Jewish Tribune – Shemini

**Silence- Not Always Golden**

Stephen Carter is a professor of law at Yale University. In one of his books, Professor Carter, who is black, describes moving to a new, until then all-white neighbourhood in Washington DC.

My two brothers and two sisters and I sat on the front steps, missing our playmates, as the movers carried in our furniture. Cars passed what was now our house, slowing for a look, as did people on foot. We waited for somebody to say hello, to welcome us. Nobody did.

I watched the strange new people passing us and wordlessly watching back, and I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here. I knew…

And all at once, a white woman arriving home from work at the house across the street from ours turned and smiled with obvious delight and waved and called out,

“Welcome!” in a booming, confident voice I would come to love. She bustled into her house, only to emerge, minutes later, with a huge tray of cream cheese and jam sandwiches, which she carried to our porch and offered around with her ready smile, simultaneously feeding and greeting the children of a family she had never met—and a black family at that—with nothing to gain for herself. We were strangers, black strangers, and she went out of her way to make us feel welcome. This woman’s name was Sara Kestenbaum.

Sometimes we see injustice in the world, and it is incumbent on us to shout it out. Sara Kestenbaum did this by ignoring the prejudice of the day and acting with kindness and warmth, seeing the “Tzelem Elokim” in every human being.

Our sedra tells of the death of Nadav and Avihu. The Medrash (Vayikra Rabbah, 20;5) tells us that when Iyov heard that the sons of Aaron had died he trembled.

Why would the death of Nadav and Avihu cause Iyov to tremble?

My dear friend, Rabbi Barry Lerer, once shared an amazing insight with me. Chazal (Sotah 11a) tell us that Iyov, Yisro and Bilaam were all advisors to Pharaoh when the Beni Yisroel were in Mitzrayim. Bilaam advised Pharaoh to throw the baby boys into the river. Yisro could not be a party to this atrocity and fled to Midian. Iyov remained silent.

Several explanations are given as to what exactly Nadav and Avihu did to deserve being killed. The Gemoro in Sota (52a) says that one time, while walking behind Moshe and Aharon, Nadav said to Avihu “When will these elders die so that we can lead the people?”

On hearing this, HKBH said: “Let’s see who will die first.”

An obvious question needs to be asked. I can understand why Nadav needs to be punished – he spoke disrespectfully. But what did Avihu do wrong? Why was he also punished?

We see from here that if someone hears or witnesses an injustice and does not stand up in protest, he is culpable too.

And that is why Iyov trembled on hearing of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. He understood the lesson that keeping silent is an inadequate response. Not calling out an injustice makes you guilty too. Iyov was therefore worried that he too was due for punishment because of his silence. He did not stand up to injustice of the terrible advice given by Bilaam to Pharaoh.

Calling out injustice is not always easy. It is often more comfortable to turn a blind eye or just remain silent. But our sedra tells that we need to do the right thing, not the easy thing.

**Rabbi Golker is the Menahel of Hasmonean High School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**