**Parenting from the Parsha- Parshat Shemini- Staying Silent**

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In this week’s parsha we encounter the mysterious death of Aharon’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu. As the Torah text itself is vague in describing the episode, numerous explanations are given by the Midrashim and meforshim as to why they were punished with death. Equally astonishing, however, is Aharon’s reaction to the tragedy. Faced with the death of two sons in such dramatic fashion, the Torah tells us "וידם אהרון", “And Aharon was silent”. Many meforshim even note that the word the Torah uses to describe Aharon’s silence is unusual - a word that indicates not simply a regular silence, but an intense silence, a stillness that is conscious and deliberate. The Torah seems to imply that, while it would have been natural and understandable for Aharon to react verbally given the situation, Aharon actively held himself back consciously from commenting or crying. Why did he do so? Why didn’t he give expression to the natural overwhelming emotions that must have been welling up in his heart? Some commentaries, such as the Rashbam, suggest that Aharon was deliberately silent because remaining quiet at that moment was the “call of the hour”. Despite his personal tragedy, Aharon’s main focus, as the Kohen Gadol and representative of the Jewish people in the newly inaugurated Mishkan, had to remain on his communal role in the Mishkan. He therefore faced the challenge of somehow putting aside his own personal mourning and sorrow in order to focus on his role as Kohen- an almost superhuman accomplishment that Aharon was somehow able to fulfill.

Over the years, Aharon’s powerful silence has come to serve as a model for those who are able to maintain incredible silence in the face of challenging situations- be they personal tragedies, or circumstances where the proper recourse is silence rather than response. Such silence represents the capacity to hold back and not openly react- despite a strong desire to do so- because that is what the conditions dictate.

The power and importance of silence are championed on numerous occasions by Chazal. Shlomo Hamelech famously states in Megillat Kohelet that “there is a time to be silent and a time to speak”. Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel proclaims in Pirkei Avot 1:17, “All my days I have been raised among the Sages, and I found nothing better for the body than silence”. Maintaining silence throughout our daily lives- without commenting or responding constantly to the goings on around us- is a rare skill, particularly in today’s society. The world of globalization and social media has created a reality where we are given endless information at the tip of our fingers, with an ability to share and respond with the click of a mouse. Never before have we had the ability to share opinions/reactions with so many people so easily. Social media platforms are designed to encourage, and even push, us to share our thoughts and opinions constantly- creating a natural inclination to respond to everything going on around us.

And yet Chazal are clear in their insistence that we must be thoughtful and careful about our speech. There are times when a response or reaction is appropriate, and times when it is more fitting to remain silent. There are moments when we are meant to share our opinion about a particular issue at hand, and occasions when such sharing may be detrimental. Particularly in the realm of personal relationships, it is crucial to develop the skill of realizing when to comment, and when to hold back. Rather than impulsively reacting or commenting on everything that enters our sphere, we must cultivate the ability to hold back and remaining silent.

While the capacity to hold back and remaining silent is important in all relationships, it is particularly important as parents. It is natural, as the adults and leaders of a household, for us to feel the need to keep control over the goings on in the home by constantly commenting, observing, and intervening. In order to be effective in raising our kids, however, we need to be strategic and thoughtful about how, and when, we comment about issues concerning our children. We must certainly communicate with our children, and when necessary, let our feelings or opinions be heard and understood. There are times, however, when our feedback or comments may be ineffective, or worse, counter-productive; times when we would be better served by holding back and remaining silent, despite the urge to comment.

In general, I would divide these situations into two categories- circumstances where a comment or feedback should be relayed, but at a later time, and circumstances where no comment or feedback should be given at all. In both situations, it can be challenging for the parent to hold back- but doing so will benefit everyone in the long term. In the “heat of the moment”, it is important that we take a moment to assess the impact of our forthcoming comment, in order to determine whether it will be productive or counter-productive. To cite a few practical examples:

1. There are moments when a child blatantly disregards a parent’s instruction or request, and the parent’s natural reaction is to immediately respond harshly to the child for not listening. Perhaps, for example, the child comes home after an agreed upon given curfew, or sneaks a candy when the parent isn’t looking. Parents may feel the need to assert their authority by berating and yelling at the child immediately after the event occurs. They may even feel that if they don’t say something immediately, children will arrive at the mistaken impression that their parents are tacitly granting approval to what they have done. Yet, while it is certainly important that the parents address the issue at hand, it should not necessarily need to be addressed immediately. Many factors- who else is present, the time of day/night, the intensity of the moment, the mental/emotional state of the parent and child- should all factor into the decision as to when might be the best time to discuss the issue with the child. Sometimes, insisting on dealing with the issue in real time can cause unnecessary additional conflict, and render the reprimand ineffective. By taking a step back from the situation, you ensure that the ensuing conversation with take place in the most appropriate way, and achieve your ultimate goals.
2. As is commonly stated in all areas of relationships, parents often need to “pick their battles”. As children grow older and go through adolescence, it is common for them to assert their independence and challenge the authority of their parents- to push the boundaries. As parents, we must consider carefully when to comment and push back, and when to remain silent and let things go. Sometimes, by remaining silent, even at times when we have much we would like to say, we show our children (and remind ourselves) that we value them as individuals, and are making an effort to understand and appreciate their perspective as well.
3. The most potentially damaging moments in any relationship are the moments of heated disagreement. Often things are said in the “heat of the moment” that either should not have been said at all, or should have been said differently or at a different time. As the parent and the adult in the dynamic, it is crucial that we do our best to stay level-headed during these disagreements, and that we avoid saying anything we would later regret or anything that could prove damaging to the relationship long term.
4. When two children start arguing or fighting with each other, it is normal for a parent that is present to get involved and defuse the situation. However, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, in their book *Siblings with Rivalry*, suggest that when a parent involves himself in such a dispute, it often ends with both sides being upset, while the core issue remains unresolved. They suggest that such a situation is, instead, a unique opportunity to model and help your children learn how to resolve such arguments themselves, through communication and cooperation. Of course, in extreme instances of violence or intense fighting, a parent must intervene. Ideally, however, parents should endeavor to give their children the skills to deal with these disagreements on their own. In that way, not only will the children often arrive at a resolution they are both are happy with- but they will also gain important life skills in conflict resolution, compromise, and teamwork.

As parents and authorities in a household, we often feel the pull to comment on, and thereby demonstrate control over, all that happens in our home. This sense is exacerbated by living in a hyper-technological world that pushes us all to react and respond to everything that happens around us. Yet the message of Chazal, and the lesson that we learn from Aharon HaKohen, is the power and importance of silence. It is specifically when we comment thoughtfully and less frequently- when we are strategic about how and when we talk- that we can be effective in communicating with our children in a meaningful way.

Shabbat Shalom!