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A STUDY OF THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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Who is Honoured?

Tetzaveh 2017 / 5777

Tetzaveh is the only sedra from the beginning of Exodus to the end of Deuteronomy, that does not contain the word “Moses”. For once Moses, the hero, the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver, is offstage. Instead our focus is on his elder brother Aaron who, elsewhere, is often in the background. Indeed virtually the whole sedra is devoted to the role Moses did not occupy, except briefly – that of priest in general, high priest in particular.

Why so? Is there any larger significance to the absence of Moses from this passage? The commentators offered many suggestions. One of two offered by R. Jacob ben Asher (1270-1340, author of the code known as the Tur), relates this week’s sedra to an event at the beginning of Moses’ leadership: his encounter with God at the burning bush (Ex. 3-4). Moses repeatedly expressed reluctance to undertake the mission of leading the people out of Egypt. Finally we read:

But Moses said, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it.” Then the Lord’s anger burned against Moses and He said, “What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.” (Ex. 4:13-15)

The Sages say that it was this hesitation on the part of Moses that caused part of his role – as potential high priest – to be taken from him and given to his brother. R. Jacob ben Asher concludes that Moses’ name is missing from Tetzaveh “to spare him distress” on seeing Aaron acquire the insignia of priesthood that might have been Moses’ own.

Without negating this or other explanations, there may be a more fundamental message. As I have mentioned before, one of the recurring themes of Genesis is sibling rivalry, hostility between brothers. This

story is told, at ever-increasing length, four times: between Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.

There is an identifiable pattern to this set of narratives, best seen in the way each ends. The story of Cain and Abel ends with murder, fratricide. Isaac and Ishmael – though they grow up apart – are seen together at Abraham’s funeral. Evidently there had been a reconciliation, though this is told between the lines (and spelled out in midrash), not directly in the text. Jacob and Esau meet, embrace and go their separate ways. Joseph and his brothers are reconciled and live together in peace, Joseph providing them with food, land, and protection. Genesis is telling us a story of great consequence. Fraternity – one of the key words of the French revolution – is not simple or straightforward. It is often fraught with conflict and contention. Yet slowly, brothers can learn that there is another way. On this note Genesis ends.

But it is not the end of the story. There is a fifth chapter: the relationship between Moses and Aaron. Here, for the first time, there is no hint of sibling rivalry (some developed later – Bamidbar ch. 12 – but was resolved by Moses’ humility). The brothers work together from the very outset of the mission to lead the Israelites to freedom. They address the people together. They stand together when confronting Pharaoh. They perform signs and wonders together. They share leadership of the people in the wilderness together. For the first time, brothers function as a team, with different gifts, different talents, different roles, but without hostility, each complementing the other.

This is conveyed by the Torah in two striking phrases. The first is in the passage already cited above. God says to Moses: Aaron “is already on his way to meet you, *and his heart will be glad when he sees you.*” How different this is from the tense encounters between brothers in Genesis. Aaron, we may have thought, might have many reasons not to rejoice on seeing Moses return. The brothers had not grown up together. Moses had been adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised in an Egyptian palace. Nor had they been together during the Israelites’ sufferings. Moses, fearing for his life after his assault on an Egyptian taskmaster, had fled to Midian. Besides this, Moses was Aaron’s younger brother, and it was he who was about to become leader of the people. Always in the past, when the younger had taken something the elder might have believed belonged naturally to him, there was jealousy, animosity. Yet God assures Moses: “When Aaron sees you, he will rejoice”. And so he did (Ex. 4:27).

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The second intimation is contained in a strange text, tracing the descent of Moses and Aaron:

Amram married his father’s sister Jochebed, who bore him Aaron and Moses. Amram lived 137 years . . . It was this same Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, “Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their

divisions.” They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. It was the same Moses and Aaron. (Ex. 6:20, 26-27).

The repeated phrase, “It was this same”, is emphatic even in translation. It is all the more so when we note two peculiarities of the text. The first is that the phrases, though at first they sound identical, in fact place the names of the brothers in a different order: the first phrase says “Aaron and Moses”, the second, “Moses and Aaron”. Even more striking is the grammatical oddity of the phrase. Both times, the third personsingular is used. Literally, they read: “He was Aaron and Moses”, “He was Moses and Aaron”. The text should have said, “They” – all the more so since the pronoun “they” is used in the middle of the passage: “They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh”.

The unmistakable implication is that they were like a single individual. They were as one. There was no hierarchy between them: sometimes Aaron’s name appears first, sometimes Moses’. On this there is a wonderful midrash, based on the verse in Psalms (85:11) “Loving-kindness and truth meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

Loving-kindness– this refers to Aaron. Truth– this refers to Moses. Righteousness– this refers to Moses. Peace– this refers to Aaron. (Shemot Rabbah 5:10)

The midrash brings proof-texts for each of these identifications, but we understand them immediately. Moses and Aaron were quite different in temperament and role. Moses was the man of truth, Aaron of peace. Without truth, there can be no vision to inspire a nation. But without internal peace, there is no nation to inspire. Aaron and Moses were both necessary. Their roles were in creative tension. Yet they worked side by side, each respecting the distinctive gift of the other. As the midrash goes on to say:

“Without truth, there can be no vision to inspire a nation. But without internal peace, there is no nation to inspire.”

“And he kissed him” [the brothers kissed when they met] – This means: each rejoiced at the other’s greatness. (Shemot Rabbah ad loc)

A final midrash completes the picture by referring to this week’s sedra and the vestments of the High Priest, especially the breastplate with its Urim and Tumim:

“His heart will be glad when he sees you” – Let the heart that rejoiced in the greatness of his brother be vested with the Urim and Tumim. (Shemot Rabbah 3:17)

It was precisely the fact that Aaron did not envy his younger brother but instead rejoiced in his greatness that made him worthy to be High Priest. So it came to pass – measure for measure – that just as

Aaron made space for his younger brother to lead, so the Torah makes space for Aaron to lead. That is why Aaron is the hero of Tetzaveh: for once, not overshadowed by Moses.

“Who is honoured?” asked Ben Zoma (Avot 4:1). “One who honours others.” Aaron honoured his younger brother. That is why Moses (not mentioned by name but by implication) is told in this week’s sedra, “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him honour and splendour” (Ex. 28:2). To this day a Cohen is honoured by being first to be called up to the Torah – the Torah that Aaron’s younger brother Moses gave to the Jewish people.

The story of Aaron and Moses, the fifth chapter in the biblical story of brotherhood, is where, finally, fraternity reaches the heights. And that surely is the meaning of Psalm 133, with its explicit reference to Aaron and his sacred garments: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes.” It was thanks to Aaron, and the honour he showed Moses, that at last brothers learned to live together in unity.

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Have You Seen This Yet?

As Israel Apartheid Weeks begin on campuses around the world, Rabbi Sacks has released a new whiteboard animation video on the dangers of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign.

It has so far been watched over 1.5 million times.

If you haven't seen it yet, please check it out on our Facebook page or our website at www.rabbisacks.org/bds/ and help us to spread the message.



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