

Aharon's Reversals of Fortune and Unflagging Courage

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Parashat Shmini

Aharon's disappointments leading up to Parashat Shmini.

Aharon, the brother of Moshe, undergoes two experiences that severely test his resolve and self-image, even before he suffers the numbing loss of his two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu while they are engaged in offering sacrifices in the newly dedicated Mishkan (VaYikra 10:1 ff.)

I. The loss of Aharon's position as spokesperson to and for the Jews in Egypt.

According to Midrash Tanchuma #24 on Shemot 4:13, before Moshe is sent to Egypt in order to intercede with Pharaoh on behalf of the enslaved Jewish people, Aharon served as HaShem's Prophet,¹ and therefore leader of the Jews. Such a role would have been natural for the oldest son of Amram, who, according to Sota 12a, was the previous "Gadol HaDor" (great one of the generation).² It is for this reason, Midrash Tanchuma suggests, that Moshe was so resistant to accept God's Assignment to return from Midyan and his life with Yitro and Tziporra, in order to become involved in leading the Jews to freedom.³ When Moshe implores God to

¹This assumption is based upon Yechezkel 20:5, wherein God states that He has Revealed Himself to the Jews in Egypt a good deal before the Exodus, as well as upon I Shmuel 2:27, when Eli the High Priest and therefore a direct descendent of Aharon, is prophetically told that God had endowed members of his family with prophecy while the Jews were in Egypt. See RaShi and Ibn Ezra on Shemot 4:13.

² Shemot 2:1 is interpreted by R. Yehuda bar Zevina in Sota 12a as indicating not only the remarriage of Moshe's eventual parents at the behest of their daughter Miriam, but also the signal to the rest of the Jewish population to remarry, as a demonstration of having faith in the Jews' eventual redemption from slavery and the reversal of the decree to kill all newborn male children, commanded by Pharaoh in 2:22. According to this approach, Amram, as leader of the Jews, had at first decided to demonstrate to everyone that it was wrong to bring children into a world where at least half of the newborns would meet death by drowning, and therefore took the lead in divorcing his wife, an action that was followed by all other Jewish men. It is at this point that Miriam argues with her father and finally convinces him to remarry Yocheved and father additional children, an action that in turn is emulated by the rest of the Jews, since they looked to Amram for guidance as to how to best cope with the situation in which they found themselves. (See RaShi on Shemot 2:1). Suggesting that Amram was the leader of the Jews is also bolstered by the assumption appearing in Midrash Tanchuma Parshat VaEra #6, that the tribe of Levi was not enslaved during the entire period of Egyptian bondage. This may not only account for Amram's and Aharon's leadership positions, but also the resistance by members of this tribe to participate in the sins of the Golden Calf (Ibid. 32:26) and the Spies, as well as their eventual selection by God to replace the Bechorim (first born) and serve as the source of the Kohanim and Leviim for the Tabernacle/Temple Service (BaMidbar 3:45). Just as Moshe's being raised in Pharaoh's palace prevented him from developing a slave mentality (see Ibn Ezra on Shemot 2:3), so too the entire tribe of Levi's exemption from having to engage in slave labor provided them with a perspective and freedom of thought that would assist them to maintain their faith, despite all manner of pressure and danger.

³ RaShi on Shemot 4:10 posits that Moshe's resistance lasted for seven days. This inference is drawn from the words "Mitmol"-yesterday; "Shilshom"-the day before yesterday; "MeiAz Dabercha"-from then I Spoke to you, i.e., an additional day; the three "Gam"'s-also are traditionally viewed by Midrashic interpreters as inclusionary words in the sense that they are not just conjunctions, but in fact hint at additional information, in this case each "Gam" representing something additional to the words/phrases

"...Please send by the hand for him that You have Sent," he is not only showing respect and concern for his older brother at this point, but that avoiding potential strife between himself and his sibling has been his motivation each previous time he has resisted God's Command as well.⁴ Consequently, in 4:14, in response to Moshe's final objection, God assures him that not only will Aharon not protest being replaced as God's lead Prophet in Egypt,⁵ but that he will welcome Moshe's arrival with joy.

Was Aharon completely sanguine about being replaced?

Is there room to wonder whether, at least in the back of Aharon's mind, beyond his joy at seeing his brother and being relieved of what must probably have been a thankless and frustrating assignment, he was disturbed at being demoted, and having his younger sibling take his place? Even if we conclude in hindsight that since it was not as yet time for the redemption from Egypt—a certain number of years of exile and servitude had been predicted in Beraishit 15:13, 16—and therefore it was not Aharon's fault that his protestations and ministrations had fallen upon deaf ears, Aharon was not in a position to necessarily have known this. While Miriam initiates the negative discussion about some portion of Moshe's personal life in BaMidbar 12,⁶ Aharon does stand by silently, and rather than defending Moshe's actions, listens without comment to their sister's critique. Furthermore, as a result of the negative discussion regarding Moshe, God Condemns not only Miriam, although she is the one whom the verse explicitly describes as becoming afflicted with Tzora'at (a skin malady that is associated with evil speech—see Devarim 24:8-9) and therefore obviously considered most to blame,⁷ but Aharon as well in BaMidbar 12:5, 8, 9. Are there intimations from Aharon's participation in this incident that something from the past was continuing to irk him?

II. The Golden Calf

Aharon's second mortifying experience was his involvement, however direct or indirect, willingly or reluctantly, in the fabrication of the Golden Calf. This incident brings him into open confrontation with Moshe in Shemot 32:21, and must have again served to undermine Aharon's self-confidence and trust in his personal judgment and leadership capacities. Even according to those accounts that maintain that Aharon was attempting to at first discourage, and then at

that they are modifying, or three more days, leading to a total of six, aside from the day that the conversation in 4:10 is taking place, resulting in a grand total of seven.

⁴The previous protests that Moshe mounts include: (3:11) his personal unworthiness for such a mission; (Ibid., 13) his unfamiliarity with God and His Attributes serving as a stumbling block for the Jews to believe him; (Ibid., 4:1) his lacking confidence that the Jews are capable of believing him when he tells them that God had Appeared to him; and (Ibid., 10) his poor communication skills.

⁵ Although from this point on, in most cases when HaShem had something to communicate to Aharon, He would do so via Moshe, e.g., VaYikra 6:18; 16:2; 17:2; 21:17; 22:2,18; BaMidbar 6:23; 8:2, there are several specific instances when Aharon receives prophecy directly from God: VaYikra 10:8; BaMidbar 18:1, 8, 20.

⁶Whereas RaShI on BaMidbar 12:1 voices the position of most commentators, i.e., that the issue being discussed by Miriam and Aharon was Moshe's abandonment of Tzippora, there are those like RaShBaM who opine that his brother and sister were objecting to Moshe's having married another Kushite woman in addition to Tzippora, thereby diminishing Tzippora's central role in Moshe's family.

⁷ Shabbat 97a cites a view that Aharon at least temporarily also was plagued with Tzora'at, perhaps due to the use of the prepositional object "Bam" (against them), but that his lesser role in sharing evil speech regarding Moshe resulted in the plague lasting only momentarily, as opposed to the more permanent state in which Miriam was placed.

least delay the making and worshipping of the calf,⁸ he appears to fail mightily in both regards. What would appear to be the strongest criticism of Aharon's reasoning during this extremely difficult period appears in Sanhedrin 7a. Regarding the apparent non-sequitor in 32:5, i.e., the text states that Aharon "saw" something, but does not specify what it was that he saw, R. Elazar suggests that he saw Chur's⁹ resistance to making the Calf and his resultant murder at the hands of the mob. The Talmud describes Aharon's rationale for cooperating with rather than resisting the creation of the Calf in the following manner: If the people were to kill me (Aharon) as they did Chur, since I am both a prophet as well as a priest, there would be no way for them to atone from such a sin. It is better for them to engage in idolatry from which there is atonement, than in the murder of one such as myself, for which they can never earn forgiveness. Moshe's sharply worded attack on Aharon in 32:21, "...What did this people do to you for you to have brought upon them this major transgression?" could only have been most embarrassing and consternating for Aharon. The text allows us to not only read what Moshe said to Aharon, but also what Moshe thought in terms of Aharon's flawed leadership, when in v. 25 we are told, "And when Moshe saw that the people were in disorder, because Aharon had made them disorderly and now they would be considered a scandal in the eyes of their enemies." It is hard to imagine that Aharon did not think similarly about what had happened on his watch, and therefore it must have been hard for him to live with himself and what he had done.

Wanting Aharon to be Kohen Gadol after the Golden Calf?

Aharon's increasing lack of self-confidence may be the reason behind why Moshe is advised by HaShem that he will have to convince Aharon to accept the position of Kohen Gadol, as hinted at in VaYikra 8:2. The Tora uses the verb "Kach" (take) with regard to Aharon's assuming this important position. In general, RaShI consistently interprets the usage of "take" when applied to people, in contrast to inanimate objects lacking any sort of will of their own, as signifying the need to convince them with reasoned argument, rather than physically coercing

⁸ On Shemot 32:2, RaShI defines Aharon's directive to obtain the gold needed for the Calf's construction from wives and children to a delaying tactic, since he thought that they would be resistant to parting with their jewelry. The strategy was defeated when in v. 3, the men offer their own jewelry and avoid the domestic squabbles that Aharon may have been counting on. It is difficult to interpret v. 4 in a way that would refute that Aharon actually formed the Calf from the gold that was donated. Since Aharon is the last proper noun mentioned at the end of v. 3, it is only logical to assume that it is he who is the subject of v. 4. Aharon's protestations in v. 24 to the contrary, i.e., "I threw the gold into the fire" as opposed to "He formed the gold with a molding instrument", it nevertheless appears that the earlier dispassionate account, rather than the version that Aharon tells a furious Moshe, is the more reliable sequence of events. According to RaShI, Aharon's final attempt to stall for time so that Moshe could hopefully return and short-circuit the desire for some sort of symbol to replace him-see RaShI on v. 1-is suggested in v. 5 when he declares the next day as the occasion when to worship the Calf. But alas this too turns out to be too little, too late.

⁹Chur is mentioned as occupying a leadership position at two different junctures in Shemot. First, during the battle with Amalek, Chur, along with Aharon, stands next to Moshe and supports his hands so that they would point upwards and inspire the people to realize that their military prowess originates from HaShem-see 17:12. The second and last occasion when Chur is mentioned in the text is before Moshe ascends Sinai for the first of his three forty day stays in 24:14. While Aharon is mentioned many times and continues to maintain his important role as Kohen Gadol, Chur never appears again, leading to at least the possibility that rather than volitionally withdrawing from public life, his life came to a sudden end. If when Moshe comes down from the mountain at the end of this first forty-day period to find the people worshipping the Calf, if Chur was still at his post, why does Moshe only complain to Aharon? Apparently Chur couldn't share the blame because at least according to R. Elazar in Sanhedrin, he was no longer alive.

them, to do something against their will.¹⁰ Would Aharon's reluctance not only be due to personal modesty, but also because he keenly feels that he has been unable to successfully fulfill previous public roles, be they prophetic or administrative? And when he finally accedes to God's Commandment to serve as Kohen Gadol, perhaps he was seeking by means of this role a way in which he could atone for and redeem his past failures and miscalculations. However, he could have just as well obstinately refused to go back into public service in light of all that had happened to him. It is interesting to reflect on the call of duty that he obviously felt, and which allowed him to overcome his personal reservations and fears, and resume his service to HaShem and the Jewish people.

Considering the deaths of Aharon's sons within the context of his previous experiences.

Aharon's reaction to the deaths of his sons in Parashat Shmini is perhaps that much more understandable in light of what had happened to him previously first in Egypt and then at Har Sinai. Many commentators understand Aharon's silence (VaYikra 10:3) as resulting from Moshe's words to him, i.e., that HaShem had Predicted before this horrible tragedy that He and His Tabernacle would be Sanctified¹¹ by those closest to Him. Prior to Moshe's reassurance, Aharon could have reasonably surmised that his sons had been obtuse sinners in some manner, and that their punishment coupled with his position as Kohen Gadol, was just more in the way of the public humiliation that seemed to dog his steps and his best efforts to serve God and His People.¹² Assuming that Moshe was not merely saying words of comfort and covering up the truth,¹³ but rather that he was appropriately and honestly describing what had taken place,

¹⁰ Other examples involve Hagar (Beraishit 16:3), the tribe of the Levi'im (VaYikra 8:6), Korach (BaMidbar 16:1), and Yehoshua (BaMidbar 27:18).

¹¹ Commentators (see e.g., Tora Temima on VaYikra 10:3 #3) note that God was "Fearful" that the existence of the Tabernacle and the means by which to atone for sins via the offering of sacrifices, may lead the Jewish people to conclude that it was not important to strive to live a good and correct life, and that anything and everything will be forgiven. In order to demonstrate that His Standards and Expectations were extremely high, God Took advantage of the principle that He Holds the righteous to an astonishingly high standard—see e.g., BaMidbar Rabba 20:24—and when the first righteous individual erred in the Temple Service, even if the error ordinarily would have been overlooked, on this occasion the rules were literally and draconically enforced in order to encourage a state of mind of Yirat HaShem (the Fear of God) among the people.

¹² A pattern where children of the High Priest clearly abuse their privileged status for personal gain is described at the beginning of Shmuel I 2:12 ff.

¹³ An extremely negative view of Nadav and Avihu is presented in Midrash Tanchuma Achrai Mot #7 where eleven different sins are offered as possible reasons for their deaths: 1) they were drunk, 2) they were not wearing the appropriate priestly garments, 3) they did not have permission to enter the Holy of Holies, 4) they did not wash their hands and feet prior to entering the Tabernacle area, 5) they offered a sacrifice that was uncalled for, 6) they brought fire from an inappropriate source, 7) they did not consult with each other or anyone else prior to their offering the sacrifice, 8) they never had children, 9) they never married, 10) they were eagerly awaiting the demise of their father and uncle so that they could become the leaders of the people, and 11) they were among those who saw God on Mt. Sinai while eating and drinking. While the Midrash claims that by delineating these sins, it would remove suspicions that they were guilty of something more nefarious, the generation of such a lengthy inventory would appear to cast considerable aspersions upon them, and at least by inference, upon Aharon as well. Similarly, some blame for Chafni's and Pinchos' iniquities is attributed by God to Eli in Shmuel I 2:29, if for no other reason, than why hadn't Eli opposed their actions more vociferously? Would Aharon's tendency to prefer to avoid conflict—a quality that is eternally associated with him in terms of the manner in which he engaged in conflict resolution between husband and wife as well as acquaintances who had become estranged—get

Aharon engaged at this point in the ultimate Tzidduk HaDin (justifying the Divine Decree that had been issued.) He is therefore confronting the fact that when one takes on responsibilities that stand B'Rumo Shel Olam (at the pinnacle of the world) there are attendant risks. But it is not for us to duck and run for cover, but rather to meet and embrace those challenges and demands with resolve and commitment, whatever the price. The attitude of both Moshe and Aharon is further clarified when, according to RaShI, Moshe tells his grieving brother, "I realized that God Intended to sanctify the Tabernacle with those who are closest to Him, but I thought that what was intended was that either you or I would be called upon to make that sacrifice. Now I see that they, Nadav and Avihu, were even closer and holier than either of us, and therefore God Chose them." According to Moshe, the readiness for self-sacrifice and total devotion was shared by all four of these individuals, and that fact should not be lost upon us.

Conclusion

The story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu is troubling and disconcerting. It is counter-intuitive that God should Wish to Make a point about holiness by taking holy people away from the world,¹⁴ rather than allowing them to engage in Kiddush HaShem and serve as models for others throughout long and healthy lives. However, the readiness to sacrifice and take risks in the service of God and the Jewish people is certainly a quality that is to be admired and emulated.

him into trouble with regard to the Golden Calf, perhaps preventing him from being the type of advocate that was necessary in Egypt, also cause him to look away from his sons' inappropriate behavior and attitude, until it was too late?

¹⁴ Can such an idea serve as the basis for the understanding of (Tehilim 116:15) "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints"? While the word "Yakar" could imply "precious", "dear", it could also suggest "difficult" "costly." Here is another example of how a translation of a word serves as an interpretation as well.