

Petirat Aharon:
An Annotated Translation & Literary and Structural Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

What follows is the result of a text immersion project I undertook to fulfill the requirements for rabbinical ordination. I decided to undertake a text immersion project for several reasons. I wanted to become more proficient in Hebrew reading skills across a variety of sources. I also wanted to become better acquainted with midrashic literature and the way midrash develops. Additionally, my interest in narratives and literary analysis propelled me to analyze a strong narrative.

The minor midrash *Petirat Aharon* was attractive for several reasons. Its length allowed for deep interaction with all parts of the text; the richness of its literary parallels exposed me to a variety of rabbinic literature. As well, its subject matter, the death of Aaron, interested me because of my experience working as a chaplain with palliative care and hospice patients and my personal interaction with those preparing for death and their family members. This project combined my interest in text study, literary analysis and the practice of pastoral care. My goal was to bring these interests to bear together on this beautiful, powerful midrash.

The body of the work is contained in the annotated translation. In addition to my own translation of the text, I provide explanations of the text, comparisons to varied literary parallels, as well as observations about the literary, artistic composition of the narrative. I divided the narrative into sections, indicated by the section headings, in order to group thematic units and facilitate analysis of the material. These divisions are entirely my own. Appendix A provides an overview of the larger structural, linguistic and thematic issues that unify the text. Appendix B contains the bibliography which outlines the varied classical rabbinic parallels to *Petirat Aharon* as well as select secondary sources.

It is my hope that those reading this material, and those with whom I am able to share it personally, see its beauty and understand its composition, as well as find material that speaks to their own experiences with grief and loss.

מדרש על פטירת אהרן

Midrash on the Death of Aaron¹

A. Three Shepherds

1. *Deaths in One Month*²

ואכחיד את שלשת הרועים בירח אחד. וכי בירח א' מתו אהרן ומרים ומשה? והלא מרים מתה בא' בניסן ונגנז הבאר, ובא' באב מת אהרן הכהן ונסתלקו ענני כבוד, ובא' באדר מת משה רבינו עבד ה'. ואע"פ שלא היתה מיתתו בירח אחד גזרתו בירח א' היתה

The Torah says, "I cut off the three of the shepherds in one month" (Zc 11:8).³ But did Aaron, Miriam and Moses die in one month?⁴ Didn't Miriam die on the first of Nissan and the well was hidden? And on the 22nd [of Nissan] the two sons of Aaron died. And on the first of Av, Aaron the priest died⁵ and the clouds

1

The text of the minor midrash used here is edited by Julius Eisenstein in his *Otzar Midrashim* (1915, Vol. I, pp. 12-15). The text of this midrash was first published in 1516 in Constantinople (1516) and Venice (1544). It was drawn from Adolf Jellinek's *Bet HaMidrash I*, (1938). Eisenstein's version contains editorial additions which are included in this translation.

Various midrashim reflected in this work appear in other sources. The main sources of these parallel midrashim are *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Midrash Tanhuma ha-Nidpas* and *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), along with Moses Gaster's *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, and Mordechai Vormbrand's *Petirat Aharon: Lefi Ketav Yad Falashi*, though they come from many other texts as well. Full information for all sources can be found in the Bibliography (Appendix B).

- 2 While this midrash, by title and subject matter, concerns the death of Aaron, it begins with an exploration about the deaths of Miriam and Moses. Aaron's death centers the narrative, but the initial assertion is that all the deaths are connected. The midrash demonstrates this by showing that Miriam's death leads to Aaron's death. While Moses' death is not included in the narrative, his concern for his own mortality, and grief and fear about it, suffuse the narrative. This larger frame for the story concerns death and its larger effects for this entire family of leaders and for those they lead.
- 3 This Midrash about the death of Aaron begins with Zechariah 11:8, determined to refer to Aaron along with his siblings, Miriam and Moses, and all of their deaths.
- 4 Immediately this verse raises problems. It is the view of this text that Aaron, Miriam and Moses did not die in one month but in three different months. The same midrash disputing the chronology of the deaths of the three can be found in *Seder Olam Rabbah* 10.
- 5 Josephus also records that Aaron died on the first day of the lunar month of Abba in the same year that his sister

of glory disappeared. On the seventh of Adar, Moses, our teacher, servant of YHVH, died. Even though their deaths weren't in one month, the decrees (of their deaths) were in one month.⁶

2. *Loss of Their Gifts*

וג' מתנות טובות נתנו לישראל על ידם: בזכות מרים ניתן הבאר, בזכות אהרן ענני כבוד, ובזכות משה ניתן להם המן. מתה מרים נסתלקה הבאר כדי שיכירו ישראל שבזכותה היה להם הבאר

Three good gifts were given to Israel because of them. Because of the merit of Miriam, the well was given; because of the merit of Aaron, the clouds of glory; because of the merit of Moses, manna was given to them.⁷ Miriam died and the well disappeared so that Israel would recognize that it was because of her merit that they had the well.⁸

died. He does not mention Moses' death as connected to the other two. See *The Works of Josephus*, Trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), book 4, chapter 4.7.

- 6 Our text resolves the tension from the Zechariah verse by stating that the deaths were decreed, but not enacted, in the same month. This is fitting for a text that is about to explore the precise mechanism of the decree of death against Aaron and its enactment, although Aaron's death is not given any preference in this initial section. *Seder Olam Rabbah*, in the midst of an exposition that is far more concerned with Moses than the other siblings, suggests a different resolution. Moses' merit can restore all that is lost when Miriam and Aaron die. It is only with Moses' death that the loss of all three is felt, hence they died in one month, the month in which Moses died. For a text that is particular to Aaron and his role with this people, this resolution would never be acceptable.
- 7 This formulation of the gifts given by Moses, Miriam and Aaron is also found in *BT Ta'anit* 9a given in the name of Yossi b. Yehudah as well as in *Seder Olam Rabbah* 10. In *BT Ta'anit* 9a, Miriam's well disappears because of her death but is returned by the merit of the other two. When Aaron dies, the clouds of glory disappear. *Seder Olam Rabbah* posits that Moses was able to bring back the gifts of the other two based on his own merit. In *Petirat Aharon*, no gifts are restored by the merit of another and the treatment of the loss of the gifts is truncated. The text concerns itself only with the loss of the water in its initial sections and returns to the loss of the clouds of glory with the death of Aaron at the end.
- 8 This text explores only the loss of the first gift, Miriam's well, not to focus on Miriam but to transition to the larger narrative about Aaron's death. Even though Miriam's death precedes the narrative sections of the narrative, her presence, even in death, propels the narrative forward.

B. Miriam's Death and the Disappearance of the Well

1. *Moses and Aaron Mourn*

והיו משה ואהרן בוכים מבפנים וישראל בוכים בחוץ ועד שש שעות לא ידע משה עד שנכנסו ישראל וא"ל עד
מתי אתה יושב ובוכה. א"ל ולא אבכה על אחותי שמתה א"ל בעוד שאתה בוכה על הנפש אתה בוכה על כולנו.
א"ל למה? א"ל אין לנו מים לשתות.

Moses and Aaron were weeping to themselves⁹ but Israel was weeping in public.¹⁰ Until the sixth hour,
Moses didn't know (that the well had disappeared),¹¹ until Israel entered said to him,¹²

“How long¹³ are you going to sit and weep?”¹⁴

He replied, “Should I not weep for my sister who died?”¹⁵

9 The brothers are weeping together and privately (מבפנים). This first expression of grief in the midrash is personal and familial in nature. The loss belongs solely to Moses and Aaron, at least in their own thinking.

10 In contrast to the brothers who believe they are alone in their grief, the entire *kahal* is weeping, providing a communal nature to the powerful personal grief of the family.

11 So complete is Moses' loss that he is not aware of the implications of his sister's death. Our midrash has taken pains to paint the communal repercussions in its opening lines. With the death of Miriam, the well disappears. Moses' grief, however, prevents him from seeing the peril to his community. This tension between personal and communal loss suffuses the narrative and asks the reader to understand different layers of the same grief.

12 Here the spheres of grief meet. The communal mourning and peril becomes urgent enough that it interrupts Moses' private, sad reverie.

From the outset, this quarrel only involves Moses. In the account in *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 763, the people start by directing their complaints against Moses but then include Aaron in their accusations, as well. Aaron's absence in our midrash serves two functions. The first is to accentuate Moses' isolation. The second is to preserve Aaron's reputation while Moses' faults are exposed (Louis Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols; (Philadelphia: JPS, 1909-38) 3:309.

13 This complaint, “how long (עד מתי), is echoed in other quarrels between Moses and the people (see sections B.1, B.4, B.3, B.5, and C.13). It shows complaint and conflict. Interestingly, the words used could, in Hebrew, also be construed to mean, “when I die,” since מתי uses the same letters as the root meaning “to die.” The resonance of death surrounds the conflict.

14 The community conveys impatience with Moses' grief process. Personal and communal grief are in conflict. This will also be the case later when Aaron dies (see section C.16)

15 Moses asserts the importance of his grief. He has, after all, lost his sister. His personal grief is so encompassing

They retorted, “While you are weeping over the soul of [your sister], weep for all of us.”¹⁶

Moses asked, “Why?”

They replied, “We don't have water to drink.”¹⁷

that he can no longer understand the grief of his people.

16 The community claims his attention. If he is to continue in his mourning for Miriam, he will have to mourn all of them since they will not be able to survive. The living assert their precedence over the dead, no matter how great the loss was for Moses.

17 This dialogue is arranged in short couplets. Moses and the community speak back and forth, one viewpoint, the grieved brother, confronting another, the community in peril. This short exchange moves Moses from a place of incapacitating grief to concern for life and re-involves him in the community. In part, the concerns of Moses and the community are the same. He mourns for his sister; they grieve the loss of water that Miriam brought.

Note the use of the word “weep” (בָּכָה) in this short passage. Moses and Israel have been described as weeping. Then, over five short sections of dialogue, the word is used four times, all about Moses. The first query, “How long are you going to sit and weep?”, establishes sadness. The next two, “Shall I not weep over my sister” and “Since you weep over your sister” show the object of his grief. The last statement, “Weep over all of us”, extends the sorrow to the people themselves. The weeping widens the circle of concern.

As well, the tears that are shed, and there are many of them, stand in sharp contrast to the water, which the people need desperately but do not have.

B.2. *Moses Quarrels with the People*

עמד מהארץ ויצא וראה הבאר בלא טיפת מים התחיל לריב עמהם א"ל ולא אמרתי לכם לא אוכל אנכי לבדי שאת אתכם יש לכם שרי אלפים שרי מאות שרי חמשים ושרי עשרות נשיאים ושרים חזקנים גדולים הם יתעסקו לכם. א"ל הכל עליך כי אתה הוא שהוצאתנו ממצרים והבאת אותנו על המקום הרע הזה וכוי אם אתה נותן לנו מים מוטב ואם לאו הרי אנו סוקלין אותך.

[Moses] got up from the ground¹⁸ and went out¹⁹ and saw²⁰ the well without a drop of water.²¹ He began to quarrel with them.²²

“Didn't I tell you that I alone²³ am not able to support you? You have ministers of thousands, and hundreds and fifties and tens, princes and ministers and great elders. They will attend to you.”²⁴

18 As Moses is moved further from his grief, he gets further from the dirt from which we come and to which we return.

19 The verb נ צ י in this narrative signals not simply a change of place, but rather leave taking from the world. This verb signals a status change from the state he was in – mourning, in this instance – to a new mode of existence. Here, Moses leaves his isolation due to grief and rejoins the concerns of the community.

20 The verb “to see” (ר א ה) is used throughout this narrative but never with the simple meaning of simply “seeing.” The use of this root signals an attempt to gain a deep understanding of an issue that is simply not comprehensible on a human level. Here, Moses is trying to understand the implications of his sister's death for the community. Seeing the well without water makes her absence more tangible and moves Moses to understanding the situation of the people.

21 The lack of even a drop of water is resonant of the many tears shed by Moses and by Israel.

22 This far, our midrash is parallel to the biblical account. The people do quarrel with Moses and Aaron. Quickly, though, the midrash departs from the story in the Torah. Its account of the events at Meribah are largely unique to Petirat Aharon. This story is unattested in midrashim connected with Aaron's death. Even in midrashim on Meribah specifically, most parallels are found in *Yalkut Shimoni I*, or *Likkutim* or *Lekah Tov* on Numbers 20:12, all later compilations, not earlier midrashim.

23 Notably, Moses' statement shows how alone he feels: I am not able, I alone (לא אוכל אנכי לבדי). He says this in the shadow of his sister's death and his words foreshadow how alone he will be when Aaron dies.

24 In *Yalkut Shimoni I*, 673 and *Likkutim IV*, 50a, Moses uses words like these, mentioning the rulers of thousands and hundreds, but only to observe that the people are moving against them in a disorderly mob, not an organized body (Ginzberg, *LOTJ*, 3:308). In that version, Moses clearly sees the threat approaching and warns Aaron. This

They answered, “*You* are responsible²⁵ because you were the one who took us out of Egypt²⁶ and brought us to this evil place and so forth.²⁷ If you give us water, good. If not, we will stone you.”²⁸

B.3. *God Admonishes Moses*

כששמע משה כך ברח מפניהם ונכנס לאהל מועד. א"ל הקב"ה משה מה יש לך? אמר לפניו רבש"ע בניך מבקשים לסקול אותי ולולא שברחתי כבר סקלוני א"ל משה עד מתי אתה מוצא שם רע על בני לא די לך שאמרת בחורב עוד מעט וסקלוני עתה עבור לפניהם עד שאראה אם יסקלו אותך ואם לאו שנאמר ויאמר ה' אל משה עבור לפני העם.

When Moses heard this, he fled from them and entered²⁹ the Tent of Meeting.³⁰ The Holy One said

contrasts with our version in which the quarrel has already begun. Moses utters these same words, adding even more layers of leadership, down to the rulers of tens, to confess that he is overwhelmed and can not handle the current situation. Moses demonstrates his weakness, which may be wholly or only partially caused by his grief. The leadership structure that Moses calls on is one that he established earlier, in Exodus 18:25, at the behest of Yitro, to ease Moses' burden and allow him to exercise executive leadership. He calls on this structure now with a sense of desperation.

- 25 The people reject his need for help. There is no opportunity for Moses to grieve in light of his responsibility.
- 26 Following our *leit motif*, the verb א צ י, used here in the *hiphil*, indicates the status change that Moses imposed on the people when he brought them out of Egypt. The account of this incident in Numbers 20:5 uses the verb ה ע ל instead (העליתנו), which lacks the resonance of change which permeates this narrative.
- 27 This evil place is a citation of Numbers 20:5. The וכו' refers to the rest of the verse: “This is not a place of seeds, figs, vines or pomegranates and there is no water to drink.”
- 28 Our version alone contains this explicit threat. From grieving the death of his sister, Moses now has to perform to save his own life. Moses' utility to the people consists only in his ability to produce water, not tears. The choice of threat, stoning, produces another resonance. Moses must bring water from a stone or a stone will kill him. The stone is both the source of life or the method of death.
- 29 The verb כ נ ס, to enter, is the second of the verbs that will form a leitmotif throughout the narrative. While going out, א צ י, implies change, כ נ ס suggests movement toward resolution. Moses enters the Tent of Meeting, the abode of God, seeking a solution to his terrible predicament.
- 30 Just as the Israelites, in their grief and fear for their lives, came to Moses' tent for help (see section C.1), Moses flees to God for assistance due to his fear of the people and their threat to kill him.

“Moses, what is the matter with you?”³¹

He replied, “Master of the Universe, “Your children³² seek to stone me. If I hadn't fled, they would have already stoned me.”³³

He said, “Moses, how long are you going to slander my children?”³⁴ Is it not enough for you that you said at Horeb,³⁵ “They are about to stone me?”³⁶ Now pass before them³⁷ so that I can see³⁸ whether

31 If Moses went to God for sympathy and help, he is sorely disappointed. God's response (מה יש לך) suggests impatience and judgment of Moses' petulance. Moses has fled from (abandoned) the Israelites and God is abrupt with him and does not provide protection.

In Numbers 20:6, both Moses and Aaron go to the Tent of Meeting. They fall on their faces and then receive instruction about how to get water for the people (Num 20:7-8). This straightforward direction is absent here as is the level of reverence that would cause Moses to simply fall on his face. His lack of reverence is an indication of his brokenness and grief.

Yalkut Shimoni I, 763 records God responding to Moses and Aaron's arrival and plea for help: “My children die of thirst and you have nothing better to do than mourn the death of an old woman.” This response emphasizes the stark life and death choices facing them. Our midrash focuses more on the parallel of the relationship between the Israelites and Moses, and Moses and God. Also, our midrash, concerned with death, appears more open to the expression of grief here, for Miriam, and later, for Aaron.

32 Moses places some blame on God by identifying those threatening him by their relationship with the Master of the Universe: it's *Your children* who want to stone me.

33 Moses seeks to defend himself. His reply acknowledges the terrible breach that has occurred between the people and himself and also maintains the theme of stone as central to the conflict.

34 Literally, call on the evil name (מוציא שם רע). Moses' faults are laid bare in this midrash of seeking water from the stone. God not only negates Moses' version of the events with the Israelites, God accuses Moses of making false and damaging statements against the people God claims as God's own (בני). As well, the use of the verb יצא shows Moses' movement in this section from a leader to a petulant, uncertain man.

35 This refers to the events of Exodus 17:1-6, the first instance of bringing water from a rock, which has similarities to this midrash, as well as crucial differences, which are critical of Moses. God's accusation of slander show the midrash to be more critical of Moses than the Torah account of this episode.

36 This accusation, an exact repetition of the phrase in Exodus 17:4, taken as true in the Exodus account, becomes slander on the part of Moses here.

37 This command, an exact parallel to the command in Exodus 17:5 (noted by “as it is said” in the next sentence), functions very differently in this midrash. In the biblical account, God tells Moses to pass before the people, not alone, but with the elders and his staff. This will lead him, in Exodus 17:6, to the rock which God will designate by God's very presence (הנני עמד לפניך שם על-הצור בחרב).

38 God needs to see (שאראה) whether the people will attack Moses. This instance of seeing indicates discerning the future.

they will stone you."³⁹ As it is said, "YHVH said to Moses, 'Pass before the people.'⁴⁰

B.4. *Moses Seeks the Stone*

והיה משה הולך ראשון וכל העדה אחריו ולא היה יודע איזה סלע אמר להם הקב"ה ליתן להם מים ממנו. ראו ישראל סלע אחד מיטף ועמדו עליו. כיון שראה שעמדו עליו חזר לאחוריו וא"ל עד מתי אתה מושכנו א"ל עד שאני מוציא לכם מים מן הסלע. א"ל תנו לנו מים ונשתה.

Moses walked at the head of them and all the congregation after him.⁴¹ He didn't know which stone⁴² the Holy One told them would give them water.⁴³ Israel saw⁴⁴ a rock dripping (water) and they stood by it.⁴⁵ Since he saw⁴⁶ that they stood by it, he retreated.⁴⁷ They said to him, "How long are you

39 In our midrash, God sends Moses to pass before the people to see if they will stone him. It is a test and one that Moses, in contrast to the parallel in Exodus 18:5, must undergo alone. Moses is not simply sent to find water and save the people; he is also exposed to the possibility of death at the hands of the people with stones.

40 Exodus 17:5.

41 Moses has suddenly passed from God's presence and rejoined the people, taking up his position of solitary leadership that he earlier sought to diffuse.

42 Though Moses has returned to the head of the congregation, he does not know how to lead. He has no idea which rock will produce the water and has transitioned from worry that stones from the hands of the people would destroy him to worry that he will not find the stone which will save the people. His uncertainty and incompetence in this moment show his human qualities and diminish his image as a strong leader.

43 Moses attempts to cover up his deep uncertainty by proclaiming that God will provide water. This phrase, however, doesn't specify from where that water is to come. It is a statement designed to reassure the people, himself, or both.

44 Israel saw (ראו) their salvation, water coming from a rock.

45 *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 763 records a midrash in which the Israelites are still hostile towards Moses and try to pick the rock from which he will get water themselves, so that he can't lead them to a rock he knows already produces water. In essence, they want to prove that he is working a miracle. There is no indication in our midrash that the people are deliberately setting up such a test. Still, their behavior, surrounding a rock of their choice, comes across to Moses as testing him.

46 Moses saw (ראה) the people gathered around the rock. This sight engendered in him an understanding of his own insecurity.

47 Moses, in his uncertainty, can't handle the pressure that comes from having the people show preference for one

going to drag us along.”⁴⁸

He replied, “Until I draw out⁴⁹ water from the stone for you.”⁵⁰

They said, “Give us water so that we can drink.”

B. 5 *Moses Doesn't Know – Israel Disbelieves*

א"ל עד מתי מתרעמים וכי יש בריה בעולם שמתרעם נגד בוראו כמו שאתם מתרעמים עליו (אני לא יודע מאיזה סלע) [מהסלע]⁵¹ רוצה הקב"ה ליתן לכם מים. א"ל ישראל אתה נביא היית ורוענו במדבר ועתה אומר אינו יודע מאיזה סלע רוצה הקב"ה ליתן לכם מים.

He reprimanded, “How long will you complain?⁵² Is there a creature in the world who complains

rock. His performance anxiety causes Moses to retreat (חזר לאחוריו) to go backward, behind himself, because he doesn't not know the way to go forward. His insecurity is stronger than his ability to lead.

48 The dynamic of complaint between the people and Moses returns. The people lodge a complaint beginning with “how long” (עד מתי), which they used earlier to protest Moses' extended grieving (see section B.1) and which will be echoed in Moses' later complaint against the people (see section B.3.).

49 Moses tells the people they will have to wait until he brings water out (מוציא) from the stone, meaning until he is able transform the situation.

50 Moses gives them a concrete answer to their question, not trying to shed responsibility in this case. The midrashist has allowed us to see Moses' insecurities. It can't have been easy for him to have stated definitively that he would be the one to draw out the water, especially since he previous said that God would give the water. This independence foreshadows, however, how Moses oversteps his role in Numbers 20 and is chastised by God.

The root א צ י returns again. There is the expectation of a change of state. What had once only been a rock will give off water. With the water, the stone will change from being a weapon of death to a vehicle of deliverance. Also, the people will move from their near-death state to one of better health. All three meanings here imply a movement from death to life. This trajectory will be reversed in the later half of this midrash.

51 The correction in parentheses is proposed by Eisenstein in *Otzar Midrashim*, p.13, and is necessary to make sense of this passage. The word in [brackets] should be deleted.

52 Moses' complaint against the people begins with עד מתי, just as the people's complaint did previously, in section B.1, setting up a parallelism in their mutual distrust and disappointment. Moses is brought to their level by his complaints and his inability to provide effective leadership during this episode.

about its creator like you complain about God?⁵³ I don't know from which stone the Holy One wants to give you water.”⁵⁴

Israel said to him, “You have been a prophet and our shepherd in the wilderness.⁵⁵ Now you say, “I don't know from which stone God wants to give you water?”⁵⁶

B. 6 Moses Has Doubts

באותה שעה הקהיל אותם על סלע אחד שנאמר ויקהל משה ואהרן את הקהל אל פני הסלע ויאמר משה בלבו אם אני אומר לסלע יוציא מים ואינו מוציא נמצאתי מתבייש לפני הקהל ויאמרו לי משה היכן היא חכמתך. באותה שעה אמר משה לישראל אתם יודעים שהקב"ה יכול לעשות לכם נס אלא שהעלים ממני שכיון שדעתו של אדם מגעת לא דעתו ולא חכמתו עומדת.

53 Though Israel's complaints have all been about Moses, Moses construes their words and behavior to be directed at God, since the people are impatient and Moses is relying on God to help him find the rock. This comment also adds irony given that Moses has already complained to God about the Israelites, God's creations. Both the people and Moses react with restlessness and blame as they face adversity.

54 Moses admits his lack of knowledge of God's ways publicly. He also indirectly complains about God's guidance, since this knowledge has not been made clear to him. In *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 763, the people are more directly rebellious and they seek to pick which rock will give water. Moses, losing his temper, demands that water will only come from the rock the he has chosen. (Ginzberg, *LOTJ*, 3:311). In our midrash, Moses lacks that decisiveness, instead openly admitting that he lacks the knowledge of what God wants.

55 Israel's remarks point out the great contrast between the traditional portrait of Moses and how he is depicted in this midrash. The people say his is a prophet (נביא) and shepherd (רוענו), yet it is clear that Moses can neither discern God's will (in figuring out which stone) nor ensure the safety of his charges, as they have no water to drink. This midrash depicts a different view of Moses other than that of great leader.

56 The people, with disbelief, seize on the disparity between what Moses has been and what he demonstrates to them at that moment. In particular, they can not believe that he lacks the knowledge of which stone will give water. This is understandable because, in the episode in Exodus 17, from which this midrash draws (see note 37) and which the people remember, God stands before the rock (על-הצור) to designate it and Moses strikes the rock to bring forth water. Having had this experience once, the people can not believe that Moses can not do it again. This same dynamic will evidence itself later, as well, when the people can't believe that Aaron, who already defeated the Angel of Death, has died (see section C.16). In this instance with Moses and later with Aaron, we see evidence of their declines. Aaron's ultimate decline is the prime subject of this midrash.

At that moment,⁵⁷ he gathered them at one stone, as it is said, “Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation in front of the stone” (Num 20:10).⁵⁸

Moses worried,⁵⁹ “If I tell the stone to bring forth water and it doesn't,⁶⁰ I will be embarrassed⁶¹ before the congregation and they will say to me, 'Moses, where is your wisdom?'”⁶²

At that moment,⁶³ Moses said to Israel, “You know that the Holy One is able to perform a miracle for you even though He conceals it from me.”⁶⁴ When a person's knowledge is diminished, neither his

57 At the same moment (באותה שעה). Moses is moved to action at this very moment due his sensitivity to the people's criticism. He may be embarrassed into acting, which is far from the visionary action we expect from him.

58 The midrash returns to the biblical text and Moses shows decisiveness, but only briefly. As the people are incredulous about his indecision, Moses finally acts. Note that the biblical account of this episode, cited here, includes Aaron in gathering the people, highlighting Aaron's conspicuous absence from this midrashic account. In our midrash, Moses' shortcomings, alone, are exposed.

59 Literally, Moses thought to himself (ויאמר משה נלבו). He is deeply, internally aware of his insecurity.

60 The verb אצ"י again appears. Will Moses be able to effect a transformation so that the rock will produce water? Moses considers the possibility that he will not be able to do this and fears not being able to make that change and what that will do to his position and stature.

61 Moses reveals his fear of failure. Literally, he says that he will be found to be ashamed (נמצאתי מתבייש). The use of the verb “to find” (מצא) is similar to the hiphil form of אצ"י which directly precedes it, “if water doesn't come forth (אנינו מוציא). The root אצ"י does not indicate transformation, but rather realization. Moses fears his fault, in this case shame, being found out.

62 Moses' worry is even more explicit here. He fears being found to lack wisdom (חכמתך), to not be able to be a capable leader, and being confronted about it by the people. This would be a major loss of status for the man who has lead them for these many years. In spite of his history, this midrash portrays his self-doubt as substantial and it gets in the way of his performance. Because he is plagued by doubts, he is unable to execute correctly the important task of finding water for the people, one he has completed successfully in the past under similar circumstances.

63 At the same moment (באותה שעה), the same wording as before (see note 57), Moses was spurred to action by the people's disbelief that he could not find water. Here, Moses is moved to quick speech by his sense of shame and doubt in his own knowledge.

64 Moses is moved to speak to the people using an aphorism. While he expresses belief that God can work a miracle for the people, his statement shows himself to be divorced from the process. He admits his feeling that God is concealing knowledge of how to work this miracle from him. Moses not only admits his lack of power; he admits his distance from God in this moment.

knowledge nor his wisdom can avail [him].”⁶⁵

B. 7 *Water, Then Blood from the Stone*

וירם משה את מטהו והניחו על גבי הסלע ועשה עצמו כמו שמדבר עם ישראל שנאמר המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים. התחיל הסלע מאליו להוציא מים כיון שראה משה הגביה ידו והכה הסלע שנאמר ויך את הסלע במטהו פעמים. כיון שלקה הוציא דם שנאמר הן הכה צור ויזובו מים ואין זוב אלא דם שנאמר ואשה כי יזוב זוב דמה

Then Moses lifted his staff and rested it on top of the stone⁶⁶ and pretended as if he were speaking to Israel, as it is said, “Shall we⁶⁷ bring forth water for you from this stone? (Num 20:10).⁶⁸ The stone

65 Moses feels himself afflicted in this moment and he indicates the extent of his powerlessness. Without God's help, neither his knowledge (דעתו) nor his wisdom (וחכמתו) remain. At this point, Moses is bereft of the qualities which made him a leader: his honesty, his self-confidence, and his knowledge and wisdom. He admits this loss publicly. In this moment, we see Moses as a fallen character. This midrash has stripped him down to a very human, very vulnerable form.

66 Having just admitted his complete lack of knowledge of what to do, Moses moves to an ill-advised action. He places his staff on the stone, which will soon lead to his downfall. Had he simply been able to remain unknowing for a brief period, he might have avoided this error. This action differs from the account in Numbers. By juxtaposing Moses' statement about not having knowledge with this action, (and the following question: “Shall we bring forth water out of this rock?”) the midrashist continues to reveal Moses' character flaws, in this case, impetuosity, the need to act, even without knowledge, in order to keep up the appearances of his leadership.

67 Though our midrash has purged Aaron from this very disappointing story, his specter nevertheless hangs over the midrash and foreshadows his permanent absence by the end of *Petirat Aharon*. Though Aaron is present in the biblical tale, his absence here suggests that the midrashist wants to protect him and his reputation from this very difficult episode with the rock. It may also be that the midrashist wished to elevate Aaron at the expense of his brother (see note 133) which will lead to a very positive view of Aaron at his death later.

68 When Moses says these words in Numbers 20, it is accusatory. He angrily addresses the people as rebels (המררים). That anger has been replaced, in this retelling, with Moses' uncertainty, his inability to authentically speak to the people and his pretense in trying to act as if he can.

began to bring forth water by itself.⁶⁹ When Moses saw this,⁷⁰ he raised his hand and struck the rock,⁷¹ as it is said, “He struck the rock twice with his staff” (Num 20:11). When he hit it,⁷² it brought forth blood,⁷³ as it says, “Thus he struck the rock and it gushed⁷⁴ water” (Ps 78:20). “Gushing” can only refer to blood,⁷⁵ as it says, “A woman discharges⁷⁶ her blood” (Lev 15:25).

B. 8. *Moses, God and the Stone*

בא משה ואמר לפני הקב"ה הסלע אינו מוציא מים [אלא דם] אמר הקב"ה לסלע למה לא הוצאת מים אלא דם?

אמר לפניו רבש"ע על מה הכני משה אמר הקב"ה למשה הכית את הסלע אמר לפניו כדי שיוציא מים. א"ל

69 This is in contrast to the Numbers 20 account in which the rock gives water only after Moses has struck it (v. 11). In our midrash, Moses exerts no real power at all. The stone effects the transformation on its own by bringing forth the water (הסלע מאליהו להוציא מים). Moses simply rests his staff on the stone, a passive gesture; what happens can not be attributed to him.

70 The verb “to see” is used here in the sense not of visually noticing, but of perceiving a miracle and trying to understand it.

71 Moses wishes to appear to have power, so he strikes the rock, but the water has already arrived. It is a symbol of his position in this narrative; he is not proactive. Only when he sees the water does he act, and even then he acts as he knew to do in Exodus 17:6. In the biblical account in Numbers 20, his striking of the rock twice, while problematic since he was not commanded to do so, is the action that appears to bring water from the rock (v. 11).

72 Moses moves from a passive to an active character, but he still can not effect positive change.

73 This new development carries the narrative far from the account in Numbers 20 and is unattested in other midrashim. With this leap, the midrash moves from one liquid necessary for life to another. The people must have water or they will die. Blood flowing from the rock diminishes their ability to live, thus Moses has actively harmed them. Blood gushing can also be a stark symbol of death. Still, the midrashist makes this blood a symbol of both life and loss (see note 75), the central concerns of the narrative.

74 Gushes is ויזוב in the Hebrew.

75 By associating the verb signifying the flow of water in the Psalms account of bringing water from the rock with a Levitical law about the menstrual flow of blood, the midrashist provides prooftexts for the assertion that Moses brought blood from the rock. This is possible because both verbs have the same root (ז ו ב). This gives a deeper significance to the blood coming from the rock. If it is associated with menstrual blood, it signifies both the possibility of life (since the woman is still fertile) yet the loss of any potential life that month. Moses inhabits this space between life and death during this midrash since he must stand in the place between his two siblings and death. That blood flows from the rock at his touch makes his liminal place between life and death clearer.

76 Discharges or flows is יזוב זוב in the Hebrew and is the same verb used for water coming from the rock (see note 74).

הקב"ה כי אמרתי לך שתכה בו והלא בדבור אמרתי לך שנאמר ודברתם אל הסלע אמר משה דברתי ולא הוציא.

Moses came and said before the Holy One, "The stone is not bringing forth water [but rather blood]."

The Holy One said to the stone,⁷⁷ "Why did you not bring forth water instead of blood?"⁷⁸

The stone said before him, "Master of the Universe, why did Moses strike me?"⁷⁹

The Holy One said to Moses, "Why did you strike the stone?"⁸⁰

He replied to God, "In order to bring forth water."⁸¹

The Holy One responded, "Did I tell you that you should strike it? Is it not by speaking that I told you," as it says, "You shall speak to the stone" (Num 20:8).⁸²

Moses responded, "I spoke and it didn't put forth."⁸³

77 The stone makes an appearance in this conversation, not as an inanimate object but as an interested party. Moses, along with Aaron, was told to speak to the rock (אל הסלע; דברתם אל הסלע; Num 20:8) but he does not do as he was commanded. He barely mutters a question: "Shall we bring forth water from this rock." In return for his timidity and disobedience, the rock becomes fully capable of speaking against Moses to God. Tellingly, even when the rock is a full conversation partner, Moses is unable to do as commanded and speak to the rock. God mediates this entire conversation.

This conversation between God, Moses and the rock has no literary parallels. Its inclusion in this midrash shows Moses in yet another unflattering light, incapable of holding his own against a rock whose speech underscores and amplifies Moses' speech impairment (see Ex 4:10).

78 Initially, God hears Moses and pleads his case with the rock. This alliance between God and Moses will not last.

79 Quickly the conversation turns against Moses. The stone accuses him of striking the rock. In this midrash, Moses' offense gets a public hearing with an accusation from the aggrieved.

80 The tide of the conversation has turned. Moses is now being called to account by God for his actions.

81 Moses' desire was to transform the situation by bringing forth water (כדי שיוציא מים). His statement shows how far removed he is from his aspirations in this episode. In addition, this answer hints at dishonesty. While he undoubtedly wanted water, he also wanted to be the one to make it come forth. In our midrash, he strikes the stone only after water emerges. He not only wanted water, he wanted control and power.

82 The midrash returns to the central problem in the Numbers 20 episode. Moses was asked to speak to the rock to bring forth the water, but instead he strikes it.

83 With his final piece of dialogue, Moses reveals another character flaw. When confronted about not following directions, Moses lies rather than admit his confusion and feelings of inadequacy. He tells God that he did speak to the rock, but this midrash gives no evidence that this is so. Moses is unable to take responsibility and tell the truth, even when given a direct opportunity as this midrash provides him. The root א צ י used here in the *hiphil* (ולא הוציא) highlights Moses' failure. He tried to enact the transformation of getting water from the stone, but was unable to do it.

B. 9. *God Rebukes Moses, Changes Blood to Water*

א"ל הקב"ה אתה צויתי לישראל בצדק תשפוט עמיתך ואתה למה לא דנת את הסלע לצדקה זה הוא אשר גדלתך במצרים שנאמר וינקהו דבש מסלע וזה היא טובה שפדעת לו ולא עוד אלא שאמרת לבני שמעו נא המורים ואין מורים אלא שוטים. הם שוטים ואתה פקח ולא תכנס עם שוטים לא"י שנאמר לכן לא תביאו את הקהל הזה כיון שאמר הקב"ה למשה כן אמר לסלע הפוך דמם למים שנאמר ההפכי הצור אגם מים חלמיש למעינו מים.

The Holy One said to him, "You commanded Israel, 'With righteousness you shall judge your companion (Lev 19:15), so why did you not judge the stone justly?'⁸⁴ This is the one who raised you up in Egypt, as it says, 'He fed him honey from the rock' (Deut 32:13).⁸⁵ This is the good that you repay it (the rock):⁸⁶

Moreover, "you said to my children, 'Listen, please, you rebels.' Rebels (*morim*) can only mean fools. They are fools and you are wise? You will not enter the land of Israel with the fools," as it says, "You will not bring this congregation [into the land which I have given them]" (Num 20:12).⁸⁷

84 After Moses' lie, God addresses him very sternly; he is called to account for his behavior towards the stone. While in the Torah, Moses merely strikes the rock, here God levels several charges against Moses for this behavior, the first of which is that he has not followed his own command to judge with righteousness. Moses, the great judge, does not act with righteousness (צדקה), a damning flaw.

85 The rock has been personified as Moses' adversary in this episode. Here the midrash portrays the rock as a force behind Moses' success. Far from only encountering the rock in the wilderness, the rock has sustained and raised up (גדלתך) Moses as a parent, by nourishing him with honey. The midrash makes this assertion based on the verse in Deuteronomy, in which the Holy One causes the honey to be sucked from the rock. This poetic meditation, at the end of Deuteronomy, also uses the metaphor of God as a rock: The Rock, whose deeds are perfect, whose ways are just/A faithful God, without injustice/ is just and upright. (הצור תמים פעלו כי כל דרכיו משפט/ אל אמונה ואין עול/ צדק וישר הוא) (Deut 32:4). God is portrayed as a rock (albeit a צור not a סלע). In some sense, this statement levels a double charge at Moses. Not only did he fail to act with *chesed* towards the rock, who raised him up, this also represents his having failed to act with *chesed* toward God, who clearly has brought Moses to the place he is now.

86 Moses is shown to be ungrateful and unworthy of the help he received both from the rock and God.

87 God now confronts Moses about his treatment of Israel, but in a unique way. Moses' anger is not the issue here, but rather his elevation of himself over the people. The midrash asserts that rebels (מורים) can only mean fools (שוטים). Rashi explains שוטים is Greek for rebels (Num. 20:10), though in Hebrew it means fools. God

When the Holy One said this to Moses, the [Holy One] said to the stone,⁸⁸ “Change your blood to water,”⁸⁹ as it is said, “The one who turned the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a fountain of water” (Ps 114:8).

C. Aaron's Death

1. *The Announcement*

כיון שהגיע ר"ח אמר הקב"ה למשה הגיע זמנך אמר משה לפניו בבקשה ממך שלא תאמר לי במהרה - למחר.
א"ל למחר והיה מצר כל היום כלו שלא היה יודע האיד. שוב אמר לאהרן הגיע זמנך לפטור מן העולם.

When Rosh Hodesh⁹⁰ approached, the Holy One said to Moses, “Your time has come.”

Moses said to God, “Please do not tell me immediately, [rather] at a later time.”⁹¹

chastises Moses on that basis. Moses may believe the people are fools and that he is wiser, but they will enter the land and Moses will not. Thus, God metes out the punishment that arises from this episode.

This is the death sentence that falls on both Moses and Aaron in the Torah: they will not enter the land. This midrash has elaborated the story of how that death sentence came about, taking care to portray Moses in a light that makes him seem deserving of his fate. It is ironic, however, that while in our midrash Aaron is the one who will lose his life as a result of that episode, he is given none of the blame. Our midrashist, while delving into Moses' faults, holds Aaron blameless, which has the effect of making his later death seem even more of a tragedy.

88 While Moses is being punished, the stone is being commanded by God and answers that command. Moses' disobedience is amplified by the stone's faithfulness to God's request.

89 Again it is underscored in this midrash: Moses has no role in bringing water from the stone. First, the stone gushed water on its own (or perhaps with divine assistance). Now, God has to clear up the mess that Moses made by striking the rock and bringing forth blood. God and the rock are responsible for the water, not Moses.

90 The text returns (briefly) to the theme established at the outset, the deaths of the shepherds and the contention that they were all decreed in one month. Here, Rosh Chodesh of the month of Moses' death arrives, prompting God's revelation to Moses."

91 While the initial section of the text does not specify to whom the deaths are decreed, this narrative shows God revealing the deaths to Moses, starting with Moses' own death. Moses does not welcome this revelation and shares his displeasure with God.

The Holy One replied, “[I will tell you] later,” and he [Moses] was distressed everyday⁹² since he did not know how.⁹³

Further, He spoke to Aaron, "Your time has come to leave the earth."⁹⁴

C. 2. *Processional Custom*

וכל אותם מ' שנה שהיו ישראל במדבר כך היו מנהגם, היו משכימים ובאים אצל שבעים זקנים בו ביום אצל הנשיאים וכל ישראל באים אצל אלעזר ואהרן היו משכימים על פתחו של משה והיו שואלים בשלומו. ואח"כ יוצאים לאהל מועד. וזה סדר הליכתו: משה באמצע אהרן בימינו אלעזר בשאלו והזקנים מכאן ומכאן וכל

92 Since the revelation of his own death, Moses was continually distressed about it. It colors his actions for the rest of the narrative. The uncertainty of not knowing how he will die or when is a source of anxiety. While Moses will remain ignorant of his own death in the narrative, Aaron's death will be made clear, first to Moses, then to Eleazar and finally to the people. Moses will even find comfort in knowing and seeing the manner of Aaron's death (see section C.14).

93 While Moses' death, unlike Aaron's, is not recounted in this midrash, Moses' knowledge his own mortality frames this narrative.

94 Only after Moses' impending death is established is Aaron's death revealed. God tells Aaron that he will die using similar language to that used with Moses (הגיע זמנו), but introducing the verb (לפטור) that will title this midrash. Aaron is told that he will be removed from the earth. Unlike Moses, Aaron does not reply to God.

This account of Aaron being informed of his death does not comport with the rest of the midrash in which Moses knows of Aaron's death and must inform him, nor with Numbers 20:23-24 in which God tells Moses and Aaron together on Mount Hor and decrees that Aaron will be gathered to his people (יאסוף אהרן אל-עמיו) and not enter the land due to the incident at Meribah.

Several other midrashim on the phrase “Aaron will be gathered to his people” (יאסוף אהרן אל-עמיו) deal with God informing Moses and Aaron of Aaron's death (*Bamidbar Rabbah Hukat* 19:9; *Tanhuma* [Buber] *Hukat* 35; *Tanhuma ha-Nidpas Hukat* 15). These midrashim agree that Aaron's death is unlike Miriam's (since she died without knowing that her death was approaching) because God makes the time of death known to the righteous (לצדיקים) so that they may bequeath their crowns to their sons. The question of succession is significant in this midrash, too, though it is not spelled out so explicitly.

Each of the parallel midrashim illustrates the import of the knowledge of death with the parable of a king and his two faithful financial ministers. Even though the king has to take back a gown that belongs to him from one of the ministers, he does not do so until he has informed them that he will take back the gown because they are faithful servants. Moses and Aaron are clearly the servants who must be informed that a gown (Aaron's High Priestly garments) must be recalled. They merit this respect because of their exemplary service. Thus, Aaron and Moses must be informed of the death, though in this midrash this will take place in the next narrative section. The current section is a rehearsal for the drama to come.

ישראל לאחוריהם, והיו נכנסים לאהל מועד ויושבים אהרן בראש על ימינו ואלעזר משמאלו וזקנים ונשיאים לפניו

All of the 40 years that Israel was in the wilderness, this was their custom.⁹⁵ They would rise early and come to the 70 elders. On that day, they drew near to the princes and all Israel drew near to Eleazar and Aaron.⁹⁶ They would come early to Moses' entryway and asked after his welfare. After that, they went out⁹⁷ to the Tent of Meeting. This was the order of their procession: Moses in the middle, Aaron at his right hand,⁹⁸ Eleazar at his left, the elders on both sides and all Israel behind them. They would enter the Tent of Meeting and sit, Moses at the head, Aaron at his right hand and Eleazar at his left, and the elders and princes before him.⁹⁹

95 The scene shifts abruptly and the text, after a break about the revelation of Moses and Aaron's death, returns to the Israelites in the wilderness. No longer at the waters of Meribah, this section establishes Israel's custom for processing to the Tent of Meeting and focuses on custom and ritual.

The Falasha version of *Petirat Aharon* is a homily specifically meant as a text for a funeral. It focuses on custom and ritual and is believed to have preserved the some ritual for a priestly funeral (Mordechai Vormbrand, *Petirat Aharon According to Falasha Manuscripts*, [Tel Aviv: Fitlovitz House, 1960], p. 15). Our version does not record that level of detail and yet the attention to custom, and Aaron's place in it, comprises part of this account of Aaron's death. See section C.7 for changes to the ritual on the day of Aaron's death.

96 Eleazar, like his father Aaron, merits the entirety of the procession to come to him. His position as heir to the High Priesthood is carefully established here.

97 Their processing forth (יצאים) from the root צ א י indicates a ceremonial transition from ordinary life to ritual life.

98 This midrash is concerned with Aaron's and Moses' relative status. The procession, as described, shows Moses to be the more important of the two, with Eleazar at the bottom of the hierarchy. The procession ends at Moses' tent and Moses' place is in the center (משה באמצע), Aaron is relegated to his right (אהרן בימינו) and Eleazar at his left (אלעזר בשמאלו).

The significance of this order is articulated in *BT Eruvin* 54b. A *baraita* teaches that if three are walking on the path, the teacher is in the middle (הרב באמצע), the more important student walks to the right (הגדול בימינו) and the less important student to the left (וקטן בשמאלו).

99 *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) possesses a variant reading of the usual custom. The princes would go to Eleazar's opening, then to Aaron's and finally they would all go to Moses' tent opening. *The Chronicles of Jerehmeel* (XLIX.2)[Moses Gaster, London, 1899. Repr., New York: Ktav, 1971] records the custom as such: the princes would go to Eleazar and Ithamar's dwelling while the elders would wait on Moses. Both of the variants hold Eleazar in lesser status. It may be that *Petirat Aharon*, in an effort to show Eleazar as a ready and worthwhile successor to his father, puts Eleazar and Aaron on an equal footing in its version.

C. 3. *The Decree of Aaron's Death*

ואז"ל כשגזר הקב"ה שימותו משה ואהרן קרא למשה ע"ה ואמר לו: כן עבדי משה בכל ביתי היית נאמן דבר גדול יש לי לומר לך וקשה לי לעשות א"ל משה מה הדבר? א"ל הקב"ה שיאסף אהרן אל עמיו כי לא יבא אל הארץ אשר נתתי לבני ישראל על אשר מריתם את פי ה' בימי מריבה.

Our sages of blessed memory said: When the Holy One decreed that Moses and Aaron would die,¹⁰⁰ He called to Moses, peace be upon him, and said to him: "So, it is my servant Moses in all of my house you are the faithful one' (Num 12:7).¹⁰¹ I have an important matter to tell you about and it is difficult for me to do."¹⁰²

100A different account of the revelation of death is included here and initially includes both Moses and Aaron . Death here is spelled out in more explicit words than the earlier accounts of its revelation (ימותו משה ואהרן).

101The midrash chooses to identify Moses with a quote from Numbers 12 when Moses, Aaron and Miriam are together in the Tent of Meeting after Aaron and Miriam have spoken against Moses. This quote singles Moses out as above all prophets: "If there be among you a prophet, I speak with him in a dream. It is not so with Moses." (אם יהיה נביאכם-יהוה במראה אליו אתודע חלום אדבר בו לא כן עבדי משה) [Num 12:6-7]. It is resonant of a previous time when Moses was elevated above his brother and sister. Moses here has the status to talk with God directly and to learn of Aaron's death before Aaron does.

This account of Moses as faithful, however, contrasts with the addition of the Meribah story earlier and its depiction of Moses as doubting and lacking confidence and the ability to lead.

In the Falasha version, Moses is identified not as the faithful one, but as a comforter. YHVH tells him, "You are the one who comforts your people" and then gives examples of the many times Moses took care of his people. The list of Moses' deeds concludes with the Waters of Meribah, where "When they requested water from you, I saw a stone and commanded the people to drink lest they die so that they could glorify me and praise my name" (p. 45). This treatment of Moses puts into relief the ways that he is portrayed as a complicated character in our midrash. He is not completely faithful. Nevertheless, he is close to God on an intimate level, but is also full of human feelings and reluctances. And he is not portrayed as a comforter. Comfort is an elusive quality in our midrash. Even God does not get all the comfort God needs (see note 102).

102 Even God is not comfortable discussing Aaron's death. That God can express discomfort to Moses shows the close relationship that God and Moses have. Most accounts do not express any emotion on God's part. Still, God's difficulty with the task and God's neediness are presented in *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764: "The Holy One said to Moses, do a good deed and tell Aaron about (his) death for I am ashamed to tell him" (ואמר לא לאהרן על) (המיתה שאני בוש לומר לו). Our midrash does not go so far as to suggest that God is ashamed, but there is a sense that Aaron's death is difficult even for the God who decrees it.

While our midrash identified this decree as problematic for God, *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) specifies that this was a difficult decree for Moses (שאמר לו גזירה קשה על אחיו) (Hukat 40). In the Falasha version of *Petirat*

Moses responded, "What is the matter?"¹⁰³

The Holy One replied, "Aaron will be gathered to his people, for he will not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel because you (both) rebelled against the command of YHWH at the Waters of Meribah" (Num 20:24).¹⁰⁴

C. 4 *Moses' Reluctance to Reveal the Death*

Aharon, God evidences great concern for Moses: "When the time for Aaron's death arrived, YHWH spoke to Moses his servant: 'Moses, hear my words. Do not be sad, let not your heart suffer, let not your knowledge be dissipated, let now your eyes be full of tears because of the matter I am revealing to you. Do not perceive grief because of the matter I am telling you of today'" (p. 42) In our version, Moses, at least initially, is not as distressed as God. This may be an indication that, for our midrash, God favors Aaron who has been blameless to this point. Finally, God's discomfort with this death prefigures Moses' difficulty. Sadness and unwillingness to face death directly exist in the heavenly and then in the earthly realm.

103 Moses is quickly attentive to God in what is clearly an intimate conversation. This contrasts with the version recorded in the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (XLIX.1), in which this exchange is a simple command: "God said to Moses, our teacher, 'The time has arrived for Aaron to quit this world. Do thou go and tell him that his life is nearing the end.'" Moses receives the order and makes no reply. It is not a conversation. Here, Moses responds almost as a friend.

104 In *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Addition to Parashat Hukat* 2], the Holy One orders Moses: "Tell your brother that his time has come to be removed from the earth" (הגיע זממך ליפטור מן העולם). Our version uses only the biblical language to convey the death decree, perhaps preferring the language of Aaron being gathered to his ancestors (יאסף אהרן לעמיו), important in a midrash about succession. As well, the midrash may prefer to distance God from more personal involvement in the death of Aaron, who is clearly beloved by the Israelites in this midrash and perhaps by the people among whom the midrashist works. The use of this verse presents a problem, however. Aaron is to die for a deed that, earlier in the midrash, was shown to be a result of Moses' lack of faithfulness. Aaron was conspicuously and completely absent from our midrash's account of the events at Meribah (see the entirety of section B). This contradiction exposes the midrashist's efforts to spare Aaron from blame earlier and shows a tension that informs this narrative: Can Aaron be a good and important leader and still be decreed for death? This is part of a larger human striving to understand why good people have to die.

The Falasha version posits a different mechanism of death coming to Aaron. It accounts Aaron's death to his lineage from Adam. In this version, Death appears to Aaron with the writ of Adam in his hand. Death informs Aaron that he can not escape. Only then is Moses informed about the death. The reason Moses is given for the death is that the time has come for another priest to arise in place of Aaron (pp. 33-37). The Falasha version portrays death as something that comes to everyone, even those who are important and blessed, and does not address the struggle to understand the death of the righteous that concerns our midrash.

א'ל משה רבש"ע גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך כי אתה אדון כל העולם ואדון על בריותיך שבראת בעולם הזה
ובידך הם ובידך לעשות להם כל מה שברצונך אבל אינו ראוי לי שאלך לאחי לומר לו זה הדבר. כי אחי גדול
ממני הוא ואיך אדבר לו עלה אל הר ההר ושם תמות!

Moses said to Him, Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before the throne of Your glory that that You are The Lord of the world and The Lord of all your creatures whom You created in this world. They are in Your hand and it is Yours to do to them according to your will. But it is not appropriate for me to go to my brother and reveal this matter to him, for my brother is older than I am.¹⁰⁵
How shall I tell him, 'Go up to the top of Mt. Hor and there you will die!'!"¹⁰⁶

C. 5 *God Instructs Moses to Prepare Aaron for Death*

¹⁰⁵Moses' reluctance is, in his first statement, not about the death itself. He concedes that God has the power to do what God wishes with God's creatures. He resists because his brother is older (כי אחי גדול ממני), which could also be read as saying that his brother is greater than he, and therefore he should not be the one to tell him. Certainly the rivalry between them is present in this narrative. That Moses does not want to tell his brother because Aaron is older suggests that Moses is reluctant due to his respect and it evidences a concern with succession and the proper order that is central to this narrative. The reading that Aaron is greater, though, is evidenced throughout this midrash as Aaron is portrayed glowingly, while Moses' human flaws are revealed (see section B).

Chronicles of Jerahmeel (XLIX.1) reports Moses' reaction, which comes only following a night of prayer after receiving the command, is one of anguish: "Lord of the world, how can I say to Aaron, 'Thy time has arrived to quit this world.'" In *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Addition to Parashat Hukat* 2], Moses, upon receiving the news, immediately stands in prayer but has the same reaction: "How can I tell my brother that his time has come?" In the other versions, there is only aversion to the task itself, with no reason given. This shows Moses to be, at once, both more emotionally involved in the moment, which concerns the loss of his brother, and less faithful to God, since no procedural reason is brought to bear on his reluctance to carry out the commandment.

In the Falasha version, Moses' initial reaction is one of utter faithfulness and emotional fidelity to God. Moses answered YHVH: "I will do all that you commanded me. My Lord, (it will be) good in my opinion" (p. 42). This portrayal shows the Moses in our midrash to be more human, motivated by his own emotions, torn between his relationship to God and his relationship to his brother.

¹⁰⁶ Moses' knowledge of taking Aaron to Mt. Hor to die precedes God's giving the command in the next section.

א"ל הקב"ה למשה אל תאמר לו אפילו בשפה אלא קח את אהרן ואת אלעזר בנו והעל אותם הר ההר וגם אתה
עלה עמם ותאמר לו דברים רכים ונאים ובעבורם יבין הדבר ואחר שתהיו שלשתכם בהר הפשט את אהרן את בגדיו
והלבשתם את אלעזר בנו ואהרן יאסף ומת שם.

The Holy One said to Moses, "Do not tell him explicitly."¹⁰⁷ Rather, take Aaron¹⁰⁸ and Eleazar, his son,
and take them up to Mt. Hor. (Num 20:25)¹⁰⁹ You should also go up with them and say to him sweet and

107 God provides the instructions for Moses to fulfill the task that Moses feels he can not do. While the directions follow closely the directions given in Numbers 20:25-6, the instructions are also full of gentleness, as God is aware of Moses' difficulty in carrying them out. Certain phrases are added to the biblical text. "You should also go up with them" makes clear that Moses should be present with his brother. "And say to him sweet and pleasant words. Through them he will understand the matter," specifies that Moses should not be harsh in carrying out God's command and that Aaron will, eventually understand. Moses will not have to work too hard to convey the difficult message and, perhaps, Aaron will not be angry. The addition of the phrase, "Afterwards when the three of you are alone on the mountain" makes clear that there will be privacy for this important moment, which is important, since Moses and Aaron were not given privacy in their grieving for Miriam (see section B.1).

In other midrashim, different versions of the instructions are found. In *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, God tells Moses "Give him the message of a great thing and of good tidings, that I will not deliver his soul into the hand of the angel of death" (XLIX.1). The traditional instructions are not there, but Moses is given an additional piece of comfort: that Aaron's soul will not be taken by the angel of death. This information is repeated in the *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber) version: "The Holy One replied, 'I have already decreed an order against him that I have not decreed against another person, that he will not be taken by the angel of death on the same day that he stopped the plague.'" (שלא נגזרה על אדם אחר, שלא אמסרנו ביד מלאך המות באותו יום שעצר המגפה). [*Addition to Hukat* 2].

While our midrash provides the most extensively personal instructions for this difficult task and weaves them around the biblical text, the other two versions specify that Aaron will not be taken by the angel of death, which may be of more comfort to Moses. While our version knows of this tradition and mentions it later, it does not choose to do so here, keeping this conversation on the human level and providing human comforts for Moses, as well as keeping the focus on Aaron's and Moses' relationship.

108 Two midrashim, *Tanhuma* (Buber) *Hukat* 40 and *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764, note that the language of this instruction to "take Aaron" (קח את אהרן) in Numbers 20:25 echoes the language of Aaron's induction into the priesthood, "take Aaron" (קח את אהרן) in Leviticus 8:2 when Moses was instructed to bring Aaron and his sons to the Tent of Meeting for their ordination. In view of the midrashim, this represents language of drawing close. It can be read as drawing close to God, but also as a drawing close to Moses since, in both cases, he is the agent who brings Aaron to his new status. The brothers' relationship is crucial in establishing Aaron as priest and in effecting his death.

109 The *History of al-Tabari* (trans. William M. Brinner; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), Vol III, p. 85. This 10th century compilation of Muslim legends, also reports God giving the instruction to Moses: "I am going to take Aaron to me so bring him to such and such a mountain" (p. 85). The tradition of a mountain death, of Moses leading Aaron up to his death, is established across these two cultures.

pleasant words for, through them, he will understand the matter. After the three of you are (alone) on the mountain, undress Aaron and put his clothes on Eleazar, his son. Aaron will be gathered (up)¹¹⁰ and die there (Num 20:26).¹¹¹

C. 6 Moses Weeps

110 This text continues to use the biblical language of “gathering” to mean death, again suggesting continuity. The *al-Tabari* legend (see note 104), also echoes the language of gathering.

111 The Falasha version contains instructions not present in other extant versions. “Listen to my words, Moses. Take Aaron your brother to the mountain which I will show you. *Eleazar* and Pinchas will go with you” (p. 42-3). While this uses the traditional wording for “take Aaron” (קח את אהרן), an additional person is added to the proceedings in the person of Pinchas. Also, the mountain is specified as “the one which I will show you” (ההר אשר אראה לך). This has some resonance with the *akedah* and in which Abraham is sent to the mountain which God will indicate (ההרים אשר אמר אליך). There is an element of faith in the Falasha version not shown in our midrash. As well, God participates actively in the Falasha version. In our midrash, Moses receives instructions, but then has to carry them out on his own. Our midrash keeps the focus on the human level.

The Falasha version adds another person, Pinchas, to the task. In our version, the line of succession is kept clear and uncomplicated.

The Falasha text demands secrecy: “The Israelites shall not know when they go. You shall not speak of and reveal this secret (הסוד הזה) to the people. Do not let the people know that you are prepared to place your hand on your brother’s eyes. You (all) alone will complete this mystery” (השלימו את המסתורין) [p. 43]. The text, which has the ritual of priestly succession and burial as its focus, indicates that these matters are to be kept secret from the people. The ritual does not have a role for the people. While our midrash does not have the focus on the privacy of the ritual, it still specifies that Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar are not to be joined by others (שתהיו שלשתכם בזה), but should be just the three of them. Moving Aaron towards death and ensuring the succession of the priesthood are not tasks which can be witnessed by everyone, only the priests are privy to it.

After the very specific instructions, the Falasha text concludes God’s charge to Moses with streamlined directions: “See, Moses, tomorrow morning, take your brother and Eleazar, his son, and Pinchas the priest, and go up to Har HaHor. Take the priestly garments off of your brother and dress Eleazar his son in them. After Aaron dies, bury him there” (p. 44). These directions are very similar to our text with the exception of the burial of Aaron. The disposition of the body is a matter to be discussed later in the narrative.

כששמע משה זה הדבר היה זועף בלבו מאד ולא היה יודע מה לעשות ובכה בכיה גדולה עד מאד, והגיע לו מיתתו (עד מות) על מות אהרן אחיו. בעבור שהיה נאמן בפועל הלך אצל אהרן לומר לו הדבר, והלך לאהל מועד ומצא שם לאהרן

When Moses heard this, he was enraged¹¹² and didn't know what to do.¹¹³ He wept greatly until he almost died over the death of Aaron, his brother.¹¹⁴ Because his was faithful in his actions, he went to Aaron to tell him of the matter.¹¹⁵ He went to the Tent of Meeting and found Aaron there.

112 This phrase, *זועף לבו*, indicates the anger taking over Moses' mind (לבו). Moses is overwhelmed by his feelings at this difficult moment.

113 With the reception of these specific instructions for his brother's death, Moses has a very human reaction. He cannot think clearly and he does not know what to do, both well-documented responses to trauma.

114 This shows the extent of Moses' suffering. He wept exceedingly (ובכה בכיה גדולה עד מאד). Note the use of the infinitive absolute and *עד מאד* to convey how the sobs must have rocked his body. In fact, Moses nearly died lamenting the coming death of Aaron. The depth of emotion ascribed to Moses in this midrash is unparalleled in any other source. In the Falasha version, Moses specifically stifles his grief (p. 59). Our midrash makes clear that Moses is deeply affected by the shock of his brother's impending death and that he pays a great emotional price for it, even before he has to move Aaron towards death.

115 In spite of the toll this news takes on Moses, he retains his faithfulness and seeks to carry out the task God has given him. He moves directly from grief to action. Several midrashim praise Moses for his purposeful, swift action in this moment. *Tanhuma haNidpas* (Hukat 17), *Tanhuma* (Buber) [Hukat 40], and *Yalkut Shimoni* (I, 764) all report a tradition, based on "Moses did as YHVH commanded" (ויעש משה כאשר צוה יהוה) [Num 20:27], that even though God presented Moses with a harsh decree, Moses did not delay (לא עיכב). Our midrash does not specify this lack of delay, but rather makes it part of the narrative.

Other midrashim, however, show that Moses was reluctant to carry out the command that God had given. *Tanhuma Hukat* 15, as well as *Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:9, report that Moses, upon hearing the news of Aaron's death requests, "Allow him to stay with Reuben and Gad" (הניח אותו אצל בני ראובן ובני גד). If Aaron can not enter the land because of the Waters of Meribah, Moses seeks a loophole that would let his brother remain alive and just outside of the land with the tribes of Asher and Gad. God rejects this plan emphatically by saying, "His death delays the giving of the land...for if he does not die, Israel can't enter the land" (מיתתו מעכבת מתנת ארץ) (ישראל...שלא ימות ולא יכנסו ישראל לארץ). In these midrashim, Moses, in fact, wishes to delay God's command and even delay entering the land in order to save his brother. Moses, in his heart and according to *Midrash Tanhuma*, is conflicted. He wishes to be obedient but he doesn't want to lose his brother.

In the Falasha version, Moses makes repeated attempts to spare Aaron, in a scene that is reminiscent of Abraham's attempts to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Upon receiving the news of Aaron's death, Moses pleads, "I request of you, my God, that you increase the days of my brother to three months. After that, let him go up and die as you wish, my Lord." God's only answer is to repeat the command to take Aaron to the mountain where he will die and Moses will bury him. Moses is dissatisfied and tries again, "I request of you, my Lord, that he remain alive thirty more days so that he will come and go and rejoice with his brother and his sons.

C. 7. *Moses Changes the Processional Custom*

אותו הייום שינה משה המנהג. יושב ובכה עד קריאת הגבר. קרא לאלעזר וא"ל לך קרא לי לזקנים ולנשיאים שאמר לי הקב"ה דבר, באו ונתקבצו על פתחו של אהרן. עמד אהרן ומצא משה עומד, א"ל אהרן למשה אחי למה שנית היום המנהג? א"ל דבר צוני הקב"ה לומר לך, א"ל אמור. א"ל עד שנצא. עמד משה והלביש לאהרן שמונה בגדים בתוך ביתו ואה"כ יצא וכן היה סדר הליכתו באותו יום (כי שינה משה המנהג) נתנו אהרן באמצע משה ימינו מיהושע משמאלו והזקנים והנשיאים מכאן ומכאן וכל ישראל לאחוריהם. כיון שראו ישראל את אהרן באותו כבוד שמחו שמחה גדולה ואמרו שאהרן נתעלה יותר ברוח הקדש לפי שהיו אוהבים אותו

That very day Moses changed the custom.¹¹⁶ He sat and wept until dawn.¹¹⁷ He called Eleazar and said to him: "Go and call for the elders and the princes for me, for the Holy One told me about a

After that, he will ascend and die according to your will, my Lord." Again, God was unmoved. Finally, Moses shows his desperation to hold on to his brother just a bit longer: "My Lord, my desire is to add to the matter before you just one day" (p. 46-7).

Moses then falls in the dirt, wails and prays, such is his grief. He wished for three more months initially but now hopes for just one more day. He is not granted more time. When he sees that he has no influence on the decree, he ceases pleading and begins to fulfill God's command. Moses, in this version, makes efforts to avert the death decree on his brother.

Tradition attributes a range of reactions to Moses in this horrible moment of having to carry out the command of his brother's death, from not delaying at all to lengthy petitions to increase his brother's time on earth. The Falasha version is particularly moving in its portrayal of Moses' very human reluctance and grief. *Petirat Aharon* takes a middle ground. Moses expresses emotional difficulty in carrying out the command. It is clear that both he and God are affected by Aaron's impending death. Still, our midrash portrays Moses at this moment as faithful and obedient, a true partner with God in carrying out this difficult action, which can be contrasted with his ineffective, unfaithful behavior at the Waters of Meribah (see section B).

116 The time of discussing and contemplating Aaron's death now yields to the day of his death when action is required. This day will not be like any other and demands certain changes.

117 This is yet another marker of Moses' grief and a familiar one. Moses does not sleep because he is weeping all night until he is interrupted by dawn, in Hebrew קריאת הגבר, the crowing of the cock. Neither of the two parallel versions of this episode, *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.2 and *Tanhuma* (Buber) [Addition to *Parashah Hukat* 2], mention Moses' emotional state. They simply report the change that Moses makes. Our midrash expresses interest, as well, in the changes in Moses' feelings and includes this detail before outlining the change in custom that a clearly grieving Moses will make.

"

matter.”¹¹⁸ They came and gathered at Aaron's entryway.¹¹⁹ Aaron stood and found Moses standing (there).¹²⁰ Aaron said to Moses, “My brother, why did you change the custom today?”¹²¹

Moses replied, “The Holy One commanded me to tell you something.”¹²²

Aaron said, “Speak.”¹²³

Moses replied, “Not until we go outside.”¹²⁴

Moses stood and dressed¹²⁵ Aaron in eight [priestly] garments that were in his house,¹²⁶ and after that, he

118 Eleazar, here, is given an enlarged role in the change of custom and appears as the agent of Moses. Parallel versions of this text, *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.2 and *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Addition to Parashah Hukkat* 2], report that Eleazar is among those who get up early and gather at Aaron's tent. Our midrash expands Eleazar's role. He gathers the elders and the princes as Moses directs, thus foreshadowing his upcoming role as High Priest and further establishing his worthiness for the position.

119 The custom, as established in section C.2., is for all those assembled to wait on Moses. Now Aaron has become the focus of the morning gathering, as he will be the focus for the rest of the midrash.

120 Aaron begins to realize that something is happening when Moses is waiting at his tent. *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.2 records the Aaron saw everyone standing “with Moses among them.” In this midrash, the focus is kept on the brothers as they enter into this difficult moment.

121 In all parallel versions, Aaron verbalizes his confusion at the change of custom. This poignant question serves to remind the reader of Aaron's ignorance of his impending death and the delicate task awaiting his brother.

122 Moses invokes the Holy One directly to establish the divine origin of the changes (and ultimately the decree of death). In *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Addition to Parashah Hukkat* 2], Moses reports simply that the Holy One commanded him to do it (כך צוני הקב"ה). Our midrash agrees with *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.2 that Moses reveals to Aaron that he has something to tell him (לומר לך). The change in custom is directly linked the coming announcement of Aaron's death.

123 Aaron's one word response (אמר) is far more direct and plaintive than the parallel in *Jerahmeel* XLIX.2: “Speak, I entreat thee.”

124 Moses will not tell Aaron until they go outside (שנצא). This repeats the leitmotif of the verb “to go out,” יצא, used in the midrash. It is often coupled with the opposite verb “to enter,” נכנס and indicates transformation or a movement from one state to another. These verbs show the journey Aaron must make in this world as well as his journey to the world to come. Thus, Aaron's is told that the first action on his journey to the mountain, and his own death, begins with he and Moses going forth.

125 Another verbal pair is established here. Moses dresses his brother (והלביש) in this portion of the narrative in opposition to his later stripping (הפשט) his brother of the same garments. Wearing clothing, in this case the priestly garments, represents authority and function. Being stripped of those garments means losing one's place and role.

126 Aaron is dressed as though he were going to do priestly work. The presence of these eight garments is significant at a later point in the narrative (see section C.11).

went out.¹²⁷ This is the order of their procession on that day (for Moses had changed the custom).¹²⁸ They put Aaron in the middle, Moses at his right and Joshua at his left.¹²⁹ The elders and princes were on either side and all Israel was behind them. When Israel saw¹³⁰ Aaron so honored, they rejoiced greatly¹³¹ and said that Aaron had been more elevated with the holy spirit¹³² because they loved him.¹³³

In the Falasha account, Aaron is suspicious of Moses' request for him to dress this way and tries to back out of accompanying Moses up the mountain. Aaron said to Moses: "Why do you call us today to service, to going up the mountain? It isn't even a festival day or Rosh Chodesh or Shabbat. When I heard this (commandment), my limbs collapsed and my strength faded. My heart was sick and my tears came down. So, you and Pinchas go up and do what YHVH commanded you. Afterwards, I will also do that which YHVH said to you" (p. 48).

127 Aaron's first action on his journey is to go forth (יצא), to leave his home, which he does alone. His transformation starts when he leaves his innermost physical place.

128 After recording Moses' emotional state and his interaction with Aaron, the midrash details the change in the procession. The usual order is recorded in section C.2.

129 Aaron takes the position of honor (see BT *Eruvin* 54b) which had been Moses'; Moses takes Aaron's place. Eleazar had been on the left (see section C.2), but here is replaced by Joshua, who has no other role in this narrative. *Tanhuma* (Buber) does not report this shift in positions. Instead, the switch in custom is that everyone gathers outside Aaron's tent (*Addition to Parashat Hukkat*, 2). It is puzzling why our midrash would leave Eleazar, who needs to be validated as the next High Priest, out of the procession. Aaron, though, is elevated over both Moses and Joshua, the known leaders of the community.

130 When Israel saw (כיון שראו ישראל). Their vision was not simply that Aaron had changed places, but that he had been elevated in the eyes of God. They were seeing something that had a relationship to the divine.

131 Israel's rejoicing is ironic. They are happy because they love Aaron more than Moses and are happy to see him ascend. Aaron, however, has been elevated because he is being sent to his death. While Israel is naïve about this, so is Aaron. He participates in this procession not understanding its meaning.

132 Aaron's elevation is accounted by the people as being a product of the holy spirit. At the same moment they are celebrating Aaron's earthly achievement of gaining the place of honor, there is a sense that there is something ethereal animating it. Without knowing Aaron's destination, they still associate him with God and with the Holy Spirit in the time before his death. In the *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Addition to Parashat Hukkat*, 2], the people believe that the Holy Spirit has been taken from Moses and given to Aaron (אמרו זה לזה ניטלה רוח הקדש ממשה (ונתנה לאהרן). In this instance, even Aaron's possession of the spirit is an indication of his higher status. Our version does not perpetuate this portion of the rivalry between Moses and Aaron.

133 This midrash makes clear that Israel loves Aaron and rejoices when he achieves a status higher than Moses. Other midrashim are more explicit about Israel's feelings. *Tanhuma* (Buber) directly states that Israel loved Aaron more than Moses (והיו ישראל אוהבין יותר אהרן ממשה). This is because Moses pursued strict justice (שהיה משה אומר יקוב הדין את ההר) while Aaron pursued peace between people and between husband and wife (אבל אהרן היה משים שלום בין איש לחברו ובין איש לאשתו). Aaron's reputation as a seeker of peace is further expounded upon with an account of how he would stop people, lovingly, from committing wrongdoing.

C.8. Leaving Camp

ויצאו כיון שהגיעו לאהל מועד בקש אהרן ליכנס לאהל ולא הניחו משה וא"ל משה אנו רוצים לצאת חוץ למחנה כיון שיצאו חוץ למחנה א"ל אהרן אמר לי מה אמר לך הקב"ה א"ל משה עד שהגיע לאותו ההר באותה שעה אמר משה לישראל שבו כאן עד שנחזור אליכם ואני ואהרן ואלעזר נעלה לראש ההר ונשמע ונרד והיו עולים בשלשתן והיה מבקש משה לומר לאהרן ולא היה יודע כיצד יאמר לו

They went forth.¹³⁴ When they arrived at the Tent of Meeting,¹³⁵ Aaron requested to enter the tent but Moses didn't permit him.¹³⁶ Moses said to him, "We want to go outside of the camp."¹³⁷ When they went outside the camp, Aaron asked him, "Tell me what the Holy One said to you."

Moses replied, "Not until we arrive at the mountain."¹³⁸

This is echoed by *Avot de Rabbi Natan* B, Perek 12: Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving and seeking peace, loving people and bringing them to Torah (אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את) הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את (הבריות ומקרבן לתורה). *Avot de Rabbi Natan* details Aaron's ability to get people and couples to resolve a quarrels. The people love Aaron because of his peaceful qualities. That is seen in our midrash even though the preference for the people for Aaron is not made explicit.

134 This use of the verb י צ א marks another moment in Aaron's transformation. After going forth from his most personal place (see note 127), Aaron is joined by his brother and his community, though only Moses knows the true destination of this journey. For the moment, Aaron is not alone and the verb is in the plural (ויצאו).

135 After leaving his personal space (ביתו), Aaron's next stop is the Tent of Meeting (אהל מועד), the place where Aaron served as priest and offered sacrifices. This procession is a tour of the important places in Aaron's life, in the same way that sometimes funeral processions will stop at places that were especially significant for the deceased.

136 Tellingly, Aaron can not enter (ליכנס) the place where he has served. He wishes to continue in his role as High Priest, but Moses, knowing the truth, will not allow it. Aaron, at this point in his journey can not enter (ליכנס) any earthly place. He is in the process, instead, of going forth (י צ א) from his earthly life.

137 The procession now turns to the area outside of the camp (חוץ למחנה). While they are getting more distant from Aaron's home and primary place of occupation as a priest, the priest still exercised authority outside the camp. This was the area where those with skin afflictions (צרעת) were sent to wait. The priest served as a connection between the camp and those outside of camp, and had the power to declare people able to rejoin the camp (see Leviticus chaps 13-14). Thus, Aaron visits this liminal area, where he once had power to turn people back to camp, on his way to the mountain and to his own death. There will not be any turning back for him. Instead, he is leaving his last sphere of worldly influence.

138 Though Aaron was put in the place of honor in this procession, Moses leads. Aaron's requests are rebuffed. Moses relentlessly steers them to the mountain but without giving any reason. In the Falasha account, Moses

At that same time, Moses said to Israel, “Remain here until we return to you. I along with Aaron and Eleazar will go up to the top of the mountain and we will hear and then come down.”¹³⁹

They went up, the three of them,¹⁴⁰ and Moses wanted to tell Aaron but didn't know how he would say it to him.¹⁴¹

C. 9. *The Allegory of the Candle*

א"ל משה: אהרן אחי שמא פקדון נתן לך הקב"ה א"ל הן א"ל מה א"ל נתן לך מזבח ושלחן שעליו לחם הפנים.
א"ל משה שמא כל מה שהפקיד בידך עכשיו הוא ממך א"ל מה? א"ל נר הפקד אצלך. א"ל אהרן לא נר אחד נתן לי
אלא כל אותם שבעה והרי הם דולקים באהל מועד והיה מבקש משה להרגישו על נפש כיון שהיה משולה בנר
שנאמר 'נר ה' נשמת אדם' כיון שראה משה שאין אהרן מרגיש בדבר א"ל באמת קראך תמים שנאמר 'וללוי אמר
תומיך ואוריך לאיש חסידיך'

Moses said to him, “Aaron, my brother, perhaps the Holy One gave you something in trust?”¹⁴²

entices Aaron to the mountain by saying, “YHVH desires to reveal secrets to us and show us a great sign” (p. 48). In our midrash, there is no promise of revelation to steer them, just Moses' grim determination.

139 Moses' command to Israel has resonances of the *Akedah*. There, Abraham tells his servants to wait (שבו לכם) while he and Isaac go off to worship. Abraham assures the servants that both he and Isaac will return (ונשובה) (Gen 22:5). Moses also commands the people to wait (שבו כאן) while he, Aaron and Eleazar ascend the mountain, hear, and come back down (ונרד). He seems to suggest that they will all return. Juxtaposing the account of Aaron's ascent to Mt. Hor with the account of the *Akedah* serves to emphasize Aaron's innocence again (which has already been done in the incident of the Waters of Meribah; see section B) and to suggest Moses' faithfulness in undertaking this task at God's request.

140 Moses, in the lead, the High Priest and the heir to the High Priesthood are all united as they ascend to the place of Aaron's death (והיו עולים בשלשתן).

141 Moses has been in charge of this procession; his public face has been impressive. We are reminded by this phrase, however, that the sadness and doubts that he revealed to God earlier (section C.4) are still very much present for him. Moses is not the leader of Israel here. He is a grieving brother who, having lost his sister earlier, now must tell his only living sibling that he will die. He struggles to know how to do this.

142 In a very human manner, Moses chooses an indirect way of revealing Aaron's death to him. He can't just come out and say it. In this version the metaphor Moses chooses is a trust (פקדון) from God, an apt one, since Aaron, in his position as High Priest, has held been responsible for many holy items.

Aaron replied, "Yes."

Moses asked, "What (is it)?"

Aaron replied, "He gave me the altar and the table upon which the shewbread is placed."¹⁴³

Moses said, "Perhaps what He entrusted to you He is now requesting back from you."¹⁴⁴

Other midrashim depict Moses approaching this difficult task from different vantage points. In *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787, Moses admits directly that he is ashamed to tell his brother (שְׁאֵנִי בּוֹשׁ לומר לוֹ) and chooses a circuitous strategy of getting Aaron to accept his own death. "Aaron, my brother, if the Holy One should say that after one hundred years you would die, what would you say?"

He replied, 'He's a righteous judge.'

'And if He would tell you (that you would die) today, what would you say to him?'

'The judge is righteous, truly He is before me.'

He said, 'Because you have accepted this upon yourself, we will go up to the top of the mountain as the Holy One said to me.'

Moses tricks Aaron into accepting his fate and then escorts him to his death.

Yalkut Shimoni I, 764, Moses tries a different strategy. Moses arrives at Aaron's tent early in the morning, asking him to help him with a matter of Torah that has been bothering him. They read through *Bereshit* (Genesis) together until they speak about the decree of death that was placed on Adam. Moses asked, "I, who have dominion over the ministering angels, and you, who stopped [the angel of] death, should we suffer thus?"

Aaron asked, "How many years do we have to live? Another twenty?"

Moses replied, "They are few." Aaron counted down the years until Moses let him know it was the day of his death.

This version links Aaron's approaching death to the fate decreed for all humans through Adam. Moses, thus, diffuses the difficulty of this death – it is like all deaths – and gets Aaron to guess his fate.

In *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (XLIX.3) Moses first attempts to get Aaron to understand by asking what God has entrusted to him. When that doesn't work, Moses switches tactics, asking Aaron about the Patriarchs. He gets Aaron to admit that Abraham had to die for Isaac to rule and that Isaac, too, had to die for Jacob to rule. When Aaron doesn't understand, Moses finally asks, "O, Aaron, my brother, if one were to ask thee to give twenty years, or ten years, or one year, or even one day of thy life to that person, when that day should arrive wouldst thou deny his claim?" After this appeal to Aaron to recognize his temporary place in the chain of leadership, Aaron understands that death is near.

In both *Yalkut Shimoni* versions and in *Jerahmeel*, Aaron, with some work, comes to understand his fate. Moses successfully conveys the information to him. Our midrash takes a gentler approach. There is no appeal to history, power, or the fate of all humans. Aaron is not forced to understand. Instead, Moses simply asks Aaron to think about his relationship with God and the service he has performed. Moses broaches the theme of return to God but Aaron doesn't understand how it relates to him. This leads to greater suspense as Aaron's innocence stands in contrast to Moses uncomfortable knowledge, and the reader's awareness of Aaron's fate.

¹⁴³ Aaron has many items to choose from. In this version, he speaks of the altar and table for the shewbread, both items on which sacrifices are offered, which is very appropriate for this death scene, as Aaron is about to be offered up on a bier. This demonstrates the literary artistry of our midrashist. In *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *Addition to Parashat Hukat*. 2, in contrast, Aaron says that he has been given the Tent of Meeting and its utensils (אֹרֶה מוֹעֵד וְכֵלָיו), which shows the range of his duties, but doesn't accord as well with the situation in which he finds himself. In the Falasha version, Aaron is heavily identified with the fire pan, likely from Christian

Aaron said, “What [is he seeking]?”¹⁴⁵

Moses told him, “A candle was entrusted to you.”¹⁴⁶

Aaron replied, “He didn't give just one candle to me, but rather all seven of them and they burn in the Tent of Meeting.”¹⁴⁷

Moses wanted him to sense¹⁴⁸ that his soul was being compared to a candle, as it is said, “The light of YHVH is the soul of man” (Prov 20:27).¹⁴⁹ When Moses saw¹⁵⁰ that Aaron didn't perceive the matter, he said to him, “In truth, you are called pure,”¹⁵¹ as it is said, “Of Levi, he said, 'Let Thummim and Urim be with Thy holy one, [whom Thou didst prove at Massah, with whom Thou didst strive at the waters of
influences on the text.

144 After the use of the verb to go forth (אצו) to bring Aaron out of his tent and out of the camp, the midrashist now emphasizes the theme of return. This is another way to mark Aaron's journey as one of eventually returning to his source.

145 Moses queried Aaron (What/מה?) earlier to find out what God had entrusted to him. His question comes from a place of knowing; he is attempting to draw Aaron into the conversation. Now, when Moses broaches the subject of return, Aaron asks “What/מה?” His question is the opposite of Moses' query. With it, he reveals that he does not understand the matter Moses is presenting, the metaphor of return and its revelation of his death.

146 In contrast to the sacrificial items which Aaron identifies as being in trust, Moses proposes that Aaron has been given a single candle (נר אחד), bringing in the metaphor of life as a flame that eventually will be extinguished.

147 Aaron remains focused on his role as High Priest and corrects Moses. He has not been given one candle, but seven, the entire Menorah in the Tent of Meeting. Aaron is still focused on his life and the function that he serves, not the solitary candle that represents the fragility of his life.

148 Moses realizes that he is failing in his attempt to subtly bring Aaron to the understanding that he is about to die. Moses doesn't wish for Aaron to know but rather that he would be able to sense or feel (והיה מבקש משה (להרגיש) what is about to happen. Moses, the grieving brother, does not want to have to break this difficult news directly.

149 As it becomes clear that Aaron can not interpret the metaphor, the midrashist spells it out for the reader and provides a proof-text. As the knowledge of the reader becomes clearer, Aaron's lack of understanding becomes more apparent and more poignant.

150 When Moses saw (כיון שראה משה) again indicates that Moses has gained a deep understanding of the situation. He realizes that his brother can not understand the matter of his death and accepts this.

151 “In truth you are called pure” (באמת קראך תמים). The truth in this situation is that Aaron is approaching death, though he is not aware of that truth. He can be called pure (תמים), but that word can also have the sense of naïve or simple. The midrashist has taken great effort to portray Aaron as pure, removing him from the narrative of the Waters of Meribah, but here he is also unaware.

Meribah]” (Deut 33:8).¹⁵²

C. 10. *The Cave Appears*

מיד נפתחה המערה לפניהם א"ל משה: אהרן אחי הכנס במערה זו א"ל אהרן כן והיה משה רוצה להפשיט את אהרן בגדי כהונה שעליו ולא ידע האידך יאמר לו א"ל אהרן אחי למערה שאנו נכנסים לתוכו אין ראוי להכניס שם בגדי כהונה שעליך שמא יטמאו והמערה נאה מאד שמא מקברים ראשונים היו בה אלא רצוני שתתן אותם לאלעזר וימתין לנו עד שנצא. א"ל אהרן יפה דברת.

Immediately¹⁵³ a cave¹⁵⁴ opened before them.

Moses said to him, “Aaron, my brother,¹⁵⁵ enter¹⁵⁶ this cave.”

Aaron said, “Yes.”¹⁵⁷

152 This proof-text from Deuteronomy 33 is not an obvious fit. It is from Moses' speech before his death. Aaron is a Levite and the waters of Meribah are mentioned. As Aaron is the High Priest, he does wear the Urim v'Thumim, articles of divination, which could be used to determine whether one is guilty or innocent (one could be found תמים via the תומים). This indicates the judgment that faces Aaron in death and the conviction that Aaron is pure (תמים). Haim Schwartzbaum in “Jewish, Christian, Moslem and Falasha Legends of the Death of Aaron the High Priest” [*Fabula* 5 (1962)], construes the verse as a direct comment on Aaron's lack of understanding and translates it, “Now it is quite obvious why you are called a naïve Hassid” (p 191).

153 Because Aaron can not perceive the message of his death, the journey to his death continues. Moses continues to trick and cajole him towards his ultimate end.

154 With the appearance of the dark, enclosed cave, often a place of burial, Aaron's death gets palpably closer. In the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (XLIX.4) the ground opens and reveals the Cave of Machpelach. This version directly references the place of burial of the patriarchs and is underground, seeming more like a tomb.

155 Even in this episode of trickery and lack of complete honesty between them, the close relationship between the brothers is present in their communication. They frequently refer to each other as “my brother (אחי).”

156 In the first portion of the narrative, “to go forth” (י צ א) served as a *leitmotif*, the concluding portions of the midrash use the verb “to enter” (נ כ נ ד). Whereas Aaron was not allowed to enter the Tent of Meeting, a symbol of his earthly life, Aaron now has gone forth from his life and must enter the cave and face death.

157 Aaron's one word answer and willingness to follow his brother, even as circumstances become more ominous, indicate his continuing naivete and loyalty or perhaps his resignation to his fate.

Moses wanted to strip Aaron of the priestly garments that were on him,¹⁵⁸ but he didn't know how to tell him.¹⁵⁹

He said, "Aaron, my brother, it is not fitting to take¹⁶⁰ the priestly garments which are on you into the cave that we are entering,¹⁶¹ lest you make them impure.¹⁶² The cave is very beautiful. Perhaps [our] ancestors were buried in it.¹⁶³ Instead, I want you to give them to Eleazar¹⁶⁴ and he'll wait for us until we come out."¹⁶⁵

Aaron said to him, "You spoke correctly."¹⁶⁶

158 Aaron is wearing the High Priestly garments which confer on him immunity from death. This is the reason that God requests Moses to remove his garments in Num 20:26. That the garments themselves have powers and make Aaron invulnerable is extensively outlined in Schwatzbaum, *Legends*, p. 206-212. Due to the powers of the garments, Moses must trick his brother into removing them so that he can die. This is difficult territory. His brother might see through his trick and refuse to comply.

159 Moses is caught between his love for his brother and his need to carry out God's command. As in the Waters of Meribah incident (see section B), he does not know what to do. Here, however, this uncertainty makes him more human and more sympathetic. He has been unable to get Aaron to understand the situation, which leaves all of the burden of arranging this death on him alone.

160 To take the garments into the cave is expressed here with the verb "to enter" (להכניס), the verb of return. While Aaron will enter the cave, the clothes themselves can not enter. They are not needed where Aaron is going and they would prevent the completion of Aaron's journey.

161 Again the verb "to enter" (כנס) is used to reinforce the change in Aaron's journey and his return home.

162 Moses engages in bit of deception. While the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* version identifies this cave as Machpelach (XLIX.4), our midrash gives no such indication. Still, Moses, in order to get Aaron to disrobe, introduces the specter of ritual impurity, the bane of a priest, due to contact with the dead in order to motivate Aaron to do what he wishes. Moses ironically calls on Aaron's need to avoid contact with the dead to ensure that he will remove the robes that protect him from his own death.

163 While not identifying the cave as Machpelach, Moses still brings to mind Aaron's ancestors who have died and their final resting places. The ancestors were buried in a cave, as Aaron will be. Their place of death, however, is known. Aaron's will not be (see section C.15).

164 Eleazar's presence on this journey is generally a quiet one. He does not speak until after Aaron has died and here he serves merely an ornamental purpose. His presence is, however, crucial since he ensures the perpetuation of the High Priesthood. In the Falasha version, Eleazar also does not do much, but Pinchas also accompanies the group and, at this point in the narrative, digs Aaron's grave (p. 49).

165 In another bit of deception of both Aaron and Eleazar, Moses states that both he and Aaron will emerge (וצא) from the cave. He uses the *leitwort* for journey and transformation. This time it rings hollow. Aaron's time for going forth has come to a close. He will not be able to exit this cave or his destiny. With divine assistance, however, he will go forth (see section C.17), though without his brother Moses.

166 Even as death draws closer, Aaron remains unaware of what is to befall him and is focused on the rules

C. 11 Stripping Aaron of the Priestly Garments

מיד הפשיט משה את אהרן את בגדיו. אפשר לומר כיון שהפשיטו בגדיו מת ערום ונבקר ערום ח"ו? אלא כל כהן גדול לובש ח' בגדי כהונה וכהן הדיוט לובש ד' אהרן ח' ואלעזר ד' נטל משה ד' מאהרן והלבישם לאלעזר ונעשה כהן גדול וישתיירו על אהרן ד'.

Immediately,¹⁶⁷ Moses stripped Aaron of his garments. Is it possible to say that when he stripped him of his garments, he died naked and was buried naked?¹⁶⁸ Heaven forbid! Rather each High Priest is clothed

governing the priesthood. He is grateful to his brother for sparing the garments, but seemingly unaware of his fate.

167 Before Aaron could change his mind. The clothes needed to come off so that Aaron would be vulnerable to death.

168 The midrash takes a break from the narrative flow to question whether Aaron was stripped of his garments and left naked, which would be an anathema. Priests are required to wear linen breeches in Exodus 28:42 in order to cover their nakedness (לכסות בשר ערוה), the punishment for which would be death. Even in death, there is concern that Aaron retain the dignity and bearing of a priest.

Not all midrashim share this concern. *Midrash Tannai'm* (D'varim 32:49) imagines that Moses takes the clothes off Aaron first and then puts them on Eleazar (ומלבישו לאלעזר). This is also true in *Midrash Tanhuma Hukkat* 17. *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764 has Aaron taking off one article and immediately transferring that article to Eleazar. *Tanhuma* (Buber) [Addition to Parashat Hukkat 2] does not delve into the mechanism for the transfer of the clothes. In *Chronicles of Jerahmeel*, Aaron takes off his own clothes and puts them on his son (XLIX.4). This runs counter to God's commandment in Num 20:26, which tells Moses to strip the clothes from his brother.

Yalkut Shimoni I, 787, however, shares our midrash's concern that Aaron might be left naked, though it resolves it in different ways. Because it wasn't possible to transfer the garments in order (i.e., Aaron would take off an outer garment but Eleazar could not put it on without first receiving the undergarments), God told Moses that he should do his part and God would do God's part. Moses undressed Aaron and, as he did so, Aaron was swallowed up in the mountain. (והיה משה הפשיטו ואהרן מתבלע בהר) The opinion of the sages, also given, is that, while Moses undressed Aaron, the ministering angels clothed him in the garments of the *Shechinah* (ומלאכי השרת מלבישין אותו). Yet another opinion is that the Clouds of Glory, Aaron's very gift (see section A), covered him (ועל ענן הכבוד וכסה אותו). These versions posit divine help to prevent Aaron from transgression and indignity by being naked. In the Falasha version, Aaron dies naked, just like his forefather Adam, symbolizing purity and the universal nature of death (p. 51-2).

Other midrashim voice a different concern about the priestly garments. *Tanhuma* (Buber) *Hukkat* 40 and *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764 wonder why Aaron would have worn the priestly garments outside of the prescribed district. Since the garments were made of wool and linen, he would have received forty lashes, the penalty for a High Priest wearing them outside of the Temple Mount. Our midrash does not appear to share this concern.

in eight priestly garments. A common priest is clothed in four. Aaron had eight and Eleazar four. Moses took hold of four from Aaron and put them on Eleazar and he was made the High Priest. Four remained on Aaron.¹⁶⁹

C. 12. *Entering the Cave*

אמרו לאלעזר המתן לנו כן עד שנצא נכנסו וראו מטה מוצעת ושלחן ערוך ומנורה דולקת ומלאכי השרת עומדים עליה.

They said to Eleazar, "Wait for us here until we come out."¹⁷⁰ They entered¹⁷¹ and saw¹⁷² a made

Our midrash strikes a middle point between keeping Aaron covered by divine means and allowing him to die naked or having transgressed the laws for wearing the priestly garments. Our midrash keeps the focus on the human characters and their journey. In this case, the problem is solved by simple math: Moses needed only to transfer the four High Priestly garments to *Eleazar*.

169 Our midrash solves the problem of Aaron's nakedness without resorting to the more fantastical elements featured in the other midrash. Simple math solves the problem. Moses removed only the four garments of the High Priesthood from Aaron and gave them to Eleazar. That left him still fully clothed in the four garments of a regular priest. The refusal to solve this problem through divine intervention in our midrash keeps the focus of the drama on its human elements: Moses' difficulty carrying out the command and Aaron's unwitting participation.

However, the undressing and dressing is accomplished, it represents yet another cycle akin to going forth and returning. What Aaron sheds, he will not regain. His earthly identity as High Priest is removed from him permanently.

170 Though Aaron has given up his High Priestly garments, making him vulnerable to death, and is ready to enter the cave, he still lacks an understanding of his fate. This time, both Moses and Aaron promise to come back out (נצא) of the cave. The use of this word, especially in Aaron's mouth, is sadly ironic and makes what the reader knows to be Aaron's fate even more poignant.

171 The *leitwort* נ כ נ appears directly after א צ י and heightens this moment. This is the turning point. Aaron no longer will be able to go forth in human form. He will not return; he is entering the cave to go to his death, to return to his creator.

172 They saw (וראו) a world beyond what they have known to this point. Their "seeing" moves them toward a greater understanding of death and divine care.

bed, a set table and a lit menorah¹⁷³ with ministering angels standing over it.¹⁷⁴

C. 13 *Revealing Death to Aaron*

א"ל אהרן למשה: אחי עד מתי תסתר ממני הדבור שאמר לך הקב"ה ואתה יודע כשדבר עמך בראשונה הוא בפי

העיד עלי וראך ושמח בלבו ועכשיו למה תסתר ממני הדבור שאמר לך הקב"ה אפילו אם הוא דבר מיתה הריני

173 These elements are reminiscent of Moses and Aaron's conversation about what Aaron had received in trust from God (see section C.9). Aaron said he had received the alter (מזבח) and the table for the shewbread (שלחן שעליו) (לחם הפנים). Moses suggested that Aaron had received a candle and Aaron countered that he had received seven lights, a reference to the menorah. Now, waiting in the cave are the menorah and a set table (שלחן ערוך). There is no alter, but it is not difficult to connect the made bed, on which Aaron will die, with the alter. Aaron's place of death contains familiar and significant items for a High Priest and for an offering to God.

174 To this point, the midrash has eschewed fantastical elements, preferring to focus on the very human elements of this drama. At the point of entry into the cave, however, this changes. We find a room prepared and angels waiting. This is a theme found in some other midrashim as well as in Islamic sources.

Yalkut Shimoni I, 764 describes the cave as containing simply a bier prepared by heaven (מטה מעשה שמים). *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.4 reports that when Moses and Aaron entered the cave, they found "a burning lamp, a prepared bed, and a table spread." Aaron immediately got on the bed and died. Muhammed ibn Al-Kisai's *Tales of the Prophets* (trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, Jr. [Boston: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997]), contains a similar but more elaborate version: "Aaron saw in the desert a huge mountain, a fertile garden at its base. Together with Moses, he went to explore the mountain, which they discovered to have an abundant supply of water, as well as herbage and caves. From the mouth of one particularly wide cave, light was streaming. They went inside and found a golden throne, covered with tapestry, over which was written in Hebrew: 'This throne is for him who is the right height.' Moses sat down on it but his legs were too long. Then Aaron mounted the throne and found that it was the right size (suggesting his elevated status). The Angel of Death appeared and greeted them saying, 'I am the Angel of Death sent to take Aaron's spirit'" (p. 255-256). In both versions, the room had been prepared with an item that causes immediate death.

Another Islamic version, *The History of al-Tabari* (Vol. III), [trans. William M. Brinner. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991, p. 85] is notable for having a similar fantastical feel, even though there is no cave. As in the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* version, the bed is the element that leads Aaron to death: "Moses and Aaron went towards the mountain and, lo, there was a tree unlike any that had ever been seen, and lo! There was a dwelling and within it a bedstead on which were cushions and a pleasant smell all about. When Aaron saw the mountain and the house and what was in it, it pleased him and he said, 'O, Moses! I would like to go sleep on this bed.' Moses said to him, 'Then go sleep on it.' He said, 'But I am afraid that the master of this house will return and be angry with me.' Moses said to him, 'Do not be afraid! I will protect you from the master of the house, so sleep!' Aaron said, 'O Moses! Rather sleep with me so that if the master of the house comes, he will be angry with both of us.' When they fell asleep, death took Aaron." Then, the house disappeared and the bed ascended to heaven.

Our version has a well-developed sense of this cave and the items and beings that inhabit it. Stepping into this cave is crossing the threshold, for the characters and the readers, leaving the human realm and beginning to glimpse what is beyond. The matter of Aaron's death is no longer simply a matter of human actions and feelings, but is also connected to angels and heavenly realms.

מקבל עלי בסבר פנים יפות א"ל הואיל והזכרת דבר מיתה בפוך – דבר מיתה הוא והוא הדבר שנאמר לי ואני יראתי להודיעך ועתה ראה מיתתך שאינה כמעשה בשר ודם ולא עוד אלא שמלאכי השרת באו לסלקך

Aaron said to Moses, "My brother, how long will you hide from me the matter which the Holy One told you?¹⁷⁵ You know that when He spoke with you at the beginning,¹⁷⁶ He himself testified on my behalf: 'When he saw you, he was glad in his heart' (Ex 4:14). So now, why do you hide from me the matter that the Holy One told you? Even if it is a matter of [my] death, I will certainly accept it cheerfully.¹⁷⁷

He said to him, "Since you mentioned death...it is a matter of death,¹⁷⁸ and this is the matter which He told me but I was afraid to tell you.¹⁷⁹ Now understand that your death isn't like that of an ordinary

175 The words of conflict and complaint between Moses and the people, "how long" (עד מתי) [see sections B.1, B.4, and B.5], reappear here between the brothers in a more intimate setting. In spite of their making this journey together, Aaron's lack of knowing God's command, has taken its toll. He expresses his impatience to the brother who has been withholding information from him and gently deceiving him as he brings up the matter of his own death.

176 Aaron turns to Scripture which describes the beginnings of Moses' leadership and portrays Moses as needing Aaron. Moses complains to God that he can't speak (לא איש דברים) and wishes not to be the one sent by God (Ex 10-13). In this context, God speaks up for Aaron as one who can speak and assist Moses with his leadership task. This stresses the interconnectedness of Moses and Aaron's fates to this point, as they shared leadership of Israel. As well, this quote shows Moses in a fragile place, in which he needs Aaron and Aaron appears powerful.

177 Again, as in the Waters of Meribah incident, the midrashist chooses a proof-text that shows Moses' shortcomings; he is refusing to carry out his responsibilities because he doesn't speak well (Ex 4:11-13). Yet, Aaron, who speaks easily (כי-דבר דבר הוא) is approaching Moses, aware of his flaws, and is still very happy to see him. He assists Moses willingly. They become partners in leadership (Ex 4:15-16), with God as the force that brought them together.

This verse reminds the reader of the beginning of Aaron and Moses' working relationship as it mirrors their current situation. Aaron, unaware of his fate, is glad to be with Moses and follows him, but needs him to speak clearly and explain what is going on. Moses, again, displays reluctance to speak and doesn't know how to tell Aaron this difficult news. It is Aaron, even under duress, who uses his power of speech to help his brother, by conveying that he can handle the news of his death, thus freeing Moses to speak and for there to be honest communication between them before Aaron's death.

178 It is because Aaron brought it up (הואיל והזכרת דבר מיתה בפוך), that Moses is finally able to speak of Aaron's death. His reluctance to speak is understandable in human terms. His brother, after all, is dying and Moses does not know what to do. His response as a grieving brother, though, is at odds with what we expect from a leader.

179 While Moses has been exhibiting fear during this entire episode, he now admits his fear to his brother (ואני

mortal.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, ministering angels have come to carry you away.¹⁸¹

C. 14. *Aaron Reacts*

א"ל אהרו: משה אחי למה לא אמרת בפני אמי ואשתי ובני? א"ל משה אחי אין אתה יודע שזה מ' שנה שעשית את העגל והיית חייב כלייה במיתה אלא שעמדתי בתפלה ותחנונים לפני המקום ב"ה והצלתי אותך מהמיתה שנאמר ובאהרן התאנף ה' וכו'

Aaron said to him, "Moses, my brother, why didn't you tell me this in the presence of my mother,"¹⁸²

(יראתי להודיעך). Unlike earlier, at the Waters of Meribah (see section B.6), where Moses kept his fear hidden and tried to cover it up, here Moses is able, with his brother, to be honest about his feelings.

180 Moses immediately tries to reassure Aaron that his death will be special, not like the death of mortals, in which the Angel of Death comes to take them. BT *Baba Batra* (17a) specifies that six people were not subject to the dominion of the Angel of Death: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses Aaron and Miriam. This is known because their deaths were decreed by God (על פי יי). The rabbis later clarify that by God's decree means by God's kiss (בנשיקה). *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787 notes regarding Moses' death that "just as the Angel of Death didn't rule over Aaron, who died instead with a kiss" (וכשם שלא שלט מלאך המות באהרן אלא בנשיקה), so Moses will also die by the mouth of YHVH. In another account (*Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764), Aaron dies by the kiss of the *Shechinah* (מיד ירדה שכינה ונשיקתו).

Clearly, Moses needs to comfort both Aaron and himself that this will not be a difficult death, due to both their relationship and fears common to all about the deaths of their loved ones. Additionally, it is important to Moses that Aaron, his beloved brother, the High Priest, is elevated in death as he was in life. The midrashist clearly shares that concern. Aaron, in addition to his status as High Priest, has been the preferred and upright character throughout the narrative, merits a death befitting his status as a righteous person.

The Falasha version directly contradicts the notion of what death should be for a righteous person. Aaron receives the writ of death bequeathed to him from Adam and drinks from the cup of death. After he has submitted in this way to the death that every human must have, the angel of death comes to take him. The only kisses he receives are from Moses on his cheek and Eleazar on the other (p. 55). Unlike in our midrash, Aaron dies a universal death, not one tied to his status.

181 Unlike other midrashim which specify death with a kiss (see previous note), our midrash has Aaron being retrieved by a host of ministering angels. The significant part of this death seems to be that Aaron is accompanied. Our midrash makes sure he does not die a lonely death. Aaron has spent his life as a priest accompanying the people in a ritual fashion. It is reciprocated upon his death.

182 My mother (אמי). Moses and Aaron share the same mother. Though they call each other "brother" throughout the narrative, Aaron's concern here is solely with his own relationship to their mother.

my wife and my sons?¹⁸³

Moses replied, “My brother, do you not know that it has been 40 years since you made the [golden] calf¹⁸⁴ and you were obligated to die¹⁸⁵ except that I stood in prayer and supplication before God, blessed be He, and I saved you from death,¹⁸⁶ as it is said, 'YHVH was furious enough with Aaron' (Deut 9:20).¹⁸⁷

C. 15 *Aaron's Death*

ועתה הלואי תהי מיתתי כמיתתך שאתה מת ואני קוברך ובשעה שאמות אני אין לי אח שיקברני ואתה מת ובניך יורשים מקומך ואני מת ואחרים יורשים כבודי. ופייסו בדברים ועלה אהרן למטתו וקבל הקב"ה נשמתו ויצא משה מן המערה ותיכף נתעלמה המערה ולא היה שום נברא בעולם שידע זה ויכול להבין את זה.

Would that my death would be like your death,¹⁸⁸ for you will die and I will bury you. At the time that I

183 As with many people facing deaths, Aaron's concerns turn immediately to his family and his lack of ability to say goodbye. He faults Moses for not telling him the news sooner, which is ironic since Aaron himself had to create the opening for Moses to tell him (see note 178).

184 While the narrative has consistently exposed Moses' character flaws, Aaron has remained blameless. This mention of the golden calf (Ex 32), then, stands out for portraying Aaron is a negative light. Of note, this mention comes from Moses and is not part of the narrative text of the essay. The fact that Moses brings it up, directly after Aaron expresses a desire to say goodbye to his family, makes it reflect negatively on Moses. Moses tries to cover for his own lack of ability to tell Aaron sooner by bringing up this difficult episode at a sensitive time.

185 The words for death in this section are all from the root מ ו ת and do not reflect the word for death used in the title of the midrash. This root is a clear signifier of death, not a euphemism. The brothers are able to speak directly to each other about death in the time before Aaron dies.

186 Moses reminds both Aaron and himself that he is the one who saved Aaron's life and gave him the last forty years. Instead of being the one who brings Aaron to his death, Moses seeks to cast himself as the one who saved Aaron and gave him additional life.

187 The verse continues: “to have destroyed him, so I also prayed for Aaron at that time” (ולהשמידו ואתפלל גם-) (בעד אהרן בעת ההוא). This legitimates Moses' claim that Aaron had been near death earlier.

188 After their quarrel and Moses' assertion that he had already saved his brother, Moses finally begins to face Aaron's death, albeit from his own perspective. He envies the death of his brother and wishes it for himself. His death was already decreed (see section C.1) and the fact that Moses doesn't know how he will die has been

die, I won't have a brother who will bury me. But you will die and your sons will inherit your position. I will die and others will inherit my honor.” And he placated¹⁸⁹ him with these words and Aaron went up on his bier¹⁹⁰ and the Holy One received his soul.¹⁹¹

Moses left the cave.¹⁹² Immediately, the cave disappeared¹⁹³ and there wasn't a creature that was

present throughout the narrative. Now that Moses has experienced the peaceful nature of Aaron's death, which is happening in his presence and with *Eleazar's* accompaniment, he grows wistful and worries about what will happen to him. Moses' mortality is a part of Aaron's death scene.

This theme is common to other midrashim, as well. In *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787, Moses speaks to his brother, who is covered in a cloud (see note 168), desperately wishing to know what death holds. He asks three times about the experience, concluding with, “Aaron, my brother: What is the death of the righteous? Where are you?” He replied, “I'm not able to tell you. I only wish I had come here earlier (אני כדאי לומר לך אלא הלואי מקדם זמן) (באתי לכאן).” When Moses saw that Aaron was happy, he desired a death like his. *Midrash Tanna'im* (Devarim 32:49) reports Aaron telling Moses: “My brother, happy is a man who dies this death” (אשריו לאדם שהוא מת) (במיתה זו), therefore Moses desired it. In both of these instances, Aaron himself reports that the death is pleasant and not painful, leading Moses to hope for such a death for himself.

Yalkut Shimoni I, 787 details a different version. As Israel weeps for Aaron, and with Miriam's death still on his mind, Moses has a moment of introspection. “I alone remain...what will become of me? Who will stand with me at the hour of death: not (my) father, not (my) son, not (my) brother, and not (my) sister?” (אי לי שנותרתי) (לבדי...אני מה תהא עלי, מי יעמד עלי בשעת מיתה, לא אב, ולא בן, ולא אח, ולא אחותי). The Holy One responded that God would stand with Moses and bury him with great honor. This version gives voice to a very real fear of dying alone. A good death is having someone to take care of you in the final moments.

In our midrash, Aaron is unable or unwilling to communicate. It isn't his viewpoint that influences Moses. Instead, Moses' realization of his own situation prompts him to identify positive aspects of Aaron's death. As in *Yalkut Shimoni* 787, Moses wishes for someone to take care of him, though he knows he won't have a brother to bury him (אין לי אח שיקברני). The act of Moses accompanying his brother to his death points out to Moses that his journey to death will be alone. Moses also recognizes that he has nothing to bequeath. While Aaron has already given his clothes and his role to Eleazar (see section C.11.), Moses has no one to take his place. He realizes that his leadership role will die with him.

While the other midrashim show Aaron identifying his death as positive or, in the case of *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787, engaging with his brother in an examination of the question of who will take care of him in death, our midrash engages in a meditation on the meaning of life and death. It is not the divine elements, but the very human ones, that cause Moses to recognize not only that he is losing his brother but that, unlike Aaron, he will leave no legacy behind. This awareness of wanting to be accompanied to death and to leave a future behind, which comes to Moses without Aaron's assistance, is what propels him to express his deeply felt wish that his death would be like his brother's (הלואי תהי מיתתי כמיתתך).

189 The word for placate is פייסו which can also mean to appease. Moses' words about what Aaron has, a brother to accompany him and a son to inherit his position, though they were motivated by Moses' concern for himself, provide solace to Aaron.

190 Seemingly because of Moses' words, Aaron accepts his death and goes to it willingly. (To see other midrashim

created in the world who knew about it or was able to understand it.¹⁹⁴

C. 16. *Moses Reveals Aaron's Death to Eleazar & Israel*

כשראה אלעזר למשה ולא ראה עוד אביו אמר לו רבי היכן הוא אבא? א"ל הלך לבית עולמו וירדו שניהם מן ההר.
א"ל ישראל אהרן היכן הוא? א"ל כבר נפטר לב"ע אמרו למשה לדברך שתאמר מת ואין אנו יודעים מה עשית לו
אפשר שהרגת אותו. אין אנו מניחין אותך לילך מכאן או לכאן עד שתראה אותו לנו מת או חי. באותה שעה עמד

in which getting on the bed is linked with immediate death, see note 174).

191 No kiss is specified, though Aaron, as promised by Moses, is not taken by the Angel of Death. Instead, his soul is received directly by God (וקבל הקב"ה נשמתו) [see note 180 for evidence of kissing as a mode of death in other midrashim].

192 Now the *leitwort* "to go forth" (ויצא) is used for Moses. He takes his leave from the cave and from his brother forever, his life transformed by this episode.

193 The mysteriously disappearing cave is found in several other texts. In *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.5, the cave closes by itself. *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764 reports that the cave is sealed (נסתמה המערה) as soon as Moses leaves. Islamic legend most closely matches the cave that immediately disappears (ותיכף נתעלמה המערה) in our midrash. As reported by al-Kisai (p. 256), when Moses left, "angels sealed the entrance to the cave." Though *The History of al-Tabari* reports the legend with a house and not a cave, the vanishing act is the same. "When [Aaron] was dead, the house was taken away, the tree disappeared, and the bed was raised to heaven" (p. 85). The raising of the bed has resonance with Muhammed's night journey, when the prophet was raised up on a journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. This divine participation in Aaron's death elevates both the death and Aaron and serves to close the barrier between the human world, with which our midrash is primarily concerned, and the world of death, to which we are exposed in the cave. With Aaron's death, that world is closed off and the text returns to human concerns.

194 In "Falling in the Wilderness: Death Reports in the Book of Numbers" (*Prooftexts* 22 [2002], p. 257), Adriane Leveen analyzes death reports in the Book of Numbers. According to the logic of the biblical text, Aaron's death shows his status because the location is specified four times in the biblical text (Num. 20: 22, 23, 25, and 37). In Numbers, where most deaths occur out in the wilderness, Aaron's death is "honorable" because it has a place (p. 255). She further asserts that Moses' death was superior to Aaron's because only Moses' place of death remains undisclosed, which will prevent it from becoming a site of worship.

In Josephus' early account, the place of Aaron's burial is known: "Arce, now known as Petra." (*Works of Josephus*, Book 5, Chapter 4). Our midrash, however, elevates Aaron's death to the level of Moses'. Its location is undisclosed and the actual place of death disappears so that no one who was ever created (שום נברא בעולם) can know it (שיודע זה) or understand it (ויכול להבין את זה), meaning to have knowledge of the location, or have a sense of what happened there. The place where Aaron died, so clearly spelled out in early sources, has become a mystery and the divine involvement in his death is not for human understanding. Aaron's death, in the hand of the midrashist, has become like Moses' and reflects Aaron's elevated status, especially *vis a vis* his brother.

משה בתפלה לפני המקום ב"ה ואמר לפניו רבש"ע בבקשה ממך תראה להם מטתו שלא יאמרו חי הוא ויעשו אותו
אלוה לפי שכל ישראל כולם היו אוהבים לאהרן הרבה.

When Eleazar saw Moses but didn't see¹⁹⁵ his father, he asked, "My teacher, where is father?"¹⁹⁶

Moses replied, "He went to his eternal rest,"¹⁹⁷ and the two of them went down together from the
mountain.¹⁹⁸

Israel said to him, "Where is Aaron?"¹⁹⁹

He replied, "He already departed and went to his eternal rest."²⁰⁰

They said to Moses, "By your words, you say that he died²⁰¹ but we don't know what you did to
him. It's possible that you killed him. We won't let you go anywhere until you show him to us,²⁰² dead or
alive."²⁰³

195 Eleazar's lack of seeing (ולא ראה) his father points him toward understanding his father's death.

196 Eleazar has taken the place of Aaron as High Priest. He appears to also have taken on Aaron's naivete about the death. Though he has been standing in Aaron's High Priestly garments for some time, he has not grasped the significance of the transfer of the clothing.

197 Went to his eternal rest (הלך לבית עולמו). To Eleazar, Moses uses an indirect idiom for death. He does not confront Eleazar with the harsh reality of Aaron's end.

198 They go down from the mountain together (וירדו שניהם), united after this difficult episode. Eleazar has taken his father's place next to Moses and they move on together. Both Moses and Aaron had said Aaron would come out of the cave (see sections C.10 & C.12). His absence is conspicuous here. The narrative makes clear that only two make the journey down the mountain.

199 Moses' interaction with the people begins as did his interaction with Eleazar, with a question about the notable absence of Aaron. Israel is clearly concerned about Aaron.

200 Again, Moses' speaks of Aaron's death with an idiom: He departed and went to his eternal rest (כבר נפטר לב"ע). With the people, Moses uses root for departing in death (פטר) that titles the entire narrative. He speaks to the people using words he believes they can hear.

201 Died (מת). The people are focused on the brutal fact of Aaron's death, not his experience of eternal rest.

202 The people ask for understanding by asking Moses to allow them to see Aaron (תראה). They are asking for confirmation of Aaron's fate and they are not able to comprehend his death unless they receive sensory confirmation. Needing to see to believe is common in cases of unexpected death. They people exhibit this grief reaction.

203 Unlike Eleazar, the people harbor deep suspicion of Moses and raise the possibility the Moses has murdered

At that moment, Moses stood in prayer before God, blessed be He, and said before Him, “Master of the universe, please show them²⁰⁴ his bier so that they will not say, “He is alive” and they will not make him a god since all of Israel loves Aaron greatly”²⁰⁵

Aaron for his own gain.

This suspicion is not evident in early versions of this episode. Josephus (*Antiquities* Book 4, Chapter 4) reports that Aaron died “while the multitude looked on.” There is no possibility for any disagreement since the people witness the events. Targum Onkelos on Numbers 20 has the people further removed but still doesn't note discord. In Onkelos, Israel sees Moses coming down from the mountain “with rent garments.” He reports the death and they immediately mourn. The Targum Yerushalmi records that Moses came down and reported that his brother, who made atonement for everyone once a year, had died. “In that hour the sons of Israel believed that Aharon was dead.” In these versions, the people believe Aaron's death immediately upon being told.

Midrashic versions, however, show the people as highly suspicious of Moses. In *Sifre Deuteronomy*, 305, the people say to Moses, “We know you are cruel. It may be that he said something improper before you and you punished him with death.” The people believe Moses might have retaliated against his brother. In *Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar* 17, the assertion is that Moses abandoned Aaron on the mountain, though no motive is provided. *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787 concludes that Satan came and turned the people against Moses. *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764 reports that the people fell into three camps: one said that Moses killed Aaron because he was jealous; one said that Eleazar killed Aaron because he wanted to succeed him as High Priest; one said that Aaron died the way heaven intended.

In a number of versions, the suspicions of the people are fueled because Aaron had already defeated the angel of death (see Num 17:12-13). In *Numbers Rabbah* 19:20, both *Tanhuma ha-Nidpas* and *Tanhuma* (Buber), as well as *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764, the people ask: “How is the angel of death able to strike the one who was stood against the Angel of Death and stopped him?” The people add a specific threat: if Moses can produce Aaron, all will be well, but if not, they will stone him. This version provides a balance to the stoning threat to Moses at the beginning of the narrative when he could not produce water.

This suspicion is present in Islamic legends, too. Al-Kisai reports that the people believed Moses had killed Aaron (p. 256). Al-Tabari attributes the motive to sibling rivalry. The people believe Moses killed his brother because “of [Israel's] love for him” (p. 86).

In our midrash, there is clearly distrust for Moses, though this distrust is not specified. Instead, Moses faces a suspicious people who believe he may have done something to his brother. With no reason specified, Moses' relationship to his brother, and the people's relationship to them both loom over the confrontation. Even in death, there is a rivalry between them. While there is no threat of stoning from the people, it is clear that they intend to keep Moses from being able to go anywhere (אנו מניחין אותך לילך מכאן או לכאן), metaphorically he can not move on until the matter is resolved.

204 Moses pleads with God to show Aaron (תראה) to the people so that they can understand both his death and what kind of behavior and faith is necessary in the wake of their loss.

205 Moses moves immediately in response to the accusations of the people. Prayer is a popular response in the midrashim and is reported by *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.6 as well as al-Tabari: “He arose and performed

C. 17. *The Holy One Reveals Aaron's Bier*

באותה שעה פתח הקב"ה את פתח המערה וראו כל ישראל מטתו של אהרן במערה שוכב על מטתו שנאמר ויראו כל העדה כי גוע אהרן ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום. והפכו פניהם למחנה ישראל וראו שנסתלק ענני כבוד שנתן להם הקב"ה בזכותו וראו מטתו של אהרן [ומלאכי השרת] פורחין בה באויר העולם.

At that moment, the Holy One opened the mouth of the cave and all Israel saw²⁰⁶ Aaron's lying on his bier in the cave,²⁰⁷ as it is said, "The whole community saw that Aaron died and they wept over Aaron thirty

two *rak'ahs* and then prayed to God" (p. 86). The content of these prayers is not specified.

In *Tanhuma ha-Nidpas* (*Hukkat* 17), *Tanhuma* (Buber) [*Hukkat* 41] and *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764, Moses prays to be removed from suspicion (הוציאני מן השחד). In essence, he prays for deliverance from the people's accusation.

Our midrash portrays Moses as even more pious. Not only is he moved to pray, but instead of asking for something for himself, as seen in other midrashim, Moses prays for the people to be saved. He expresses concern that the people think Aaron is alive and will make a god of him (חי הוא ויעשו אותו אלוה). This resonates with the golden calf incident, which Moses already introduced (see section C.14). This allusion has the effect of not only making Moses seem pious and selfless, but also of casting the people and Aaron in a negative light. Perhaps, too, Moses is reflecting on his own death and what will happen to the people when he dies.

While elevating himself over the people and Aaron, Moses does mention Israel's love for Aaron (see note 133). This favoritism towards Aaron, which even Moses admits, makes sibling rivalry a possible reason for Moses' accusatory prayer. As well, events that transpire after Aaron's death (see section E), make Moses' prayer seem prescient, as Israel will seek other gods in Aaron's absence.

206 Because Israel saw (וראו) Aaron's bier leads them to understanding and acceptance of Aaron's death.

207 Moses' prayer that the people see Aaron's bier is answered immediately. The idea that Aaron, in death, is brought before the people by supernatural means is a common one. In *Sifre Deuteronomy* (*Netzavim* 31), the Holy One suspends the bier in the upper heavens (ותלאה בשמי שמים). Both God and the angels eulogize Aaron. This is also true for *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* XLIX.7. In *Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar* Chap. 17, God suspends Aaron's casket in the air and suspends it over the camp (נטל ארונו של אהרן והעביר פורח וטס באויר). *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 787 also documents God's response to the prayer as the lifting of Aaron's bier and then the Holy One mourns before it. In one version in *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764, the angels sing praises before the hovering bier (והיתרה פורחת בשמים והמלאכים מקלסין לפניו).

Outside legends, both Falasha and Islamic do not register a flying bier but do include fantastical elements designed to exonerate Moses (*The History of al-Tabari*) or elevate Aaron's death (Falasha). In the legend

days” (Num 20:29).²⁰⁸ They turned their faces to the camp of Israel and saw that the clouds of glory, which the Holy One had given them due to the merit of Aaron,²⁰⁹ had departed. They saw Aaron's bier and [the ministering angels] flying in the air (of the world).²¹⁰

D. Mourning for Aaron: Beat Your Breasts

אמר הקב"ה ספדו על הצדיק ספדו על השדיים שנאמר על שדים מהו על שדים סופדים שכלכלו ופרנסו וזנו שני

recorded by al-Tabari, God deals with the people's skepticism by having Moses take them to Aaron's burial place: “He took them to the grave of Aaron and called out, 'O, Aaron!' and he emerged from his grave, shaking the dust off his head. Then Moses said, 'Did I kill you?' and Aaron replied, 'No, by God! I died a natural death.' Moses said, 'Then return to your bed,' and they departed” (p. 88). This brief resurrection serves to clear Moses and make the people believe. In the Falasha legend, there is no controversy about Aaron's death, yet even YHVH and the hosts of heaven come to participate in Aaron's burial (p. 59).

Three versions feature fewer fantastical versions. In *Tanhuma ha-Nidpas* (Hukat 17), *Tanhuma* (Buber) [Hukat 41] and *Yalkut Shimoni* I, 764, God merely opens the cave which has already closed (see note 193). This is the approach of our midrash. Initially, God simply allows the people to see for themselves that Aaron is dead, which all that the people get in Numbers 20:29. This is also in keeping with this midrash's focus on the human experience of grief and mourning. Here there is a two-step process and first the people must understand and grieve. Overt divine involvement comes only after human realization has been achieved on its own.

208 This verse from Numbers inspired many midrashim. The wording of the verse in the Torah that “all of the house of Israel” mourned (ויבכו כל בית ישראל) for Aaron for thirty days is viewed in comparison to the account of the mourning for Moses' death (Deut 34:8), where “the children of Israel” are said to have mourned (ויבכו בני ישראל) thirty days. *Avot de Rabbi Natan* reads this to mean that everyone, both women and men, mourn Aaron because he brought peace to Israel (see note 133). For Moses, who was more strict in his interpretation of the law, only the men (literally the “sons of Israel:” בני ישראל) mourn (Perek 12, *Nusach* B). Targum Onkelos on Numbers translates this verse as “the men and women of Israel” (גבורייה ונשיא דישראל) wept for Aaron, suggesting a broad interpretation for the extent of the mourning for Aaron. *Tanhuma* (Buber) [Addition to *Parashat Hukat* 2] also asserts that while both men and women wept for Aaron because he brought peace, only men (האנשים לבד) mourned Moses' death. The joy that the people felt when Aaron was elevated over Moses in the procession (see section C.7) turns to their great sorrow at his death. Our midrash does not engage in comparing their deaths, but there are echoes of Aaron's favored status in this report of his death.

209 The narrative, as it concludes, returns to material from the beginning. The people turn back to the camp, their home, to see that the gift Aaron had given them, the Clouds of Glory (ענני הכבוד), has disappeared. This is a powerful and tangible symbol of the loss that the whole community is bearing in the death of their peace-loving leader. It contrasts with the loss of water the community felt upon the death of Miriam and which led to thirst and strife. It is not initially clear what effect the loss of the clouds will have on the community.

210 Only after Israel has recognized Aaron's death and begun to understand the loss that it represents for them, do they see Aaron's bier flying away from them. This is the second part of the grief process. Only after Israel has realized their loss are they able to face the divine intervention in the process. God's care for Aaron can comfort, but it can not take away the loss that they are experiencing.

שדים אתכם זה ארבעים שנה שנאמר שני שדיך כשני עפרים תאומי צביה וכתוב על שדה חמוד על גפן פוריה על כנסת ישראל שנמשלה לשדה חמוד ולגפן פוריה שנותרה בלא סריקי. ואח"כ אמר יבא שלום ינוחו על משכבותם הולך נכוחו.

The Holy One said,²¹¹ “Mourn for this righteous man,²¹² beat on your breasts,²¹³ as it is said, “Beat on your breasts” (Is 32:12). What does “beat on your breasts” mean?²¹⁴ Two breasts provided and fed and nurtured you these forty years,²¹⁵ as it is written, “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle” (SS 4:5).²¹⁶ And [about Israel] it is written “[Striking the breast] for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine”²¹⁷(Is 32:12)

211 This material is not found with any other account of Aaron's death. The analogy of Moses and Aaron as two breasts can be found in *Shemot Rabbah*, Parashah 1, *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), *Parashat Shemot*, Siman 12, and *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shir HaShirim*, 988. The material is used here as a meditation on Aaron's role for Israel and the act of mourning him.

212 The connection with Aaron's death is clearly established. God gives the command to mourn him and refers to him as a righteous person (צדיק). This is similar to the midrash in which God's self spoke about Aaron at his death (see note 207).

213 This phrase is parallel to the one that preceded it. Mourn and beat are conveyed by the same verb (ספדו על (הצדיק/ספדו על השדיים). The second phrase, beat on your breast, comes from Isaiah.

214 The midrash explores the connection between the two parallel terms: mourning for a righteous person is the act of beating on your breast.

215 The breasts are compared to Aaron and Moses who provided for the Israelites over the forty years in the wilderness. This midrash credits Aaron, along with his brother, with a great role in supporting the people and applies to him a metaphor of caregiving that is gendered female. He and Moses are the breasts that suckle the people.

216 *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* identifies Moses and Aaron as the two breasts multiple times. They are the breasts because, by their efforts, the Reed Sea was opened (4:3), the Torah was given (4:4), and their ancestors were brought out of Egypt (4:12). The midrash also stresses the equality inherent in the metaphor, since, for breasts, “one is not greater than its companion” (4:12). Thus, Moses is not greater than Aaron, nor is Aaron greater than Moses (לא משה גדול מאהרן ולא אהרן גדול ממשה).

Using this verse from Song of Songs to identify the brothers speaks to their importance. The midrash is made relevant to the current situation, since Moses and Aaron are not identified by their deeds in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, but rather by their ability to sustain Israel in the desert for so long. As well, the inclusion of this midrash speaks to the on-going theme of measuring Moses and Aaron. While at points, Aaron has been shown to be more pure and more loved than his brother, this midrash points to an equality between the brothers and a sense that they are a true team.

217 The text now moves to a verse with the feeling of trouble and scarcity. Isaiah is referring to the women who are at ease or careless and who have been commanded to strip as a sign of mourning (Is 32:9 JPS). He urges them to hit their breasts (שדיים) in supplication for a pleasant field (שדה) and fruitful vines. Israel is the fruitful field that blossoms as a result of the mourning.

comparing them to a pleasant field and to a fruitful vine that remains without empty branches.

Afterwards, it says, “He shall enter in peace, they will rest on their beds, he walks upright” (Is 57:2).²¹⁸

E. The Loss of the Clouds of Glory

וכיון שנסתלקו ענני כבוד ראו ישראל שנולדו במדבר החמה והלבנה ברקיע ורצו להשתחוות להם לפי שמעולם לא ראו ולא ידעו חמה ולבנה לפי שכל ימיהם במדבר לא היה להם לא שמש ולא לבנה כ”א ענני כבוד שנאמר כי ענן ה’ עליהם יומם ואש תהיה לילה בו נמצא כי הענן היה מקיף אותם כל ימי היותם במדבר. וכיום שראה הקב”ה שרצו להשתחוות לשמש ולירח אמר להם וכי לא אמרתי לכם בתורת י וכן תשא עיניך השמימה וראית את השמש ואת הירח ואת הכוכבים ונדחת והשתחווית להם ועבדתם וגוי.

נשלם מדרש פטירת אהרן

And when the Clouds of Glory disappeared,²¹⁹ Israel, who was born in the wilderness, saw²²⁰ the

218 The midrash jumps to another verse in Isaiah that speaks directly to Aaron. The previous verse (Is 57:1) says that the righteous one perishes (הצדיק אבד). Aaron has been referred to as a righteous one. Then it continues with “He enters in peace” (יבוא שלום): This is Aaron who brought peace to Israel in many ways (see note 133). “They rest in their beds” refers to Aaron on the bier. The final part of the verse brings hope. “He walks upright” indicates that Aaron’s death will not be permanent. Eventual resurrection is implied. Aaron’s death is not final.

Other traditions hold on to that sense of resurrection, as well. A Muslim legend includes a brief resurrection of Aaron for the purposes of communicating with the people (see note 207) The Falasha version of this midrash ends with a declaration of resurrection from the dead: “Blessed is YHVH, our God, who revives those who lie in the dust of the earth. You are the one who chose our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and saved Moses, Aaron, Eleazar and Pinchas” (p. 60).

219 This final portion of the midrash examines Aaron’s death from the perspective of how it affects Israel and ties it to the beginning of the midrash. Aaron’s gift, the Clouds of Glory (see section A.2), which were gifted to Israel due to his merit, do not remain. Israel is bereft of Aaron and the Clouds of Glory which he brought to them.

220 The sense of sight, which throughout the midrash has indicated seeking understanding and looking beyond the material world, here is revered. Israel saw (ראו) the sun and moon, which had been hidden from them by divine means, and are led astray.

sun and moon²²¹ in the firmament in the wilderness. They wanted to bow down to them,²²² for they had never seen (such a thing) because all their days in the wilderness they never saw the sun or moon, but only the pillars of glory,²²³ as it is said, “The pillar of YHVH was with them by day and fire by night [in the sight of the whole house of Israel throughout all their journeys]” (Ex 40:38). It was found that the cloud would encircle them all the days that they were in the wilderness.²²⁴ When the Holy One saw that they wanted to bow down to the sun and the moon.²²⁵ He said to them, “Didn't I say to you in my Torah, 'Lest you lift your eyes to the heavens and see the sun and the moon and the stars, you will be attracted and worship them and serve them (Deut 4:19).’”²²⁶

221 The language of birth (שִׁנּוּלָדוּ) is peculiar here and stands in contrast to the death that has pervaded the narrative. Aaron's death brings the birth of a danger, in the form of astral objects that can be worshipped, to the people. Like birth and death representing the poles of life, the pairing of the sun and the moon represents the polarity of time, day and night, and the cycle of passing time, also significant, given the focus on death. And the sun and moon represent a constancy that shows just how temporary Aaron's life has been.

The sun and moon not only represent idol worship and time passing in this narrative, they are a strong reminder of the opening passage of this midrash, which began with the deaths of the three shepherds in one month. Hebrew months are reckoned by the moon, so the mention of the moon creates an association with the midrash about the deaths of the three shepherds. To conclude, the midrash returns to its beginning. Here, the association is conceptual, not linguistic: the word used for moon (לִבְנָה) does not match the word used for month (יָרַח) in the opening section. (See section A.1)

222 Another example of Israel's idolatry. Moses previously brought up the incident of the golden calf (see note 184) and then prayed that God show Aaron's bier so that the people not make him a God (see section C.16). The people used Aaron to lead them astray before and now they will allow his death and absence to open them to idolatry once again.

223 The Clouds of Glory, and thus Aaron's influence, were so great that the people had never seen the sun and the moon. The impact of Aaron's death on the people is massive and constant. The very sun and stars remind them of what they have lost.

224 The constancy of the cloud represents the constancy of Aaron's presence for the people. His absence, like the absence of the clouds, leaves the people disoriented and vulnerable, not only to grief but to idolatry, just as Moses' absence lead to the need to build the golden calf (Ex 32:1).

225 The word used for moon (יָרַח) matches the word used for month (יָרַח) in section A. This connects explicitly the first and last sections of this midrash and serves to conclude this narrative where it began, with a meditation of the effect of the death of an important person. In the first section, the deaths of the shepherds led merely to the loss of their gifts (see section A.2). At the end of the narrative, an even more dangerous effect of the death is evident. The vacuum of Aaron's leadership leaves the people vulnerable to idol worship. Immediately after Aaron's death, they go astray.

226 The midrash ends in a difficult place. In their grief, the people have transgressed God's commandment not to worship the sun and moon. During his life, Aaron represented proper worship of God as the High Priest, except

The Midrash on the Death of Aaron is completed.

for the incident with the golden calf but even then designated the festival in God's name (חג ליהוה) [Ex 32:5]. The impact of Aaron's death has been substantial and negative, and the narrative leaves us feeling his absence. There is no ameliorating the effects of the death and no comfort that comes to the reader experiencing the loss of leadership. Rather, the midrash treats the loss as raw and unresolved, in a literary sense, paralleling the feelings of Israel. Even the Holy One, who must watch the spectacle of the people bowing down to the sun and moon, is pained by Aaron's absence. Grief over Aaron's death has moved from Moses, to the people, and finally to God.

APPENDIX A

The Literary Artistry of *Petirat Aharon*: *A Structural, Thematic Analysis*

Focusing primarily on the death of Aaron, *Petirat Aharon*, a minor midrash, details God's decree of Aaron's death and Moses' role in carrying it out, but also includes a substantial section on the Waters of Meribah incident. In addition, other traditions – the death of the three shepherds and the loss of the Clouds of Glory, for example – have a role in the midrash. While material on the death of Aaron is common and parallels can be found in Josephus, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, many midrashic accounts, as well as outside sources from the Muslim and Falasha worlds, *Petirat Aharon* provides the most complete and the most sublime account of Aaron's death. The diverse material included is incorporated in a holistic way to serve the theme of examining the death of the righteous. While collections such as *Yalkut Shimoni* may include more material, the editorial hand in *Petirat Aharon* creates a new, integrated narrative out of many older, fragmented traditions that speaks to human questions and feelings about death and the experience of loss. *Petirat Aharon* is not only the most literary version of Aaron's death, but is also the most resonant of the way death affects not only the righteous, but all of us.

I. *Literary Unity*

Petirat Aharon is composed of five different midrashic traditions, some also containing component parts. The first, The Three Shepherds, is an examination of the deaths of Miriam, Aaron and Moses, in one month along with the concrete losses Israel suffered as a result of their deaths: the well, the Clouds of Glory, and the manna. The second main midrashic section, Miriam's Death and the

Disappearance of the Well, concerns the difficult aftermath of Miriam's death. Moses and Aaron weep while the people are without water. The people even threaten to stone Moses. Moses looks to produce water from the stone but his insecurities and inabilities prevent him from doing so. Instead, God brings water from the rock and Moses, hitting the rock, changes it to blood. After a brief discussion between God, the rock, and Moses, Moses is chastised and God returns the blood to water. This section contains unique elements, such as the conversation with the stone, but coheres as a unit because of the focus on the loss and return of water to the people. Aaron is conspicuously absent from this section. The third and central section of the narrative, Aaron's Death, concerns all matters leading up to and including Aaron's death: the announcements, Moses' grief, the process of bringing Aaron to the mountain, the removal of Aaron's garments and Eleazar inheriting them, entering the cave and dying by a kiss, the people's lack of acceptance and grief, and viewing Aaron on his bier. This section is large and contains component elements (e.g., Aaron's death is announced twice, once in B.1 and again in B.3), yet it serves as an integral narrative covering the elements related specifically to the process of Aaron's death. The final two sections, Beat on Your Breasts and the Loss of the Clouds of Glory, are each unique units, covering the people's grief for Aaron and Moses, and the loss experienced as a result of Aaron's death and its effect on the people.

The compiler of *Petirat Aharon* drew from many sources and combined diverse midrashim into this narrative. Yet, it is not a patchwork of tradition, but instead a unified, literary whole that speaks to the specific incident of Aaron's death, as well as to larger human questions about grief and loss. This integrity is accomplished by several literary devices, along with a sophisticated understanding of the human experience of grief. The three main elements tying these separate midrashim together are the structure of the narrative, repetition of specific, significant verbal elements, and the close attention paid to the

experience of grief throughout. These three devices erase the divisions between the different midrashim and create a unified, meaningful story.

2. *Structural Elements*

A. Death of the Three Shepherds in One Month (Section A)

- Month/moon (*yareah*; ירח)
- loss of the well leaves the people vulnerable

B. Miriam's Death Experienced (Section B)

- The people are without water and suffer; they challenge Moses (B.1-2)
- Moses experiences a lack of ability and vulnerability (B.3-9)

C. Aaron's Death (Section C)

- Announcement and decree of death by God (C.1, 3)
 - Moses reluctant to reveal death to Aaron (C.4-6)
 - Procession out of camp (C.7-8)
 - the cave, garments and death (C.10-15)
 - Moses and Eleazar descend to camp (C.16)
 - Moses reveals Aaron's death, threats to Moses (C.16)
- God reveals Aaron's death by showing his bier (C.17)

B'. Aaron's Death Experienced and Accepted (C.16 – Section D)

- The people challenge Moses (C.16)
- The people mourn for thirty days and suffer (C.16)
- Beat your breasts; mourning what they have lost (D)

A'. Loss of the Clouds of Glory (Section E)

- the people are vulnerable
- they follow the sun and moon (*yareah*; ירח)

This midrash utilizing various sources has been organized into a chiasmic structure that has the experience of Aaron's death at its center and makes the diverse midrashic sources speak to each other.

Petirat Aharon is framed by the midrash on the loss of the shepherds (section A & A'), which shows the

tangible loss that can come from death and which leaves people vulnerable. Both the first and last sections of the midrash use the word moon (*yareah*; יָרֵחַ). In the initial section, it is used to explore the time frame for death and memory. In the closing section, the moon, along with the sun, is revealed to Israel after the death of Aaron and the loss of the Clouds of Glory, as specified in the first section. The moon, here, brings to mind cycles and time, but mainly serves to highlight the very different view of the people now that they are bereft following the death of their leader. As well, the moon, while an organizing factor in the initial section, contrastingly serves as a sign of disorder and disbelief at the end of the midrash. The envelopment of this narrative by traditions dealing with the moon and loss provides a larger frame for understanding death, one that is conditioned by time and cycles and, in the end, the danger that accompanies loss.

The next level in the chiasmic structure (sections B & B') deals with particular loss and its accompanying mourning. The section on the loss of the well shows that Miriam's death has significant ramifications for Aaron and Moses individually, as well as for the community as a whole. Moses's uncertainty and incapacity is revealed in stark ways and there is strife with the people. This section is long and contains great detail. At the section at the end, the people mourn Aaron and the midrash on mourning practice, beating your breasts, symbolizes Aaron and Moses, who literally suckle the people like a woman. It is parallel to the Miriam section, though not as rich. Still, this layer of the structure focuses on the mourning for two significant individuals in a communal setting.

The center section (C) provides the core of this midrash, the particular details of the death of Aaron. Even this center section of the midrash has chiasmic elements. The progression follows God's announcement of the death of Aaron, Moses' reluctance and lack of understanding of how to reveal the information to his brother and his reluctance to do so, and then their progression out of camp. The

narrative then focuses on the moments before and in the cave when Moses removes Aaron's garments and explains the death which then occurs. The opening elements are mirrored in the rest of that section. Moses and Eleazar process back to camp. Moses reveals the death to Eleazar and the people, which leaves him vulnerable. Finally, God reveals Aaron's death by floating his bier over the people. The elements of God's revelation, human announcement of death, and movement in and out of camp frame the death scene at the heart of the narrative.

The overall chiasmic structure evidences the care with which the midrash was assembled. The elements are skillfully arranged so that disparate elements, such as the deaths of the three shepherd's and the people's idolatry at the end, inform and support each other. The overall structure creates a form in which less personal accounts of death, such as the three shepherds or a distant account of the people's idolatry, and accounts of mourning for Miriam and Aaron and Moses (Beat Your Breasts), frame the more intimate details about every step in the death of Aaron. The most poignant moments live at the center of the narrative and they are underscored by other accounts of death. This careful cradling of the experience of death and enclosing it in layers related to more communal experience of death and mourning creates a progression into and out of the experience of death and mourning.

3. *Linguistic Elements*

In addition to using structure to tie different midrashic traditions together, our midrash uses a number of specific verbal elements to link the sections of the narrative and to carry certain themes throughout. These verbal elements – the question of “how long?” (עַד מַתִּי), the verbal pair “to go forth” (יָצָא) and “to enter” (בָּרַח), and the verb “to see” (רָאָה) – are used in varying sections and their repetition

provides the narrative with verbal continuity. Their use, however, does not simply create an effect of verbal conformity; the themes expressed by each word carry over from one section of the narrative to another, creating a rich, thematic continuity, as well.

The question “how long?” (*ad matay*; עַד מַתַּי) echoes throughout the sections of this midrash. (sections B & C). More than a plea for information, it is a show of impatience, even anger, an accusation and an indication of the difficulty created by a lack of knowledge about the future. Just as soon as death appears in the midrash, Israel interrupts Moses' mourning for his sister (see section B.1) with this question: How long are you going to sit and weep? The people disrupt his individual grief with this accusation because they are suffering the loss of water brought on by memories of death. They want Moses' attention; they need the comfort of their leader, as they suffer the consequence of her death. They do not know how long it will take Moses to help them. Moses, reeling from their accusation, seeks comfort from God who hurls the same question words at him (see section B.3): How long are you going to slander my children? God expresses impatience and raises a question about Moses' behavior in the future. Even when Moses seeks water from stone, in his insecure manner, Israel hurls this question at him again (see section B.4). They query “How long are you going to drag us along?” Their frustration and anxiety at having no water meets with Moses' indecision and they are insecure about the future. Moses, then, responds to them using the same question words (see section B.5): “How long will you complain?” His anger spills back at them. The use of this word by Moses indicates a full-fledged quarrel between Moses and the people based on their not-knowing the future, but wishing for a particular outcome.

This question is only asked once in the section on Aaron's death (section C). Still, that use creates

a connection between these two sections. Aaron, having repeatedly asked Moses what the Holy One told him in confidence, finally allows his frustration to spill over. He both asks for information and accuses Moses when he finally asks, “How long will you hide from me the matter which the Holy One told you?” His question indicates a breach in the brotherly relationship, but it also shows the depth of this question, “how long,” and its significance in this narrative. “How long” is a temporal question. While Aaron asks how long until he is given the news, the question, once he receives the announcement of his death, will be, “How long will I live?” This question of time is made explicit in *Yalkut Shimoni* I (764) and the *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* (XLIX.3) when the years and days are counted down (see note 142). In *Petirat Aharon*, the question of length of life is not asked explicitly, but the midrash does focus on the very question of mortality. In this midrash exploring death and grief, the use of the question “how long” unites the narrative and highlights conflict, but also points the reader to the central question of human life.

Another verbal element that unites the larger narrative sections (B & C) is a verbal pair consisting of “to go forth” (*yatsa*; יָצָא) and “to enter” (*nikhnas*; נִכְנַס). These verbs signify movement, but in this midrash the movement does not simply indicate “leaving” or “going in.” These verbs convey transition, from one domain to another and from one state to another. The first few usages concern Moses in his struggle to provide water to the people and to retain his leadership. Moses does not simply enter the Tent of Meeting (B.3), he wants to escape the people and the realm of the mundane and go somewhere he could find God. Likewise, the narrative notes that Moses brought the people out (*hotzeitanu*; הוֹצִיאָתָנוּ the *hiphil* form of the verb) of Egypt (B.2), a change of venue, but also an ascension in holiness, from slavery to relationship with YHVH. Moses worries about not being able to bring fresh water forth (again using the *hiphil*) from the stone (B.6). This also indicates a state transformation. Moses’ thoughts about water coming miraculously out of a stone show his state, worried, and even embarrassed, if he doesn’t

succeed. Finally, the stone does bring forth water (B.7 & 8), which Moses was unable to bring forth (or transform) on his own. An inert object is transformed into an object of salvation. The use of these terms in section B presents an element of holiness or divinity conveyed by these movements and transitions.

In section C, these verbs occur frequently with Aaron as the subject. They become more personal as the narrative moves towards Aaron's death. As before, the going forth and entering are not only directional, but indicate transformations of state and movement towards what is holy. Moving closer to death, Aaron goes forth from his own tent (C.8), his own personal area, to outside of camp. The root “to go forth” (*yatsa*, יָצָא) occurs three times in this short narrative section. Unlike Moses who entered the Tent of Meeting to talk with God (B.3), Aaron does not visit this earthly area where he has served God. Instead, Moses urges him on towards Har HaHor, the designated site of his death. Only when Aaron has completed his journey of going forth, of leaving his personal realm and going outside of camp, does he have the opportunity to change directions and enter. At the climax of the narrative (see section 2. *Structural Elements*), Moses encourages Aaron to enter the cave, though not wearing the priestly garments (C.10). This is the transition from leaving the earthly realm to entering a mystical, holy realm. In total, the root “to enter” (יָבִיחַ) is used three times in this section. Finally (C.12), these two verbs are used consecutively, signaling Aaron's transition from the earthly to the holy realm and from life to death. Moses says to Eleazar, “Wait for us here until we come out:” a deceptive, though aspirational, statement indicating what can not be. Then, the midrash tells us, “They entered” to find a setting arranged for death with the ministering angels present. While in the cave, Aaron crosses over to death. Moses alone leaves (C.15), which frames the episode and tells the story. Two plural verbs get Aaron into the cave, a singular verb tells of Moses emerging, transformed, although differently from Aaron, by the experience of death. These verbs tell of not simply personal movement, but movement within realms, physical, psychological

and spiritual. Their use *vis a vis* both Moses and Aaron enriches our understanding of their journeys towards death and grief, both from a spacial, as well as an internal psychological perspective.

In addition to demonstrating the overall trajectory of the story and thematically linking different sections, these verbs are deployed in individual sections to create a chiasmic structure and emphasize the theme of that small narrative piece. In section C.10, for example, these verbs are deployed four times at the moment that the cave appears and Aaron must enter to find his destiny. Their arrangement tells the larger story. The first use is an imperative: Moses tells Aaron to enter (*hikanas*; הכנס) what he desperately hopes Aaron will do willingly. With the next use of the verb, Moses speaks about the cave “we are entering” (*sheanu nikhnasim*; שאנו נכנסים). This use of the plural, present tense shows Moses' desire to be with his brother and for Aaron not to feel alone. The third instance of the verb “to enter” is used as a *hiphil* infinitive (*l'hakhnis*; להכניס) meaning “to bring in.” Moses convinces his brother to relinquish his priestly garments by telling him that it isn't fitting to bring them into the cave. This could also be a reminder to Moses that it isn't fitting for him to forcibly bring his brother to his die. Moses cannot bring him into the cave to death. Aaron must enter on his own. The last usage a key word switches from entering to exiting. Moses tells Aaron that Eleazar will wait “until we come out” (*ad shenetse*; עד שנצא). The use of these verbs progresses from command, to accompaniment, to the idea of causing something to enter, to the wishful idea of return that shows Moses' thought process in this significant moment. The verbs can also be seen as being arranged in a structure that intensifies meaning.

A. Enter!

B. We are entering

A'.. Don't bring in

B'. We will come out

Commands and suggestions from Moses in A and A' are set against the “we” statements from Moses, one true and one wishful. The verbs indicate that Moses is both leader and participant in these events. He must carry out God's command, but also wants to be with his brother and wants his brother to live. The alternation of these verbal forms shows that he is torn. Even in this small section of the larger midrash, the verbs “to enter” and “to go forth” are artfully arranged to move the narrative and to show Moses' internal state. The use of these *leit motifs* is not limited to making connections among the larger narratives. Even in small sections, their deployment and arrangement advance the theme and speak to the artistry of *Petirat Aharon*.

Another frequently repeated verb, “to see” (*ra'ah*; רָאָה) captures an additional, important element of the narrative, the need for understanding on both an external, visceral, but also an internal and deeper level. When this verb is used, it relates to insight as well as to actual sight. It indicates a desire to gain a deeper understanding about matters beyond human understanding. At the beginning of the narrative, the use of the verb indicates a desire but a lack of capacity to truly grasp the matter at hand. When Moses “sees” the well without a drop of water (B.2), he feels the consequences of Miriam's death more acutely, but he gains no insight into what to do about the lack of water. When the people see water first dripping from the rock (B.4) they believe that they have found a miracle, their salvation through water. Their perception is incorrect. Their salvation requires God to bring forth water, but it will not happen for a while. They see and want to believe, but they lack true awareness. When the people see Aaron in the center of the procession, they believe he has been elevated to his rightful place (C.7). They are unable to see that he is on his way to his death. Sometimes the seeing involves understanding on both the human and divine planes. Moses sees that Aaron doesn't comprehend the allegory of the candle (C.9). This perception of what is happening on the human level points out Aaron's lack of comprehension that

God has decreed his own death. In these matters, apprehending something merely on a visual level shows lack of understanding on deeper, spiritual levels.

Once the narrative has progressed, deeper understanding occurs, also using the verb “to see” (*ra'ah*; רָאָה). Aaron and Moses see the cave with its made funeral bed, set table, and ministering angels (C.12). What they perceive is nothing short of divine. They fully grasp a place in which God has made a funeral bier and allowed angels to stand around the menorah, a symbol of Aaron’s status as High Priest. This “seeing” at the mouth of the cave begins Aaron’s understanding of his fate. He immediately asks Moses what secret he is holding and states that he can accept it “even if it is a matter of my death (C.13). This “seeing” represents the turning point of the narrative. From this point forward, Aaron understands and cooperates in his death. After Aaron’s death, “Eleazar saw Moses but didn’t see his father” (C.16). The understanding of death is extended to Aaron’s son and then to the people. The desire to comprehend death, and the trouble with doing so, are illustrated by Israel’s response to Aaron’s absence. The people are in disbelief about what happened. They literally need to see in order to believe. They threaten Moses that they will not let him leave until he shows (in the *hiphil*, *tareh*; תִּרְאֶה) them Aaron, dead or alive (C.16). With God’s help, Israel finally sees Aaron on his bier, even flying away on the air (C.17). This indicates that they understand and can accept and mourn Aaron’s fate.

While the general trajectory of the use of the verb “to see” (*ra'ah*; רָאָה) in the narrative is towards greater comprehension of matters that are in some way beyond human capacity, the ending takes a different turn. This sense of sight, of understanding that has developed, fails the people in the end as they deal with their grief. With the Clouds of Glory gone in the wake of Aaron’s death, the people see, for the first time, the sun and the moon (E). They are lead astray by their sight of something new. Once they lay

eyes on the celestial bodies, they want to bow down to them and their sight does not lead them to a deeper understanding but to incorrect practice. Far from perceiving spiritual matters as they had before, they are deceived by their lack of insight. Their visual sense is not sufficient to guide them through their grief. It raises the question of what elements enable the people to see clearly. It seems that all along Aaron lead the people to greater comprehension. His absence, virtual or actual, from the narrative is associated with a deterioration of their ability to truly understand. Their leader, Aaron even more than Moses, is the one who gifts them with insight.

Generally, the three verbal elements, “how long,” “going out/entering,” and “to see” operate independently in the narrative. Each is woven throughout the main narrative by the compiler to create connection and continuity among the major narrative sections, though each element operates independently. However, at a crucial point of the narrative, the three significant verbs are interwoven. As Moses, Aaron and Eleazar stand outside the cave, which has just appeared, Moses tells Eleazar that they (he and Aaron) will **come back out**, then they (Aaron and Moses) **enter** and **see** (נִצַּא נִכְנְסוּ וַרְאוּ). The first verb, “**to go out**,” indicates transition. Aaron has gone forth from all the places of his life. In this instance, however, the verb is in the future tense and indicates Moses' wish that Aaron not die and that they will both exit the cave. Directly thereafter, Aaron and Moses **entered** the cave, indicated by the past tense). This is the point of transition. Aaron has begun the process of entering, of returning, that the narrative demands. Immediately, he **saw** the divine elements of the cave and began to understand and prepare for his death. This use of the three significant verbs one after the other tells the story of leaving and transformation, entering and return, and sight and understanding at the heart of this story. This masterful use of these devices demonstrates the literary creativity with which this narrative was crafted and the significance of these verbal elements in telling the story.

Even words that are not significant to the overall narrative are deployed artfully to further theme and plot development. An example of this is the use of the root “to weep” (ב כ ה) in section B.1, arranged in chiastic structure.

A. Moses and Aaron were weeping (bokhim; בוכים) over Miriam

B. The people ask Moses how long he will weep (u'vockeh; ובוכה)

B'. Moses asks, “Should I not weep?” (evkeh; אבכה)

A'. The people tell Moses to “weep for all of us” (bokheh; בוכה)

Moses' weeping begins as raw grief shared with his brother. It is familial. The two uses in sections B and B' concern Moses alone and whether and how long he should weep. The final use (A'.) broadens Moses' grief to include the entire people. Through the use of the chiastic structure, the editor moves Moses' grief from private, to personal, to concerning the whole community. The linguistic artistry is evident in elements that run throughout the narrative, as well as in individual sections.

4. *Thematic Elements*

Even more than the literary elements that enrich *Petirat Aharon*, the thematic treatment of death, loss, and grief represents the strongest unifying theme of the narrative. Each section maintains a focus on loss and, taken together, the narrative demonstrates a profound understanding of human grief and responses to death. While *Petirat Aharon* presents itself as concerning only the death of Aaron, in fact it evidences concern about death in general and about those who survive a loss. It is a deeply realistic exploration of the human experience of mortality that invites the reader to examine and experience grief along with Moses and the people in the narrative.

The midrash is centered around philosophical concerns. The larger question asked by the narrative is why the righteous and beloved die. Aaron, throughout the narrative, is portrayed as blameless. He has no hand in the debacle at the Waters of Meribah (Section B) that brings the death sentence on him and on Moses. While Moses shoulders the wrong-doing in this narrative, Aaron is the one who must die. No reason for his death is stated in the midrash, nor in the events of Numbers 20:2-12. Thus, the narrative begs the question: why should Aaron, a righteous and beloved individual, die?

The narrative also explores death from a universal standpoint. With the allegory of the candle (C.9), Moses communicates a general truth: “The light of YHVH is the soul of man.” There is a divine light in each human and it can be snuffed out at the time of the Creator's choosing. In this way, the narrative makes real everyone's mortality. While Aaron's death might be exceptional (“Your death isn't like that of an ordinary mortal” C.13), he shares the basic fact of mortality with every human soul.²²⁷ The cave in which Aaron dies (C.15) provides another universal, philosophical truth about death. After Aaron's death, the cave disappeared and “there wasn't a creature that was created in the world who knew about it or was able to understand it.” While the midrash explores death, there is an admission that, ultimately, the understanding of death is kept hidden from all humans. It is far away and beyond us. We can only hope for divinely-given glimpses of understanding, such as the people receive when God makes Aaron's bier visible (C. 17). Unaided human understanding of the entirety of death, however, is futile.

Petirat Aharon, while acknowledging that death can not be entirely comprehended, nonetheless explores death from multiple perspectives. It begins with the deaths of the three shepherds (section A), a

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The Falasha version of this legend enhances the sense of Aaron's death as universal. He is said to receive the writ of Adam and then to grasp the cup of death (p. 33-7), which Adam first held. In addition, in this version, Aaron dies naked (p. 51-2), is taken by the Angel of Death (p. 58), and is buried (p. 59). There is no mysterious cave or treatment from God, even though God weeps at his death. Aaron dies an ordinary death and experiences what every human inherits, his own mortality.

report of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and the gifts they brought the people which will necessarily disappear when they die. While not personal in any way, this account prepares readers for the entirety of narrative. Immediately, the narrative presents the death of Miriam and her brothers and the people experience her loss and its accompanying impact (section B). The narrative moves on to the next shepherd, Aaron, and narrates the process of his death with all the grief, confusion and loss it brings (section C). Even before Moses is informed of Aaron's impending death, however, he is also told of his own mortality (C.1). The Holy One tells him bluntly: "Your time has come." Moses pleads for more time and becomes "distressed everyday" because of the uncertainty surrounding his death. Later, Moses wishes he could experience a death like Aaron's (C.15) Thus, Moses' impending death hangs over the midrash even though it is not narrated. In the end, the analogy of Aaron and Moses as the two breasts (D) treats their deaths together and looks at the impact of their lives and the mourning required. It even hints at possible resurrection, a hope of the living surrounding death. The final section returns to the terrible consequences of death and loss. While the first and penultimate sections take a more generalized look at death, the narrative core and the final section closely examine death in most human terms. Furthermore, those sections present a progression related to death, from deaths in the past, to death experienced in the present moment, to apprehension of death to come: the entire spectrum of death experiences.

While this midrash presents a philosophical treatment of death and treats multiple stages of death, its greatest strength is in its honest and authentic examination of the lived experience of grief and loss. While it purports to be about a specific death, the death of Aaron, it demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how losses affect us all on a human level. Death, and dealing with the loss of a loved one, is a universal experience that evokes many responses. *Petirat Aharon* examines these responses in an intimate and sensitive way.

The midrash surely concerns itself with grief on a personal level. Moses, whom the midrash has taken great pains to make more human in the service of elevating Aaron (section B), provides an example of many individual responses to loss, from sadness, to anger, and then to acceptance. He has to experience grief for his sister, accompany his brother to his death, and worry about his own mortality. When Moses first appears in the narrative, he is heartbroken over Miriam's death. The verb “to weep” (בָּכָה) is used four times in this short section, three times with Moses as the subject (B.1) He weeps for his sister and is then invited to weep for all of Israel. His weeping is the first and central experience of grief. Later in that section, Moses' attempt to get water from the rock demonstrates his grief in other ways: anger, uncertainty, and decreased performance. Moses' rage, self-doubt and inability to fulfill his leadership role show how grief pervades his life. His entire life is affected by his heartbreak.

When Moses is faced with Aaron's mortality, his response continues to be powerfully human. He doesn't know how to tell his brother about his death and doesn't want to be the bearer of the news (C.4). People have such difficulty discussing mortality. Moses is no different. He dreads the difficult conversation with his brother. God understands his hesitation and urges Moses to “say to him sweet and pleasant words” (C.5). In other words, the midrash underscores the need for care and comfort in approaching such a delicate subject. Even with God's advice, Moses procrastinates (C.7). Ultimately, Aaron has to give him permission to bring up the subject of his death (C.13). In carrying out the steps leading to Aaron's death, Moses' emotions get the better of him, as they often do in acute grief. He is enraged, confused and weeps until he nearly dies (C.6). He can't sleep and cries until dawn (C.7) Then he organizes a procession to honor his brother (C.7) and begins the difficult journey to the place of Aaron's death. Along the way, he evidences concern that Aaron will be taken care of, even in death. He mentions

that it will not be an ordinary death, which means that it will not be carried out by the angel of death (C.13). He wants Aaron not to experience fear or pain in dying. He also takes care to mention the ministering angels, who will accompany Aaron in death. Moses comforts both Aaron and himself with these words. The thought of a painful or lonely death discomforts people. By the time of Aaron's moment of death, Moses appears to reach a place of either numbness or acceptance. He does not demonstrably react once Aaron has died (C.15-6.).

While Moses is the primary example for showing the range of individual grief, he is not the only individual who experiences grief in the narrative. The midrash even provides us a window into Aaron's state of mind as he dies. Aaron expresses disappointment when he finally finds out his fate. He wishes Moses had revealed it in front of his mother, wife and sons (C.14). Family is often foremost in the minds of those who are dying. Family is Aaron's primary concern. While *Petirat Aharon* specifically keeps its focus on the human experience of death, it allows the reader to peek beyond the human realm. God, while decreeing Aaron's death to Aaron admits that "it is difficult for me to do" (C.3). Even God feels the effects of death. The potent effects of the loss of a loved one occur on the human level, but the midrash suggests this grief is even mirrored on the divine level, as well.

The midrash also explores human reactions to our finite lifespan. Moses is told of his own mortality relatively early (C.1). He exhibits another common response, denial; he simply does not want to know and puts off these thoughts. When he experiences Aaron's death, he knows that he would like to dies in a similar manner (C.15). He wistfully states his desire that, at his death, he be accompanied by his brother and have sons to inherit his position. This breakthrough in his thoughts about his own mortality serves as a reminder that, for most of the narrative, he denies the fact of his own death. Like nearly all

people, Moses is content to deny what he knows to be true: his death is certain.

Petirat Aharon presents a sense of communal grief alongside individual mourning. Israel stands as a paradigm of collective grief. The Israelites grieve Miriam's death, but out of self-interest. When her death puts them in peril, they interrupt Moses and Aaron's grief for their sister, angry and concerned that Miriam's death means the loss of water and they demand action (B.1). The people again react in their own particular way after Aaron's death. When Moses returns from Har HaHor (C.16), Israel wastes no time in reacting with disbelief and suspicion. They had thought Aaron was elevated. Now they must process the surprising news of his death. They don't want to believe that he is gone. They need to see it to believe it. If he is dead, they want someone to blame. They are not initially capable of accepting that Aaron died simply because that is the way of the world. Once they receive divine help to make the death real to them, they revert to weeping for thirty days, a more common and accepted way of expressing grief. Their loss, however, also leads them astray. In the void that Aaron's death leaves, they fall prey to idol worship (E). While both Moses and the people experience many feelings and reactions as they face death, they are unable to do so together. The grief of the people, their anger, worry and sadness conflicts with Moses' experiences of personal grief. This rich exploration of grief shows the struggle between what the individual feels and how collective grief is expressed.

While the midrash investigates human response to painful loss, it provides little comfort and consolation. In the case of Miriam's death, God restores the water (B.9) so that the people will live, but Moses' grief is not resolved. In Aaron's death, certain factors convey comfort. Aaron is accompanied by his brother, his role is bequeathed to his son, he does not die like an ordinary mortal and ministering angels accompany him (C.13). Aaron does not die in pain, he is not alone, and continuity is assured. The

people come to understand Aaron's death (C.16). Still, however, Aaron is gone and there is little that can be done. The narrative does not resolve the pain of loss and its effect. Instead, a void is left. Moses has been haunted by his own mortality and the people seek whatever can provide them some interim comfort, the sun and the moon (E). While this underscores Aaron's significance in their lives, it also demonstrates their desperation in the moment. In this midrash, suffering and anguish is palatable in recognizable, human ways; comfort, even with God present in the narrative, is elusive. This midrash keeps the focus on the ways we experience grief and knows that achieving consolation is neither quick nor easy.

Petirat Aharon delves deeply into the experience of transformation and death through its plot, structure, verbal elements, and themes. While it is about the journey of a particular and righteous man, it speaks to the transitions, grief and mortality that each of us must face. The word that identifies the midrash, *petirah* (from the root פ ט ר) means exempting, freeing, dismissing or letting go. It is a verb of process and transformation and that is just what the literary artistry of this midrash shows us. Aaron is freed from his mortality, but he must let go. Moses and Israel must also let go and accept grief in the place of their beloved Aaron. The journey through Miriam's and Aaron's deaths to an uncertain ending shows that mortality and change are key elements of life, for every single human being, even the righteous.

APPENDIX B

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