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“He enters the classroom, sits down, doesn't say anything. He looks at us, we look at him. At first, there are a few giggles, but Morrie only shrugs, and eventually a deep silence falls and we begin to notice the smallest sounds, the radiator humming in the corner of the room, the nasal breathing of one of the fat students. Some of us are agitated. When is he going to say something? We squirm, check our watches. A few students look out of the window, trying to be above it all. This goes on a good fifteen minutes, before Morrie finally breaks in with a whisper. "What's happening here?" he asks. And slowly a discussion begins -- as Morrie has wanted all along -- about the effect of silence on human relations. Why are we embarrassed by silence? What comfort do we find in all the noise?”

As this excerpt from Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* points out, we humans have an uncomfortable relationship with silence. We don't know what to do when we are in a room with others, and no one is saying anything. It feels awkward and unnatural, and makes us want to squirm.

Yet, this quote also points out that when there is silence, there is new possibility. We notice sounds that we haven't noticed before- the hum of the radiator, the deep breathing of a colleague, the cars driving by outside our windows. Silence may seem limiting, but in reality it opens us up to what we might not notice in a noisier context. Silence allows us to be present on a different level. Silence allows us to hear more deeply.

In this week's Torah portion, during a critical moment in his life, we are invited to hear Aaron more deeply. He has just been ordained as the very first High Priest, after many chapters about his selection and what his role will look like. However, the celebration is short-lived when his sons Nadav and Abihu are suddenly killed by God for offering the wrong kind of sacrifice. Moses tries to fill the moment right after their deaths with chatter, justifying why this might have happened and attempting to support his brother by filling the space with words. Yet, in a big moment for Aaron, who has hardly had a chance in the Torah to speak much at all, the Torah merely offers this to tell us how he was doing: "va'yidom Aharon"- "and Aaron was silent.

Like the students in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, some of us may become agitated by thinking about Aaron's silence. We might be uncomfortable with his stoic reaction to a horrific and traumatic event. But, as Morrie asks, what comfort would we find in noise? Why would Aaron's silence embarrass us?

How does Jewish tradition explain Aaron's stillness? Our sages certainly have many explanations for his reaction, and these explanations cover a wide range of interpretation: they say that he was trying to console himself, that he didn't want to upset God further, that he was disengaging from the situation, that he was in mourning.

I believe that Aaron's silence is an invitation for us to listen closer- not just to him, but to everyone we encounter. If Aaron had reacted a certain way after his sons perished, we would be able to ascribe an emotion to him- sadness, anger, fear- and move on.

We could have simply defined him, and his grieving process, with one specific reaction. Because the Torah merely states, “va’yidom Aharon”- “and Aaron was silent, we are left to think about why. It is up to us to analyze what the silence could mean. While his noisier brother Moses has a very wordy response, Aaron’s silence speaks volumes. Without words or a specific reaction, Aaron’s quiet allows each reader of Torah to try to hear him more deeply, allows each person who encounters this story to relate to Aaron individually, and allows us to be present with him in a traumatic moment in our own unique way.

In his stillness, Aaron invites us to think about the moments in our own lives when we haven’t had the words to express how we’re feeling. Aaron requests us to listen closely, to think about why silence might make us uncomfortable, but why it is so important. Aaron asks us for empathy, to be present for him in a time of unimaginable pain.

The late Israeli writer Amos Oz reflected, “No man is an island, wrote the great Donne. The novelist among us adds: true, no man is an island, but we are all peninsulas. Partially on our own, surrounded by the dark waters, and partially linked to a continent, to other peninsulas, to the plural noun.... This truth is deeper than Jewish. It is universal.”

With his silence, Aaron shows us that each of us has our own truth- as Amos Oz wrote, we are partially on our own. We experience the events of the world differently. When dark waters threaten to submerge us, we have unique responses. However, as peninsulas we are all connected. Silence is a force that allows us to remain linked to a continent, to others around us who want to support and comfort us.

In silence, we connect. In silence, we are present. We don't need to find the right words or the right responses, we can just be there for each other. We can embrace silence as a natural reaction instead of experiencing discomfort from it. This connection, this empathy, this presence allows us to be open to universal truths.

One such universal truth is that sometimes things happen that we cannot control or understand. On a day of celebration of his new position as High Priest, Aaron suddenly experienced the worst event imaginable. His silence, and ours in the face of similar inexplicable events, reminds us that sometimes there just aren't the words to explain, rationalize, or justify. Moses' attempts to do so fall flat as his brother remains quiet. The silence that brings us together also represents the fact that something has changed. It marks a transition from a sense of normalcy to a world that will never be the same. Dr. Eliezer Diamond, a Professor at Jewish Theological Seminary writes, "Aaron continued his holy work, but there was some part of him that was now silent, that did not turn to God in prayer and praise as it did in the past. The fire that killed Aaron's sons had wounded him profoundly as well."

“Va’yidom Aharon”- “and Aaron was silent. Why are we embarrassed by silence? What comfort do we find in all the noise? If the Torah had stated that Aaron was sad, or angry, or frightened, we would have understood- but we would not have been able to be present to Aaron’s grief in the same way. Aaron’s silence is an invitation to listen to him, and to one another, more closely. Aaron’s silence prompts us to be empathetic, to think about how we might have reacted, or did react in similar situations. Aaron’s silence brings us closer to him, linking us all together in the face of helplessness when trauma occurs.

*Eloheinu V’Elohei Avoteinu V’Imoteinu-* our God, God of Aaron, God of all of our ancestors, may we still feel your presence even when the unimaginable occurs. May we use silence to really listen to the noise around us, and to hear each other more deeply. Even as we experience and react to events in our own way, may silence link us like peninsulas, helping us to be truly present to the world and to one another.