

It is the eighth day. It is the day after Aaron and his sons have been consecrated, ordained, and secluded from all the people so that they may understand who they have become. They are, now, holy to God, charged by God, entrusted by God.

They emerge and make the first sacrifices of their people's history. It is a day of revelation; the people gather together before their sacred space and Aaron raises his hands and blesses his people. He lifts his hands, reaches for blessing and wholeness, for shalom. Torah tells us that all the people see the Presence of God, that they cry out, that they fall in supplication and gratitude.

How must such a moment feel for Aaron? Maybe you know. Who among us has not known a moment of sheer transcendent power? Our own president, Dr. Earl Greenwald, has described bringing a baby into this world and holding that new life in his hands: "Every time," he says, "it was a miracle." Our children, opening Little Torah and reading from it, holding it high. The moment of knowing, the moment of revelation, the moment of blessing: Melanie raises her hand, makes a comment of such beauty that the entire class is suddenly awakened to understanding a piece of life itself. Keri watches her students dance to "Dovid Melech."

Remember a moment of clarity and truth? Perhaps you thought: "I understand that problem." Or, "I know I am needed." Or: "I am in love with him."

Something divine courses through you; some sweetness that is beyond words is present. Something inexplicable, mysterious. But your knees go weak and soft; if you could, you, too, might fall in supplication and gratitude.

Then it happens: the moment of despair. There is terrifying news about your sister, your other, your friend, your child, your parent. Something has happened – an accident, an illness. Something you yourself have done has gone wrong.

Aaron blesses the people; they all experience God's holy, sweet, powerful presence.

And then: Aarons two sons, Nadav and Avihu go back into the Tent of Meeting, they offer "strange fire" and they die, they are consumed by a fire that comes forth from God, Godself. Commentators search for some crime to explain what has happened: Nadav and Avihu have done something about which God did not command them. But how can you commit a crime when the act itself has never been officially described and proscribed? And then, Moses tells his brother: "This is what the Lord meant

when he said “through those near to me I demonstrate, I show myself holy, just so do I gain glory before all the people.”

Aaron goes still. Aaron cannot move. Aaron is motionless, rigid, silent.

What on earth was Moses thinking? Aaron’s two sons are dead; they will have to be dragged from the sanctuary by their tunics. Moses is explaining God? See, here is what happens when you get too near to me? Here is what happens in order to demonstrate my greatness?

“It’s all in God’s plan,” someone says. “God doesn’t give us anything we can’t handle.” “Don’t question God.”

All those well-worn phrases are used with the best of intentions: to comfort. But this is what each one of these phrases does.

Each one strangles us. Each one forces us to go silent, to go rigid.

I don’t believe that God plans pain. We are not being tested by God, we are being tested by what it means to be human, to be frail, to make mistakes, to have fragile bodies and tender souls. We are not only imperfect beings, we are capable of as much cruelty to others as we are to kindness. Who in this room has not been abused, or known abuse? Who has not been damaged by someone who has used us in some awful way? Who has not felt the Damocles sword at the neck?

The God who tests us and who punishes us may have been one we used to explain why bad things happened to good people. But such an image of God is, frankly, immature. I don’t want a childish religion. I want one that recognizes the full responsibility we bear for the world. I want one that demands that I look to create healing and to know healing. In such a world, no one’s voice will be strangled in their throat. No one will be speechless. We will hear the pain of others and we will hold it tenderly, acknowledge it, and admit the truth. Just as God would. Just as God longs to do.

Someone has been diagnosed with cancer? Listen to their fears, hold them in your arms, allow them to ask for what they need, but give them a voice. Someone has admitted being abused? For God’s sake, don’t give them a “God doesn’t give you anything you can’t handle.” Give them the right to rage. We may not ever know why bad things happen, why people are cruel and the innocent are harmed. We can know that honoring and acknowledging that we have a right to grieve, even a right to rage is a necessary act of respect. It is the beginning of a path to healing.

Aaron went silent. Aaron went motionless. The sound of silence may be a scream, a cry of anguish.

What would, I imagine, God want? For me to extend God's compassion and love and mercy and forgiveness. To be godly.

To know God is to know what to do. We have just read about Esther, who, Mordecai says, may have come to the kingdom for just such a time. People, just such a time is before us each day. We have all come to the kingdom. We have all been consecrated, ordained. We are a nation of priests, every one of us here. Come to the kingdom and bless. Come to the kingdom and look for revelation and speak the truth. This world is beautiful. It is perfect. We are flawed, perfect beings and holy to God. May we free our voices and our hearts and be shalem.