lanes were closed up ahead. Perhaps just knowing why helped keep people calm. Or perhaps it was because other folks were thinking like I was thinking --- well, so I'm late, but I wasn't in the accident, and offering a prayer of healing for those who were. Or perhaps some were thinking more globally - I wonder what it's like to be trying to drive through the city of Baghdad right now, and offering a prayer for peace, and another prayer to keep safe those at war. Or perhaps, like me, some of my fellow traffic jamees (jammers?) were just counting blessings -- so I'm moving a few feet at a time through traffic on a hot day when the air conditioning isn't working in the car - but I'm on my way to see a newly adopted baby dipped into the mikvah by his loving new parents -

shehekiyanu, v'kiyamnu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh, I knew I'd be saying shortly: thank you God, for giving us life, for sustaining us in life, for allowing us to reach this moment.

Do you ever pray in traffic jams? I recommend it, but don't pray to get out of the traffic jam in a hurry - remember, Jewish tradition tries to dissuade us from praying for things we're not likely to get (that's why we pray for rain only during the rainy season, etc.). I pray in order to re-focus myself, and in order to re-frame a situation.

I don't just pray in traffic jams (in fact, I've only recently taken to praying in traffic jams). It is part of a larger question this wind, and this war have inspired in me -- what do we do when we're caught up in the arbitrariness of life? or the inexplicability of life? how do we explain the inexplicable? how do we keep going in the face of it?

In this week's Torah portion, Shemini, we read again the troubling story of Nadav and Avihu, sons of Aaron the High Priest, who die young, struck down in the prime of life, inexplicably. The story, one of the few stories in the Book of Leviticus, is only a few verses long. We are told that when these newly ordained priests, on their first attempt to offer sacrifices at the altar in the Holy of Holies, made their way there, "fire came forth from before God and consumed them; and they died before God." [Lev. 10.1-2] Why? We don't know. God offers no explanation. And if the two young men knew, they didn't live to answer. Their uncle Moses offers only a cryptic remark, one that the commentators discuss, but come to no consensus about. And Aaron himself, having just witnessed the fiery death of two of his sons, responds, we are told, with silence.

The rabbis had a field day with this short narrative. Their sometimes bizarre explanations for the 2 deaths range from viewing their annihilation as a sign of "Divine approval," to calling it a just punishment for the young men's arrogance and wrong-doing.

And Aaron's silence . . . how is it explained? It's not, for silence by its very nature is inscrutable, isn't it? -- we can guess, but we cannot know -- and therefore silence can mean anything . . . from grief to fear to shock to anger to indifference to approval -- you name it. Interestingly, though, the Hebrew word that tells us of Aaron's silence -- yi-dome -- hints at an explanation. There are any number of words in biblical Hebrew that mean "silent," but the root of the one used in this passage can also mean "wail"--as in to "groan" or "lament." The implication, then, is that Aaron's silence is indeed from grief, as any of us might have suspected. In fact, perhaps we are wrong to hear it as silence at all, perhaps, we ought to be hearing Aaron wailing and groaning instead.

This passage moves Aaron and Moses from a moment of worship and a vision of the glory of God described in the verses that immediately precede these, to a moment of shocking, inexplicable tragedy. And we too experience the sudden change: we are there to witness God's glory and then to see a father watch the unexpected, violent death of two sons. Despite its strange plot, real life is once again reflected in Torah: a sudden catastrophe intrudes seemingly from nowhere with no explanation forthcoming.

The Hebrew of this passage and some of its details always puts me in mind of a second compelling and cryptic story that I often think about - this one happens to Elijah, the prophet. In a time of great despair, sought after by enemies, ready to give up on his own life, Elijah went out to a mountain in search of God. The text tells us: "God passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke the rocks in pieces before God; but

God was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but God was not in the fire: and after the fire a thin voice of silence--kol d'mamah dakah -- a still, small voice." [I Kings 19.11-12] The Hebrew word -- d'mamah -- variously translated here as "silence" and "still" comes from that same Hebrew root as Aaron's yi-dome, "silence" or "lament."

Another important parallel is about the fire in both stories. The fire that consumed Nadav and Avihu, we are told, "went out from before God -- mi-lif-nay Adonai -- and they died before God -- lifnay Adonai." [Lev. 10.2] One might think from this that God was in that fire. Yet in very similar language in the Elijah story, we are told that the wind broke the rocks into pieces "before God-- lifnay Adonai -- " BUT there we are specifically told that even though the wind was before God, God was not in the wind-- lo va'ruach Adonai. Neither was God in the earthquake nor in the fire, but, presumably God was after the fire -- a-char ha-eish, in the still small voice -- kol d'mamah daka -- the thin voice of silence. Because of this comparison with Elijah, perhaps we can surmise that in the story of Nadav and Avihu, God was not in the fire that burned them up, but rather God came after the fire, in the yi-dome -- the silence or the lament -- the still small voice of their grief-stricken father Aaron.

In the past, before I had the terrible privilege of being with dying people and their loved ones, I felt baffled and battered by this story of Nadav and Avihu. I felt anger and confusion and distress over God's apparent part in the killing, and absence later. But until I'd been with the dying and those who love them, I hadn't seen that quieter view that I just offered you. The view that suggests that God is in the grieving father, rather than in the fiery killer. So too in Elijah's encounter, God is the still small voice, rather than the implements of destruction.

It may not be easy to accept that God is in these faint voices, or even silences, rather than in the fire or wind or earthquakes. We may still find ourselves inclined to expect God in the disasters. We may insist on keeping God the "who" that we blame when the bad things happen. Or we may be inclined to assume God is nowhere to be found. But these stories turn those ideas around, suggesting that God is not against us but with us, not an absence but a presence. The presence that keeps us from imploding under the crush of despair. They tell us that God is not in the catastrophe, but in the stunned or groaning silences of grief that follow -- be they Aaron's or our own.

I told you earlier that I sometimes pray to re-focus myself, or to re-frame a situation. I read Torah for those reasons too, I guess. And I know I am not alone in either of those "habits."

This week, like last, I received lots of e-mails with yet more prayers and reflections to help us through this time of war and uncertainty and ongoing disagreement among the citizens of the world.

One of the prayers I received is attributed to Rabbi Harold Kushner, famously the author of "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." I choose this one to read tonight because he too seems to be inspired, if not by the wind or the fire or the earthquake, at least by the wind's close friends.

A PRAYER FOR THE WORLD

Let the rain come and wash away  
the ancient grudges, the bitter hatreds  
held and nurtured over generations.  
Let the rain wash away the memory  
of the hurt, the neglect.  
Then let the sun come out and  
fill the sky with rainbows.  
Let the warmth of the sun heal us  
wherever we are broken.  
Let it burn away the fog so that  
we can see each other clearly.  
So that we can see beyond labels,  
beyond accents, gender or skin color.  
Let the warmth and brightness  
of the sun melt our selfishness.  
So that we can share the joys and  
feel the sorrows of our neighbors.  
And let the light of the sun  
be so strong that we will see all  
people as our neighbors.  
Let the earth, nourished by rain,  
bring forth flowers  
to surround us with beauty.  
And let the mountains teach our hearts  
to reach upward to heaven.  
Amen.

-- Rabbi Harold S. Kushner

Shabbat shalom