

Comforting Aaron

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The two sons of Aaron, his putative successors, were burnt to death at the Altar. They had seen their father bring incense and then they decided without his permission to imitate him. All kinds of different reasons are given to explain why they did it. Some positive and others are negative. Moses then tries to comfort the devastated Aaron by relaying God's response "I will be sanctified through those closest to me."

Which sounds a bit like saying that God punishes those He loves. This sounds very harsh and not at all comforting. It reminds me of some of responses to the Holocaust and other evils that this is God's will and an atonement for human sins. Do we really think that the deaths of all those Jews somehow sanctified God's Name? Surely it had the opposite effect. It really does get people to ask, "Where was God." It is one thing to say that we cannot understand the mind of God. That divine time and actions are of a different order. It is quite another to try to apply divine cause and effect to specific events, like a child dying at birth or indeed the holocaust.

But we can understand the words differently. God does not need to be sanctified by us humans. God is beyond, in a different dimension. However, we need that relationship, to help us cope with the tragedies and challenges of life.

The message that Moses was passing on was "If we who are closest to God can cope with tragedy then we are sending a message to everyone else that God is not like Superman who intervenes all the time to protect the good but rather to give us the strength, the ability to keep on going despite the things that go wrong for us. Closeness is not a protective child, but like friendship, an aid to coping.

This shows that the relationship isn't just a good weather one that only works when things go well. Rather it is the measure of love like one partner shows to the other standing by and supporting. If we think of God like a Casino machine doling out jackpots then we trivialize the very idea. But if God is life, the universe, and life is the challenge, our task us to engage with it. The message is that even if you are closest to God, that is no guarantee of life or protection. Actions have consequences regardless. But if you can bear the loss, as Aaron did, this is greatest testament to your relationship with God.