

**Parshat Shemini:
On Living with Loss**
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Parshat Shemini records the death of Aharon's two sons and the varied reactions of his family, begging the question: Is there one *right* way to mourn loss?

Amidst the celebration on the eighth day of the dedication of the *mishkan*, as the people are consecrating the *mishkan*, Nadav and Avihu step forward and place *esh zarah* (alien fire) on the altar. Immediately,

a fire came forth from before God and consumed them, and they died before God (ויקרא י:ב).
(Vayikra 10:2).

Aharon, their father, who witnesses this tragedy does not scream, or cry, or wail over their bodies. The Torah simply states:

And Aharon was silent (10:3). (יִדָּם אַהֲרֹן י:ג)

Perhaps, Aharon's silence was an expression of shock. Or, his silence was external, while inwardly his feelings raged. Rashbam suggests (ibid.) that Aharon's reaction, his silence, is quiet acceptance of God's decree-- his silence flowed from an inner acceptance of God's judgment. As we read on, Aharon indeed continues the daily service as usual, silently resigned to the fate of his family.

There's another reaction to loss that is alluded to in our parsha: denial. After the death of Nadav and Aviyhu, Moshe summons Mishael and Elzaphan, their cousins, to tend to the deceased and to carry their bodies outside of the *mishkan*.

Generally speaking, *kohanim*, who normally may not expose themselves to *tum'at met* (ritual impurity transmitted by a dead body), are permitted to tend to the burial needs of a deceased relative—a parent, sibling or child. Therefore, it would have made sense that the surviving younger brothers, Elazar and Ithamar, perform this task, not Mishael and Elzaphan. (Aharon, who was the Kohen Gadol, was not permitted to come into contact with a *met*—with a dead body, even of a close relative.)

This very question is debated in the Talmud, in *Mesechet Zevachim* (100a). Rabbi Akiva argues that no *halakhic* precedent can be learned from Ithamar and Elazar's lack of involvement in caring for the deceased and a relative of a *kohen* is obligated to tend to his deceased relative. Rabbi Yishamel, however, argues that the fact that Elazar and Ithamar did not tend to their brothers does set a precedent that a *kohen* must never come into contact with a dead body, even a close relative. As proof, Rabbi Yishmael tells the story of a *kohen* named Yosef Ha-kohen who lost his wife and refused to defile his priesthood to tend to her needs.

As I envision Yosef Ha-Kohen's refusal to defile himself for his wife, I imagine a range of emotional states—quiet acceptance of God's decree, anger, and grief. But at the core of these emotions, I see denial. Yosef Ha-Kohen's refusal to tend to his wife, of using his *kahuna* as an excuse, shows a forlorn husband, unable to face the task of burying his beloved wife. In denial, he hid behind the veil of a *halakhic* concept, even though the *halakha* did not apply to him.

The Gemara concludes: Yosef Ha-Kohen's fellow *kohanim* convened and concluded that the *halakha* is in accordance with Rabbi Akiva, demanding that he become *tamei*. They then forced him to tend to the needs of his deceased wife, come out from the veil of *halakha*, and bury her.

Each of these stories offer a viable emotional reaction to loss: Aharon's silence; Rav Yosef Ha-Kohen's denial and inability to come to grips with reality.

And, in truth, our reaction to loss, often encompasses a slew of emotional states. Emotions are cyclical, not linear. There are days when we are angry. Days that we cannot speak, and accept our fate. And, days when we are in denial. There is no one right way.

But we cannot hide from reality forever. We cannot, like Rabbi Yosef Ha-Kohen, refuse to confront our loss, and hide behind a veil. For some, that veil may be alienating oneself from community; another's veil may be turning to vices, rather than seeking solace with others. It is only through confronting loss and experiencing the cycles of emotions that we can begin to heal.

There is no one way to mourn. But, on the emotional roller coaster of the mourning process, our response must be to emerge and find a way to live.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.