

Tzav:

At the end of parashat Tzav, Moshe tells Aharon and his sons to sit at the entrance of the Ohel Moed day and night for seven days.

Midrash Tanchuma interprets this instruction as, "Observe *mourning* for seven days, *before* it comes to you." Meaning: sit shiva before a death occurs. Sit shiva for something you do not even know is on the horizon. According to the midrash, this strange instruction--to grieve before the grief has a cause--is modeled after a process God went through before the Flood.

In Breishit we read that "God was grieving in God's heart... and it came to pass after seven days [that the waters came upon the earth]." Before the flood waters rushed in, God sat and mourned the Divine creations in advance of their destruction. God observed the seven days of shiva *before* bringing the flood, grieving *before* the loss. So, the midrash says, just like God mourned before the flood, so should you, Aaron and sons, mourn before the grief touches you. In fact, you cannot fully claim your mantle of leadership until you go through this mourning period.

As readers, we have the benefit of knowing that after the shiva at the end of Tzav comes tragedy in Shemini: upon arising from shiva, Aaron and his line were summoned to take on the role of priests, to offer sacrifices to God for the first time. On that very day, two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, were killed in the process.

Moshe turned to Aharon and said, "This is what Adonai meant when God said: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, And gain glory before all the people." Moshe, trying to comfort his brother, said: your sons are close to God! Through them, God has been sanctified!

The text continues, "And Aaron was silent."

The midrash from Tanchuma interprets Aaron's silence as a signal that he was consoled by these words, but I hear in his silence the impossible depth of his grief. I hear him *not* saying, Do you think sitting shiva for seven days when I did not know what or who I was about to lose brings me comfort *now* in this moment when I have just lost so much?

Aharon's silence teaches us that anticipatory grief is a false comfort. That grieving before you have lost means missing precious time to experience joy or find contentment.

While for Aharon, this anticipatory shiva is prior to the life-altering, horrible experience of the death of sons, we often enter this space of anticipatory anxiety or grief before something happens, even for minor things on the horizon. My critique of the midrash is that grieving first does not actually offer us comfort when the time comes. It's simply more time grieving.

Aaron's silence is a call to us to find presence in the present moment. To not emulate Moshe as he tries to offer false reassurance in a moment when comfort cannot be found. Our task is to sit in the moment we are in--even if that moment is painful to sit in--and to sit alongside those who need us beside them with no agenda, no matter how long they need us there.

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי קָרָא מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו וּלְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

And then, on the 8th day, Moses called to Aaron and his sons and the elders of Israel.

Vayehi erev, vayehi boker

**On the eighth day Moses called Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel** וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי קָרָא מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו וּלְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

**On that day there was joy before the Holy One, Blessed be He, similar to the joy that existed on the day on which the heavens and earth were created. The Gemara cites a verbal analogy in support of this statement. It is written here, with regard to the dedication of the Tabernacle: “And it came to pass [vayhi] on the eighth day,” and it is written there, in the Creation story: “And it was [vayhi] evening, and it was morning, one day” (Genesis 1:5). This indicates that there was joy on the eighth day, when the Tabernacle was dedicated, similar to the joy that existed on the day the world was created. Apparently, the term *vayhi* is not necessarily a portent of grief. megillah 10b**

Midrash tanchuma (Lev. 9:1) “And it came to pass on the eighth day...” This text is related to [the verse] (in Eccl. 8:5), “Whoever observes a commandment shall not know anything evil.” Who is this?<sup>1</sup>Cf. *Tanh. (Buber), Gen. 2:4*. Aaron, of whom it is said (in Lev. 8:33, 35), “And you (i.e., you and your sons) shall not go out from the door of the tent of meeting for seven days [...]. And you shall remain at the door of the tent of meeting day and night for seven days.” Moses said to them, “Observe mourning for seven days, before it comes to you.” (Lev. 8:35, cont.) “And you shall observe the charge of the Lord.” Moses said to them, “Observe the charge of the Lord, for so did the Holy One, blessed be He, observe seven days of mourning before He brought the flood.” Where is it shown that He mourned [before the flood]? Where it is stated (in Gen. 6:6), “Then the Lord regretted that He had made humanity on the earth, and He was grieving in his heart.” [The expression] “He was grieving” can only mean, He mourned. For so it says concerning David (in II Sam. 19:3), “And the victory [on that day] was turned into mourning for all the people because [on that day they heard it being said,] ‘The king was grieving over his son.’”<sup>2</sup>*Tanh. (Buber), Gen. 2:4; Gen. R. 27:4*. So also Ezra said to Israel when they were weeping, each one for his brother and each one for his child (in Neh. 8:10), “Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks.... Do not be grieving, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” It is therefore stated (in Gen. 6:6), “and He was grieving in his heart.” At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, observed the seven days of mourning, before He brought the flood. Thus it is stated (in Gen. 7:10), “And it

came to pass after seven days [that the waters of the flood came upon the earth].” And so Moses was saying to Aaron the priest and to his sons, “Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, mourned over His world before He brought the flood, so [you are to] observe the [required] mourning before it touches (i.e., harms) you.” So they observed [the mourning], but they did not know for what reason they were observing it. Why? (Eccl. 8:5:) “Whoever observes a commandment shall not know anything evil.” (Eccl. 8:5, cont. :) “And a wise heart shall know [there is] a time of judgment.” This is Moses, to whom the Holy One, blessed be He, had already said (in Exod. 29:43), “And there I will meet with the Children of Israel, and there shall be sanctification<sup>3</sup>*This translation leaves in doubt who or what is sanctified. A more traditional translation would read, “It (i.e., the door of the Tabernacle) shall be sanctified.”* through My glory.” [In other words,] I (the Holy One, blessed be He,) will be sanctified there through My glory. Now Moses ministered during the seven days of priestly ordination, but he was afraid, saying, “Perhaps divine judgment will strike him (i.e., Aaron).” Thus it is stated (ibid.), “and there shall be sanctification through My glory.” Still he did not act, but said to Aaron, “Observe seven days of mourning.” [Aaron] said to him, “Why?” [Moses] said to him, “For so the Holy One, blessed be He, has told me – (in Lev. 8:35) “for so I have been commanded.” When they had observed the seven days of mourning and [when] the eighth day had come, Nadab and Abihu went in to make an offering (rt.: *qrb*). Divine judgment struck them, and they were destroyed by fire. It is so stated (in Lev. 10:2), “So fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed them, so that they died before the Lord.” Moses came and said to Aaron (in Lev. 10:3), “This is what the Lord spoke, “Through those who are near (rt.: *qrb*) to Me, I will be sanctified.” Where did he speak? In the Sinai Desert. (Exod. 29:43), “And there I will meet with the Children of Israel, and there shall be sanctification through My glory.” And so did Moses say to Aaron, “The time that He said to me, ‘Through those who are near to Me, I will be sanctified,’ I thought that He would strike me or you. But now I know that they are greater than I and than you.” (Lev 9:3:) “And Aaron was silent” – the thing was consolation for him. Ergo (Eccl. 8:5), “Whoever observes a commandment shall not know anything evil.”

Sometimes we say the wrong thing. We want to offer comfort or reassurance, support someone struggling or grieving and we say something well intentioned that is actually painful for the person to hear.

I recently heard humorist Jenny Lawson say-- Live like it's your last day? Why would I want to do that--I'll probably be screaming, my last day of life will probably be painful. I want to live like I'm immortal.

Sometimes the expressions that are supposed to help us, the rituals that are supposed to shelter us fall short or come at the wrong time.

Sometimes, words and rituals that are meant to bring us comfort fall short or even are damaging to our grief or our healing process. Humorist Jenny Lawson, known for her writing about her struggles with mental health, was recently gifted a book of truisms that were meant to be inspirational, but were actually unhelpful. Her reframing of these expressions is both entertaining and an important reminder.

“You can move mountains.”

Lawson says, Yes, “You can move mountains, but you shouldn’t because mountains are there for a reason and then the map makers have to go back and they have to fix everything. And then also I don’t have any... signposts... oh, I normally turn where there’s a mountain and now there’s not a mountain... So maybe leave the mountains where they are.”

It is silly but also essential. When we are trying to support someone, Lawson’s edit to this motivational quote is a good reminder to think about what is actually helpful. If someone is struggling with a chronic condition, is it actually helpful to suggest that they move mountains? Probably not.