**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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This essay is dedicated in honor of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, outstanding as a rabbi and as a homiletics teacher.

**Aaron the Peacemaker**

Concerning the public bereavement period after Aaron’s death, Scripture reports:   “The whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last.  All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days (Numbers 20:29).”  A similar statement, concerning Moses, appears in the Pentateuch’s final chapter:  “And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days.  The period of wailing and mourning for Moses came to an end (Deuteronomy 34:8).”

The typical mourning period mentioned in Tanach was seven days.  Jacob’s twelve sons observed the rites of mourning for their father for seven days at the threshing floor of Atad (Genesis 50:10).  The valiant warriors of Jabesh Gilead mourned over Saul’s mutilated corpse for seven days (I Samuel 31:13).  Job, together with his three friends, mourned the loss of Job’s children by sitting on the ground in silence for seven days (Job 2:13).  In contrast, a beautiful woman captured in battle is afforded a month to bewail the loss of her parents before she becomes the proper wife of her Israelite captor (Deuteronomy 21:13).  Befitting their stature as High Priest and national leader, respectively, Aaron and Moses were mourned for the lengthier thirty-day period.

From the presence of the word כל in Numbers 20:29, and its absence in Deuteronomy 34:8, we might infer that Aaron was mourned by every individual Israelite, without exception, but Moses was mourned only by the majority of Israelites.  Modern scholars are hesitant to make much of this slight textual variation.  Rabbinic literature and the medieval commentators, however, who tend to ascribe omnisignificance to seemingly unimportant words in Scripture, used the word כל to develop a redefined Aggadic version of the Biblical character Aaron and to teach valuable moral lessons.

Another hint that the bereavement attendant upon Aaron’s passing was somehow more widespread or intense than it was after Moses’ passing is Scripture’s noting that the wailing period for Moses came to an end.  We might therefore be inclined to conclude that the mourning for Moses was pro forma, ending as soon as protocol allowed, whereas the mourning for Aaron was heartfelt and did not end upon the completion of the statutory period.  That view is, not surprisingly, disputed.

One interpretation utterly rejects the notion that the Israelites in any way wailed more sincerely for Aaron than for Moses.  Rather, upon Aaron’s death, the masses participated in funerary rites out of respect for the surviving family members -- Moses, Elazar, and Phinehas (the deceased’s brother, son, and grandson, respectively) --  who were great national figures in their own right (Avot d’Rabbi Nathan A 12).  In contrast, when Moses died, his then-surviving relatives were minor personages.

Talmudic law is that, in certain instances, one must participate in mourning rituals even if the deceased was not an immediate relative.  A husband or wife is required to mourn, in the physical presence of their bereaved spouse, upon the loss of their father-in-law (Ketubot 4b).  If the king experiences a loss, the citizenry must sit on the ground during the mourner’s meal in symbolic display of their solidarity with the royal family (Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:3).

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk suggested that wailing for Moses purposefully was halted because thousands of halakhot were being lost as a result of the closure of the academy, imposed during the mourning period (see Temurah 16b).  He posited that a similar problem did not arise during the mourning period for Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, because by that point the Oral Law had been written down (Meshech Chochmah Deuteronomy 34:8).  While this explanation relies upon Aggadic legend, it nonetheless shows that Deuteronomy 34:8 need not be interpreted as showing a popular preference for Aaron over Moses.  Another quite reasonable explanation for the cessation of mourning for Moses is that Joshua quickly had to ready the people for their journey across the Jordan and the ensuing battle against the Canaanites.

The better-known view, however, is that Aaron was a more beloved figure than was Moses.  Avot d’Rabbi Nathan, the post-Talmudic Minor Tractate and expansion on Ethics of the Fathers, describes at length Aaron’s virtuous practices.  He would extend personal greetings to sinners, who then were too ashamed to continue their iniquitous ways because of their relationship with him.  Unlike Moses, who berated transgressors for their behavior, Aaron never explicitly criticized people for their moral failings.  Aaron fostered peace between hostile neighbors by falsely telling each of the two parties that the other had feelings of remorse and wanted to reconcile.  He made peace between estranged husbands and wives by promising that the women would improve their behavior and the men would be less abusive.  Three thousand boys were born to these women and were named Aaron in honor of the great mediator.  At Aaron’s funeral, 24,000 descendants of these reconciled couples exposed their shoulders in display of mourning (ADRN B 24).

Nevertheless, there does not appear to be any basis in the Torah itself for the Aggadic depiction of Aaron as a beloved peacemaker.  In several of the wilderness tales in which the Israelites become disgruntled with, and antagonistic toward, their leaders, Aaron is situated at Moses’ side. Aaron, as well as Moses, is therefore on the receiving end of popular fury.  This phenomenon is most apparent in the episode of the Waters of Strife (Numbers 20:2-6), the very same chapter in which Scripture records Aaron’s death.

The Biblical (non-Torah) claimed basis for the Aggadic Aaron is a passage from the Minor Prophets: “I had with him a covenant of life and peace, which I gave to him, and of reverence, which he showed Me.  For he stood in awe of My name.  Proper rulings were in his mouth and nothing perverse was on his lips.  He served Me with complete loyalty, and held the many back from iniquity (Malachi 2:5-6).”  The weakness of even this derivation, however, is that Malachi is here addressing the theoretical righteous scion of the tribe of Levi, not a particular person.  And even if the prophet’s intent was to recall a heroic personage from the past, the wording here fits Phinehas more than it does Aaron.  Phinehas acted boldly and decisively to stop Zimri and Cozbi from gross public sin.  God rewarded Phinehas with a covenant of peace for his righteous zealotry (Numbers 25:12).

The Aggadic Aaron can be traced back to an ethical maxim espoused by Hillel the Elder: “Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to Torah (Avot 1:12).”  What did Hillel see in the Torah that led him to describe peacemakers as disciples of Aaron?  Former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks suggests that the answer can be found in Aaron’s behavior during the Golden Calf episode.  “Although it is clear that God and Moses regarded the calf as a major sin, Aaron’s willingness to pacify the people – trying to delay them, sensing that if he simply said No they would kill him and make it anyway – was not wholly wrong. To be sure, at that moment the people needed a Moses, not an Aaron. But under other circumstances and in the long run they needed both: Moses as the voice of truth and justice, Aaron with the people-skills to conciliate and make peace (Covenant and Conversation, Ki Tisa 5771).”

Hillel lived at a time of intense intra-Jewish strife.  The various sectarian groups in early first century CE Judea were divided on both theological and political lines.  Even within the Pharisaic camp there was a deep fissure between the left and right wings.  These groups emerged as the Houses of Hillel and Shammai, respectively.

While we cannot always accept the historicity of the Talmudic tales concerning Second Temple era sages, there is a legend about Hillel in which his behavior is reminiscent of Aaron’s actions during the Golden Calf incident, at least as seen through Lord Sacks’ lens.  Hillel once brought a male animal into the Temple Courtyard on Yom Tov in order to sacrifice it as a burnt offering, inclusive of the attendant leaning ritual.  The disciples of Shammai, who subscribed to the halakhic view that burnt offerings and the leaning ritual are forbidden on Yom Tov, questioned Hillel’s behavior.  Seeking to avoid conflict, Hillel played with the animal’s tale and then falsely asserted that the animal was female and about to be sacrificed as a peace offering, which even the Shammaites conceded was permitted on Yom Tov (Beitzah 20a).  Like Aaron, who announced “this is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Exodus 32:5),” Hillel departed from absolute truth to avoid a bloody confrontation with fellow Jews at a holy place.

The prophet warned Israel: “Love ye peace and truth (Zechariah 8:19).”  Hillel, like Aaron, determined in the heat of the moment that peace should temporarily win out over truth.  Yet the Talmudic tale ends with Baba ben Buta vigorously asserting the correctness of Hillel’s viewpoint by bringing thousands of burnt offerings to the Temple on Yom Tov lest the law be codified, wrongly, in accordance with Shammai.  The Talmud’s tacit message is that practical concessions made to avoid strife must not become standardized.  At some point, the pendulum must swing back toward truth.

In the perpetual struggle between the two important values of truth and peace, the record of Israelite mourning for Aaron and the eventual supremacy of the House of Hillel teach us that the pliable peacemaker will likely always be more popular than the rigid legalist.