

April 9, 1999 Parashat Shemini

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Last week here Jeremy Lawrence talked to us about stories, and the telling of them. And I've been thinking a lot this week about the ways in which stories help us create and shape our realities, just as the story of the Exodus, that we told again at our seders and all the week of Passover, helped create and shape us a people. Jeremy told us a story from Kosovo, a story that was as powerful to the people there as the Exodus story is to the Jews.

On an individual level, we all have our own stories, that get told and retold, embellished and edited along the way to becoming the shaping events of our lives. Jews tell stories on every holy day, but Passover is most of all storytelling, even the food tells the story. I thought about that again last night as some of us gathered for Yizkor -- memorial services. Reciting to ourselves the individual memorial prayers, thinking so intently, privately there in the midst of others doing the same thing, of the people in our lives we have lost, the ones who our stories are about, the ones who helped shape who we are.

After a week flooded with storytelling, how sweet to end it with those private personal stories told, at that moment, only to oneself. And then to share the names of BCC members who have died, the long list, each name a story not told last night, but floating there, a promise of future pleasure perhaps, as the storytelling week came to an end.

Also during this storytelling week, I've been reading a Holocaust memoir called *The Seamstress* by Sara Tuvel Bernstein. I'm reading it I suppose partly in preparation for Yom Hashoah next week, Holocaust memorial day, and partly because our upstairs neighbor, Pam Gray is adapting it for a screenplay (she's the writer of the recently released movie, *A Walk on the*

Sarah Bernstein wrote that she saw "one broken chair left on its side in the dining room," and yet she continued to try to find a sign that "[Rachel's] family was simply away on a visit."

The commentators and midrash writers tell us all sorts of things about Aaron's silence. It means, say some, he quietly accepted God's judgment. He was afraid. He was unmoved. It is why Aaron was called a peacemaker -- he did not object or complain. I wonder. Is that what you hear in statements like, "Aaron was silent" or "I never saw Rachel again"?

There is a tradition, in these weeks between Passover and Shavuot, to read one chapter a week of *Pirkei Avot*, the *Sayings of the Fathers*, the most popular tractate in the Mishnah. An appealing little book of useful aphorisms, ones you probably know, like Hillel saying, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" Lovely, cryptic stuff like that. In chapter one, which Jews are reading this Shabbat, we find Simeon, son of Rabban Gamaliel, saying, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing of better service than silence; not learning but doing is the chief thing; and whoso is profuse of words causes sin."

Va yi-dome Aharon. Aaron was silent. In the presence of the wise, perhaps, silence is best, especially if it is accompanied by listening. And perhaps that is what Aaron was doing. But Simeon's word for silence is different from the Torah's word in describing Aaron's silence. The root of Aaron's kind of silence also means "to wail, groan, lament." Perhaps that in fact is what Aaron was doing there after watching his sons die. A wail, an inward, even silent wailing perhaps.

Moon). Living as a young single, working woman in Bucharest, Bernstein tells compellingly her witnessing of the anti-Semitic fervor that overtook the Rumania she grew up in. She describes the life she led with her best friend Rachel, a coworker at the seamstress shop, and then in her simple narrative style, tells of Rachel's disappearance:

"Then one spring day in 1939, Rachel did not come to the salon to work. The next day she was still absent. I told myself that she was ill and would come back soon, but as the days went by and she did not return I could stand it no longer and ran to her home after work one evening. No one was there. The house was locked, silent, one broken chair left on its side in the dining room. I went from window to window, trying to find a sign that her family was simply away on a visit -- a note on the back door, a suitcase not needed at the last minute. I went back to my room alone. I never saw Rachel again." [p.55]

I got up from reading that paragraph yesterday and picked up the LA Times. The picture on the front page -- did you see it? -- of the deserted refugee waiting area on the Yugoslav-Macedonian border. No reporters had any idea what has happened to the people who the day before had huddled by the thousands in several such areas on the Yugoslav borders at both Albania and Macedonia. On Tuesday, the paper said, more than 24,000 people had poured across the bridge at Morine into Albania. On Wednesday, after the Yugoslavs shut off the flow, the grand total was 27. Where have they gone? Today their story had even disappeared from the front page of the newspaper (or any page).

Pictures tell stories without words. Sometimes they just imply stories -- like names mentioned at Yizkor. Or stories told without enough detail to know what really happened. In the Torah portion we read this shabbat, the long stories of the Exodus, of Passover week come suddenly to a halt,

That kind of silence, that kind of wailing, is, I suspect, what many of us are doing these weeks as we watch the Kosovo pictures, so eerily reminiscent of the black and white Holocaust pictures we know too well. "Images of Refugees Resonate" is today's LA Times headline in the article about the Jewish response to aid the ethnic Albanians [4/9/99, p. A16].

It is not entirely clear why the Israeli Knesset, in 1951, picked the date it did for Yom Hashoah, Holocaust remembrance day, which falls every year on the 27th of Nisan, the 12th day of the counting of the omer, and this year on Monday night and Tuesday, April 12 and 13 (we'll observe it at BCC next Friday night). It is officially called Yom Hashoah v'Ha-g'vurah -- Day of Destruction and Heroism. For me, Aaron is the hero of the story when his sons mysteriously died. He quietly lamented; he didn't feel obligated to tell others what to do or how he felt at the moment (later he spoke out, by the way). Heroes continue to come out of the Shoah, the destruction, some of them are the ones who were silent for so long, but spoke out later -- like Sarah Tuval Bernstein, and the hundreds who are telling their stories through the Shoah Foundation, telling their stories so we would know what happened, so we would know what we're seeing if we see it again.

But here's the trick. Can we, in the presence of the wise, be silent and listen, until we get the story? And if we do that, can we do what Simeon suggests is the next step: "Not learning but doing is the chief thing; and whoso is profuse of words causes sin." When do we stop listening, learning from the stories, and do something? And when do we stop talking ourselves and do something? Are we, in fact, learning what to do? The simplest do something measure now is to help send relief aid, so I hope you can (instructions are in the seat bulletin), but obviously a few dollars

and we are struck by the brevity of a story told here -- a three verse story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron. In their first attempt to act as priests at the altar, they offer "strange fire" which causes a flame to come from before God and zap them -- kill them, right there at the sacred altar. What happened? What did they do wrong? Was God punishing them or was it like a chemistry experiment gone wrong? We don't know. What does God want us to learn from this? We don't know. And the three verse story has given way over the centuries to longer stories, midrashim.

I am always struck, however, and this year in particular -- situated here in our storytelling week, in the shadows of Sarah Bernstein's memoir and the scary front page photographs -- I am struck by Aaron's response to the death of his sons, a death he witnesses. Two words in the Hebrew: *va-yi-dome Ah-ha-ron*. Aaron was silent. What a stark and cryptic statement -- like the stark sentence in Bernstein's paragraph: "The house was locked, silent, one broken chair left on its side in the dining room." Silence, like a photograph, like the images Sarah Bernstein saw as she looked into the windows of her friend's home, silence is often inscrutable. It could mean many things. The photograph on the front page yesterday, with all its brightly colored clothing strewn all about the place, the two Red cross tents in the distance, the empty water bottles, looked almost like it could have been a photograph taken the day after Woodstock -- what a different story that would have told.

from abroad, if it even gets there to bring some physical relief (the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, by the way, seems confident that it will), still won't do much toward long term solution, but it might save some lives in the meantime. And so might any tzedakah given to people in need -- consider joining our joint project Sukkot in April, which begins tomorrow, in which we'll make a clear difference for a family in need right here in the LA area by helping rebuild their falling down home (more on that later).

I admire Clinton (finally) and NATO -- as pacifist as my leanings are -- for trying to do something, to learn from history and do something different this time. But who knows if it's the right thing to do? I've heard so many complacently arrogant analyses in the last week. How can anyone presume to know the best course of action, or that what NATO is doing is the worst course of action? Maxims may be said and repeated easily, but like morals to stories, like stories themselves, they're not always easy to translate into action, into life. Like Jeremy when he spoke to us last week, I don't, as you've no doubt guessed already, have any clear answers for us. Keep reading, keep listening, keep wailing, don't turn away, act in whatever way you can to try to help. Hillel said, in chapter one of Pirkei Avot, by the way, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow-creatures, and drawing them near to the Torah." The word Torah means "teaching." May the Torah, the teaching, of our lives too come to be an *etz chayim hi l'makhazikim bah* "a tree of life to those who hold fast to it." Shabbat Shalom