A few years ago, I went on my first silent retreat - which is really quite a trip. As an introvert, to be honest, I wasn't worried about not talking to others. While I love talking to people, to you, to loved ones, to strangers, I also need serious recharging alone time, so I relished that part of it. But it was also clear that spending so much time in silence also meant spending so much time with . . . me. My thoughts, my heart, my doubts, my memories, my hurts, my questions - hoo boy. It was possible that this silence wouldn't feel very silent at all. But my mindfulness teachers were skilled and guided the space tenderly such that our silence was gentle, vulnerable, real, and purposeful.

We ate in silence, contemplating our coffee, our grapes, each bite - an exercise in not rushing through miracles mindlessly. We meditated, did yoga, walked down the road, all in silence - exercises in being present with each other without having to fill the space with our noise. Sometimes the silence felt like the end goal, like when our teachers explained how it helped center us on our breath and freed us from judgementalness. And at times, the silence felt like a preparation for a deeper level of being or even, eventually, for speaking.

My newish time in mindfulness spaces has been the first meaningful relationship with silence that I've had in my life. And I've found, since then, that it animates how I think about silence as it shows up in our tradition. This week, in parshat Shmini, we find one of the more difficult instances of silence in Jewish text.

Here, we read of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, two of Aaron's children. Aaron and his sons have just been ordained as Priests when Nadav and Avihu bring what the text calls an *eish zarah,* strange fire, as an offering to God. The consequence of this action is their immediate death. In response, Moses speaks to Aaron and says: "This is what God meant by saying: Through those near to Me I show Myself holy." And then the text reads: *Vayidom Aharon*, and Aaron was silent.

In the face of the tragic death of his children, he is silent. And so begins a profound conversation about silence in Jewish tradition.

Ramban suggests that as soon as he heard this devastating news, Aaron began to wail, as we might expect, but then Moses reminds Aaron that he has a public role that he needs to fulfill, insinuating perhaps that this behavior is not appropriate, and Aaron goes silent. Here, silence is a stoicism, a stifling, a silence of obligation and unexpressed emotion. We can only imagine the pain this silence might cause a person, a leader, a parent. The Italian commentator Sforno seems unsatisfied with this idea of silence and so softens it a bit, suggesting that yes, Moses' words quieted a grief-stricken Aaron, but because he felt comforted to hear that his sons were brought close to God. This silence might, then, communicate a sense of acceptance or a coming to terms. While sweeter for sure, we might wonder if the silence of healing can really come so quickly to a broken human heart.

Perhaps not surprisingly, more modern teachers take an empathic approach: Rabbi Dvora Weisberg writes: "Many of the commentators claim that Aaron's silence should be read as an

acceptance of the Divine decree. In my view, she continues, this interpretation, while certainly pious, is an overreach. What could Aaron possibly say? There are no words. … This parashah reminds us that we live with an ongoing awareness of death. … (and) Aaron's silence speaks truth more profound than any commentary."

In this case, Rabbi Weisberg suggests that the ancient commentators miss the mark as they try to explain Aaron's silence with ever more noise. She teaches instead, that silence is the most human expression we have when there are no words to explain away deepest grief, no trite expressions or cold comfort, no theology that softens the blow. That silence is not good or bad; it is merely enough, and at times, it is all we have.

In this way, silence in our text is for its own sake. And yet, this silence - this "all that we have" - may also be a bridge of sorts, an opening that makes possible what was not possible before.

Rashi insists that because Aaron's silence was so difficult, that it is not only praiseworthy, but it is rewarded. How? The next time that God speaks it is to Aaron alone - not even Moses hears it - which is the only time this happens in Torah. While the idea of being rewarded for stuffing down our feelings might be disturbing to us, I think there's something more going on here.

According to Rashi's reading, Aaron's decision to choose silence even in his rage and despair does something existentially powerful: it draws him closer to God, and God closer to him. It helps him hear God in a way he never has before . . . which leads us to the next significant time that we encounter silence in our text, now within the Nevi'im section of the TaNaKH.

We find the Prophet Elijah standing on a mountainside, looking for God. And there was a great wind, but God wasn't in the wind. And an earthquake, but God wasn't in the earthquake, and then a *kol demama dakah* - a silent small voice. And that is when Elijah knew that God's presence was near. *Demama* and *vayidom* come from the same root word and reflect Jewish silences in conversation with each other. In such a silence, if we are willing, we might find God and God might find us.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called this: "the sound you can only hear if you are listening. … To hear the voice of God, he writes, you need a listening-silence in the soul. He continues: From time to time, we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the still (silent) voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced, . . . we are not alone."

Maybe this was Aaron's silence, too. Might he have chosen silence in order to hear the stirrings of evidence that he was not alone, when he felt so alone?

Now a brief pause: if God is not what you call that which is greater than us - then find a different word! The universe, the connection between all living things, nature, love. What can we hear speaking to us, connecting with us, if we quiet our voices, and our souls?

Rabbi Adolf Altmann, the Chief Rabbi of Trier, Germany in 1928, also taught of the power of a listening-silence. But he said, not only does silence allow a person to hear, and so respond to God or that which is greater than us, but that it allows us to hear, and so respond also to humanity most fully, too. He wrote: “Through the silent walls of hard prison cells, hear the sighs, Israel; out of the lonely huts of deserted widows and orphans, from the bed of pain of the sick and suffering, … from the pale lips of the starving and needy, you, Jew, shall hear the cries of pain, without their having to be emitted.”

Without being silent at times, we cannot hear what is silently suffering. And that is dangerous in the world in which we live. Which brings us to the last - for tonight - oft referenced Jewish text on silence: there is an *eit lachashot, v’eit l’daber,* a time to keep silent, and a time to speak.

This paired couplet intimates that silence can be preparatory in nature. There is a time to keep silent. It is necessary. It is disciplined. It is anticipatory. This is a silence that enables us to center ourselves, to choose our next words with intention, for when it is “a time to speak” - to find the words which will do the most good.

Today, as we have found over and over again, silence alone is not an option. Immigrants, Palestinians in the West Bank, Jews facing antisemitism around the world, trans folks - all need us to speak. Our children need us to speak up now before it’s too late to protect their future. But drawing from Aaron, from Elijah, from Ecclesiastes, there is a powerful role that silence must play, too.

Our members of Congress surely need a silence that can give them the space to ready themselves for holy speech. The kind of speech that can stop a dangerous tyrant from wiping out another civilization or our own. Their speech could be so powerful, it could change the course of history if they use it well. So their silence must be deliberate. And then it must give way toward wise and mighty and precise speech that accomplishes their task with a focused urgency.

And we who are not elected officials - we also need to find pockets of silence that allow us to bear witness to our grief, that allow us to hear the stirrings of our not-aloneness, and that ready us for holy speech.

Later tonight, we’ll enter into silent prayer together. I know sometimes we aren’t sure what to do in that space. Sometimes we let our minds wander or sit down or any other thing. And that’s all really fine - it is Shabbat after all! BUT, or AND, maybe we could try to explore it tonight. A bit deeper, with a bit more urgency. So this is my prayer: may we find in this silence a chance to grieve what is too hard to speak. May we hear the stirrings of God or the universe insistently trying to reach us. May we see our silence as preparatory for the words that will inevitably need to come next. And for our own good and the good of all living things, may we experiment with silence in other parts of our lives, too - out in nature, at breakfast, in the co-op, in bed, in prayer, anywhere. Such that we might learn together to stop filling our silences with noise and so see what and who it becomes possible to hear. Amen.