



RABBINIC PERCEPTIONS OF AARON

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Dedicated To The Memory of My Father-In-Law

**MILTON LOEMAN**

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To Carol, for her love, support and understanding.

To Rabbi Edward Goldman, my teacher, who made this a rewarding learning experience with his sound guidance and deep concern.

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## DIGEST

Aaron, known primarily as Moses' older brother, is seen in the Bible to have a role that is clearly subordinate to the role of Moses. And yet, Aaron too spoke with God, Aaron too played an important role in Israel's redemption from Egypt, Aaron too was a unique individual with emotions and feelings, not merely Moses' mouthpiece and servant.

This study, in collecting midrashim about Aaron, attempts to determine more about the life of this national hero and how the rabbis viewed him. By providing material unavailable in the biblical narrative, the midrash enables us to better understand Aaron's personality, emotions, goals, background as well as the pressures under which he labored. Through the medium of this creative literature, the rabbis provide Aaron with an opportunity to explain himself and justify his actions. Consequently, the rabbis successfully transform Aaron into a figure with whom all of us can identify. Aaron becomes the paradigm of the imperfect human striving to fulfill the will of his God. He frequently fails those close to him, yet provides the receptive Jew of every age with an example of resolve to do better in the future.

Chapter One of this study deals with Aaron's life while growing up under the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh. Chapter Two deals with Aaron's call to become a redeemer of the Israelites and the nature of the divine communications from God. Chapter Three describes the

encounter with Pharaoh by Aaron and Moses and the great effort required to release the Hebrew people from bondage. Chapter Four discusses Aaron's involvement in the building of the Golden Calf while Chapter Five describes Aaron's elevation to the position of High Priest and the duties required of him while serving in that sacred office. Chapter Six relates the events that brought about the death of Aaron's two sons at the altar of God and Chapter Seven describes the nature of the slander spoken by Aaron and Miriam against their brother Moses. Chapter Eight relates the attempt by Korah and his band to secure the priesthood for themselves and the drastic actions taken by God, Moses and Aaron to combat this revolt. Chapter Nine deals with the sentencing of Aaron and Moses after they failed to do God's will at the Waters of Meribah. Chapter Ten describes the relationship that existed between Aaron and Moses while Chapter Eleven concentrates on Aaron's personality. Finally, Chapter Twelve relates Aaron's death and the great sense of loss experienced by the people of Israel.

## INTRODUCTION

Relatively little is known about the personality of Aaron, the high priest of Israel who throughout his lifetime was overshadowed by his younger but more famous brother Moses. And yet the reader of the Bible cannot fail to see that Aaron was privy to divine communication, that Aaron played an important role in Israel's redemption from Egypt, that Aaron was a unique individual with emotions and feelings.

Building on the material found in the biblical narratives, the study will collect and analyze the various midrashim about Aaron, material which will surely shed new light on the importance of this controversial biblical personality. After locating the material through cross references and subject verse indices, the author categorized the midrashim according to certain events in Aaron's life. In most instances the existing translations were utilized, but only after a careful examination. In some cases these translations were slightly altered and this is indicated through the use of brackets. A bracket may also indicate a point of clarification or explanation. Parentheses enclosing material in a particular midrash are those utilized by the author of the existing translation and they help to clarify the subject matter. When translations of material were unavailable, I composed my own translations.

Many texts, both early and late, dealing with the same subject material were available. The author selected the

midrashim that most effectively portrayed a complete picture of Aaron, without regard to the date of the text. The later texts were essentially the same as the earlier texts with regard to subject matter, but usually contained references to the Olam Haba, the World to Come.

The footnotes, listed at the conclusion of each chapter, not only cite the source of the midrashim used in the body of the text, but list places where parallels dealing with the same material may be found. In addition, the footnotes occasionally cite secondary material that is helpful in further understanding Aaron.

The rabbis, through their use of midrash, are certainly successful in portraying both the negative and positive aspects of Aaron's character, but their task is not so confined. Through the use of midrash the rabbis attempt to teach mankind precisely what God desires of him. Even more than the halacha, which often manifests itself in a set and dogmatic form, the midrash, because of the literary freedom and creativity available in this manner of expression, brings to mankind a new world view, that God is the end, the goal, the purpose of life.

And so Aaron becomes the paradigm, the model, the example of the imperfect mortal as he strives to satisfy his creator, participating in the never ending work of creation. Aaron is a tragic figure, a man continually faced with trying struggles and challenges. The midrash

captures the pain and terror that befalls this beleaguered leader as he and his brother attempt to guide a stiff-necked people through the difficult period of the wilderness. The midrash enables Aaron to justify his decisions and hence his experience provides later generations with answers to their own dilemmas.

Aaron is silent at the death of his two sons, he is silent when sentence is passed at the waters of Meribah, he can figuratively be seen defending himself, citing entrapment in the case of the Golden Calf and when he spoke against Moses with his sister Miriam. He is a victim of Korah's rebellious band in their quest for the reigns of leadership and is naive when confronted by thirsty Israelites. He is a simple man who almost single handedly brings upon Israel total destruction and doom and yet it is he who assumes the position of greatest sanctity, that of serving at God's altar.

Thus, Aaron's life serves as a model not only for Jews, but for all mankind. He is a man who is sincere in his service of God, yet because of the fact that he is human, he does err, he does not always do the right thing, he often questions when he should be obeying divine ordinances. But Aaron is a rational human and recognizes his weaknesses, and so he attempts to make amends for them. This man Aaron is the Jew in every age, the father, the husband, the brother, a man who does not understand the mysteries of the

universe, but realizes life to be a gift of God and consequently lives that life continually striving to meet the Source of All Life.

## Chapter One: GROWING UP IN EGYPT

The great Jewish prime minister of Egypt was dead and a "new king arose over Egypt,"<sup>1</sup> one who refused to acknowledge the miraculous deeds of the dynamic Joseph. Obsessed with the fertility rate of the Hebrews and their potential threat as a fifth column should war break out, the Egyptians "set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses."<sup>2</sup>

As time passed, bitter oppression clouded the memory of the weary Israelites and the spiritual teachings of the patriarchs grew fainter. Surrounded by idolatry and by the perverse fetish of animal worship, the Israelites abandoned their invisible God. The rabbis elaborate in commenting on the verse, "Now there arose a new king."<sup>3</sup>

The rabbis commenced this discourse with this verse: "They have dealt treacherously against the Lord, for they have begotten strange children; now shall the new moon devour them with their portions (Hosea 5:7)." This teaches that when Joseph died, they abolished the covenant of circumcision, saying: "Let us become like the Egyptians."<sup>4</sup>

The majority of Israelites, fatigued by great physical abuse, quickly adopted the religious and social customs of the Egyptians. However, one segment of the population, because of its superior knowledge was "regarded as the sacerdotal tribe."<sup>5</sup> This tribe, known as the tribe of Levi, "preserved the memory of the patriarchs and the belief in the God of their fathers, and had accordingly kept itself aloof

from Egyptian idolatry and its abominations."<sup>6</sup> While weaker Hebrews plummeted into a state of moral decay, the Levites maintained, in a pure state, the religious practices of Israel.

R. Shimeon ben Johai says: "Israel did not bring any sacrifice, but who did? The tribe of Levi; as it is said (Deuteronomy 33:20): 'They put incense before Thee and burnt sacrifice upon Thine altar.'"

Israel worshipped idols, and the tribe of Levi did not, as it is said, "For they have observed Thy word" (Deuteronomy 33:9).

Again it says (Joshua 5:5): "But all the people that were born in the wilderness... they had not circumcised." The Israelites did not keep the circumcision, but who did? The tribe of Levi.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed redemption from the misery of servitude could only come from those who had not abandoned the God of Justice and Righteousness. The rabbis express this idea as they elaborate the virtues of Amram the Levite. The midrash tells us that Amram was "the leading man of his generation."<sup>8</sup> Being of the sacerdotal tribe, he was undoubtedly an educated man who remembered the teachings of the patriarchs and abhorred the practices prevalent among the Egyptian people. Surely he, as a righteous man, felt compelled to bring his people closer to God and the midrash intimates that he labored to restore the Shechinah, the Divine presence to earth.

"The real home of the Shechinah was in the nether sphere; when Adam sinned it departed to the first rakia (firmament); when Cain sinned, it ascended to the second rakia; when the generation of Enosh sinned, it ascended to the third; when the generation of the Flood sinned, it ascended to the fourth; with the generation of the separation (of tongues), to the fifth; with the Sodomites, to the sixth, with the Egyptians in the days of Abraham, to the seventh. But as against these there arose seven righteous

men: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kohath, Amram and Moses, and they brought it down again to earth. Abraham (brought it down) from the seventh to the sixth, Isaac from the sixth to the fifth, Jacob from the fifth to the fourth, Levi from the fourth to the third, Kohath from the third to the second, Amram from the second to the first, while Moses brought it right down below. R. Isaac said: It is written, The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell (wayyishkenu) therein for ever (Psalm 37:29): then what are the wicked to do—are they to range in the air! What it (wayyishkenu) means is that the wicked did not permit the Shechinah to dwell on earth."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Amram, with later rabbis concurring, believed that "the upright shall cause (the Shechinah) to dwell on earth."<sup>10</sup> He lived his life believing that the kingdom of God, the divine presence, would be established "on earth by man's consciousness that God is near to him, whilst nearness of God to man means the knowledge of God's ways to do righteousness and judgement."<sup>11</sup> And surely he recognized that the Egyptians were not dealing in God's ways, when he, unlike his people, was not deceived by the sly offer of the Egyptian rulers. The midrash provides us with the details.

And the Egyptians forced the Children of Israel to serve with rigour בפרך. Rabbi Elazar says בפה רך, with deceitful words. They said: All those who make a brick will receive a shekel.<sup>12</sup>

With the offer of one shekel for each brick produced, the Israelites hastily prepared many bricks. The taskmasters quickly noted the quantity of bricks produced and recorded the daily measure of each individual. Amram, however, was satisfied with the production of one brick a day, and could not be coerced at a later date to make more than his measure.<sup>13</sup>

As Israel became further entrenched in slavery, Amram found it most difficult to find a suitable wife. This wise and righteous man, whose name "Am-ram" implied that he was from a higher people, witnessed the base behavior of the enslaved Israelites and consequently took his aunt, Jochebed, also from the tribe of Levi to be his wife. She was a lovely woman worthy of Amram. A midrash provides us with a description of her beauty.

And Amram took Jochebed as a wife. Why is her name called Jochebed (Jah-kavod). Because her countenance resembled the splendor of the divine glory.<sup>14</sup>

Within time a daughter was born and her parents gave her the name Miriam. It was an appropriate name for at the time of her birth the Egyptians had submerged the Hebrew people in a "sea of bitterness." Redemption seemed remote, particularly in light of Pharaoh's newest decree.

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl let her live."<sup>15</sup>

Rabbinic debate ensues, with disagreement as to whom Shiphrah and Puah were, but most midrashic sources agree that Shiphrah was none other than Amram's wife Jochebed and Puah their daughter Miriam.

Who were these midwives? Rab said it was a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law, namely, Jochebed and Elisheba, the daughter of Aminadab; R. Samuel b. Nahman said: It was a woman and her daughter, namely Jochebed and Miriam.<sup>16</sup>

The midrash continues:

Miriam was then only five years old, for Aaron was the senior of Moses by three years.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed it appears improbable that Puah was Elisheba, for Aaron would have had to be married at the age of two years old! As further disproof of Rab's contention, the etymology of Aaron's name, אה הרון, "woe to this pregnancy,"<sup>18</sup> or הרון, suggesting pregnancy,<sup>19</sup> implies that Aaron was at the most two years old, having been born in anticipation of or immediately after Pharaoh's evil edict was made public. Clearly, the available material does not provide a satisfactory solution to this dilemma, but the preponderance of texts suggest that Miriam and Jochebed were in fact the midwives.

During this time, Miriam

used to accompany her mother Jochebed, attending to all her wants, and she was very zealous, for even when the child is yet young, its (character) is known.<sup>20</sup>

The midrash elaborates their daily tasks during this difficult period as they attempted to evade Pharaoh's wicked decree.

"Of whom the name of one was Shiphrah"—because she used to make the babe good looking (me-shapereth); for when the babe was born, it was full of blood. "Puah"—because she used to make bubbles (nofa'ath) with wine before the babe in the presence of her mother.

Another explanation of Shiphrah is because Israel multiplied (she-paru) exceedingly, thanks to her; and Puah, because she used to revive (mefi'ah) the infant when people said it was dead.

Another explanation of Shiphrah: because she made her acts pleasing (shafrah) before God. Another explanation of Puah: she lifted up her face against Pharaoh and turned up her nose against him, saying: 'Woe unto this man when God comes to exact His retribution.' Whereupon Pharaoh became so angry that he sought to slay her. Shiphrah—because she smoothed over

(meshapereth) her daughter's words and pacified him: 'Do you take notice of her, For she is only a child who knows nothing.'<sup>21</sup>

The midrash clearly indicates that both Jochebed and Miriam disobeyed Pharaoh's command, and the young male infants remained alive. But they were not alone in this great task. Through prayer and righteous acts Jochebed and Miriam were able to invoke God's help.

"And they saved the men-children alive"—some children are liable to be born lame or blind or cripples, or require the amputation of a limb so that they may come out safely. So what did they do? They would pray to God thus: 'Thou knowest that we have not fulfilled Pharaoh's command; for it is Thy command that we wish to fulfil. Lord of the Universe! Let the child come out safely, so that Israel find no occasion to accuse us by saying, 'Behold, they have come out crippled, because they sought to slay them.' God at once hearkened to their prayer and they were born safe and sound.

R. Levi said: Why cite a minor matter? Quote rather one more important. There are some babies who would die at the time of birth or endanger their mothers, so as to die after giving birth. They, therefore, prayed to God saying: 'Lord of the Universe! Suspend their fate now and grant them their lives that Israel say not: "They killed them." Therefore God granted their prayer, hence "And they saved the men-children alive."<sup>22</sup>

Pharaoh, noting that the Israelites "multiplied and increased greatly," summoned the two Hebrew midwives to his court for a hearing. The midrash records the dialogue.

If you say that the Hebrew women were midwives themselves—well, does not even a midwife require the services of another? Hence this is what they said: These people are like the beasts of the field that do not require the help of midwives.<sup>23</sup>

For their reverence for human life, for their courage in the face of great danger and for fearing God, as did the patriarch Abraham, God established "households for them," descendants

who would lift the yoke of slavery, restore dignity to the oppressed Hebrews and constantly remind them of God's will on earth.

Miriam's first prophetic utterance, spoken in Pharaoh's court, was clearly a prognostication. The midrash implies that redemption was no longer remote, particularly after the birth of Amram and Jochebed's first son, Aaron. Expounding a verse from Job, the rabbis teach that the righteous can and do affect the course of mankind.

"I was not at ease, neither was I quiet, neither had I rest; but trouble came (Job 3:26)." "I was not at ease"—on account of the first decree against me, as it says, "And they made their lives bitter (Exodus 1:14)." God raised up a deliverer for them—Miriam, whose name intimates the bitterness (mirur) of slavery.

"Neither was I quiet"—on account of the second decree, "If it be a son, then ye shall kill him (Exodus 1:16);" God then raised up a redeemer—Aaron, whose name alludes to birth.<sup>24</sup>

Pharaoh, now humiliated and frustrated by the ineffective midwives, engages all of his people to participate in the base work of infanticide. "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."<sup>25</sup>

Miriam's words cited above which threaten divine retribution against Pharaoh for his decrees were not ill spoken.<sup>26</sup> Already Pharaoh's court was filled with apprehensions about redeemers, representatives of God who would come to exact justice.

The rabbis say: They (the Egyptians) took deep counsel so that God should not exact retribution from them through water. They knew that God repays measure for measure, and they were confident that He would no longer bring a flood upon the world, so they decided to drown them.<sup>27</sup>

When this evil decree reached the Hebrews, Amram, who was head of the Sanhedrin, decreed that the Israelite men should divorce their wives, thus rendering Pharaoh's decree ineffective.

Amram was at that time the head of the Sanhedrin, and when Pharaoh decreed that "if it be a son, then ye shall kill him," Amram said that it was useless for Israelites to beget children. Forthwith he ceased to have intercourse with his wife Jochebed and even divorced his wife, though she was already three months pregnant. Whereupon all the Israelites arose and divorced their wives.<sup>28</sup>

Miriam, as if rebuking Amram for his temporary lack of faith in God, persuades her father to revoke his edict, as the midrash from Pesikta Rabbati relates.

At that time Miriam was six years old, and she said: "Father, father, Pharaoh is kinder to Israel than you are." Why? "Pharaoh has decreed against male children; but you have decreed against both male and female children."<sup>29</sup>

The Talmud, reflecting an additional theological perspective adds the following:

"Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world whereas thou hast decreed concerning this world and the World to Come."<sup>30</sup>

The expounders in Pesikta Rabbati continue:

Though Pharaoh has decreed, it is doubtful whether this decree is being carried out. When Amram heard what she had to say, he brought her before the Sanhedrin<sup>31</sup> and she said the same thing to them. The Sanhedrin then told him: "Amram, it was you who forbade procreation—it is up to you to declare it permitted." He replied: "And what say you if I set the example by secretly bringing back my own wife?" They asked: "But how can it be made known to all of Israel?" According to R. Judah bar Zebida, Amram's answer was to place Jochebed in a bridal litter, with Aaron on one side and Miriam on the other carrying castanets and marching before her. And the holy spirit cried out and said, "The Lord our God....causeth a woman rooted out (of her house) and thereby made

barren to dwell again in her house as a joyful mother of children. Why did Amram make this public display? In order that Israel should see what he was doing and so bring back their own wives.<sup>32</sup>

Thus it is that Miriam was referred to as Puah, for she  
הוֹפִיעָה פָּנִים כְּנֹגַד אָבִיהָ, "dared to reprove her father."

In pomp and ceremony Amram remarried the beautiful Jochebed.

"And took to wife a daughter of Levi"—It does not say 'he took her back' but "he took," proving, said R. Judah, the son of Zebina, that he went through a marriage ceremony with her. He placed her on the bridal litter, Miriam and Aaron dancing before them.<sup>33</sup>

This daughter of Levi was 130 years old when Amram remarried her and shortly after, the third redeemer of Israel, Aaron's younger brother Moses was born.<sup>34</sup>

"Neither had I rest"—on account of the third decree which (Pharaoh) decreed: "Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river" (Exodus 1:22); but God raised up a redeemer—Moses, whose name indicates his association with water, for it says, "Because I drew him out of the water" (Exodus 2:10).<sup>35</sup>

Fearful that the Egyptians would discover her son, Jochebed "got a wicker basket for him (Moses) and calked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile."<sup>36</sup> A midrash, found in the Yalkut Shimoni, intimates that Aaron too was placed in the wicker basket, suggesting that Jochebed feared for his life since he was merely an infant and hence liable to be drowned should the Egyptians find him. This is revealed in the comment on Exodus 2:6.

"When she (Pharaoh's daughter) opened it, she saw that it was a child, בֶּן־אֶרֶב, a boy בֶּן־אֶרֶב crying. This was Aaron.<sup>37</sup>

Assuming this to be the case, that Aaron was in the basket with Moses, what became of him when Pharaoh's daughter discovered the weeping infants. Again the midrash supplies an answer.

They (the Egyptians) foresaw that Israel's deliverer would be punished through water, so they decreed: 'Every son that is born,' etc., and as soon as Moses had been cast into the water, they said: 'Their saviour has already been cast into the water'; the decree was therefore immediately cancelled.<sup>38</sup>

Thus Aaron and Moses were restored to Amram and Jochebed, fulfilling the divine promise of reward to the righteous.<sup>39</sup>

Amram and Jochebed could look forward to knowing

אשר יבוא את ישראל ממצרים, שבוזכותם הוציא הקב"ה את ישראל ממצרים, that because of their merit God would bring Israel from Egypt<sup>40</sup> and all

Israel would look to their children for guidance and instruction.

"He built them houses" (Exodus 1:21). Rab and Levi discussed this. One says: It means that they established priestly and levitical families; and the other, that they were founders of a royal family. Priestly and levitical families—from Moses and Aaron; a royal family from Miriam, because David descended from Miriam.<sup>41</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The midrashim covered in this brief chapter reveal very few details about Aaron's youth and his early years in Egypt, but they are nonetheless of great importance for they demonstrate that Aaron was nurtured in a religiously pure environment, a milieu conducive to cultivating leadership and responsibility. That God ordained Aaron and his siblings to be redeemers of Israel attests to their uprightness, love of divine service and sincere desire to lead Israel in the ways of God.

Notes, Chapter One

1. Exodus 1:8.
2. Exodus 1:11.
3. Exodus 1:11. A new king in place of God, King of kings.
4. Exodus Rabbah 1:8.
5. Graetz, History of the Jews, Volume I, p. 12.
6. Ibid.
7. Sifre Numbers 67.
8. Exodus Rabbah 1:19.
9. Genesis Rabbah 19:7. Parallel midrashim can be found in Song of Songs Rabbah 5:1; Tanhuma Pekudey 6; Pesikta Rabbati 5:7 and Pesikta De-Rab Kahana 1:1. Our text takes wayyishkenu from Psalm 37:29 to mean that the righteous cause the Shechinah to dwell upon the earth.
10. This proof text is used in Pesikta Rabbati and comes from Proverbs 2:21.
11. Schecter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, p. 89-90.
12. Midrash Hagadol Exodus, page 8. This is my translation.
13. Midrash Hagadol Exodus, page 8. Other parallels exist, such as Tanhuma Behaalotecha 13 and Exodus Rabbah 5:18, and express similar ideas, but only the midrash in Midrash Hagadol mentions Amram by name, and for this reason it is quoted here.
14. Midrash Hagadol Exodus, page 54.
15. Exodus 1:15.
16. Exodus Rabbah 1:13.
17. Ibid.
18. Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Volume V, p. 396, note 36.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid. Miriam was most likely her mother's assistant. Perhaps the midrash, in implying "her wants," suggests that she was in fact pregnant with Aaron and needed Miriam's assistance in later months. No explanation, however, can be conclusive.

21. Ibid. A less explanatory parallel is found in Sifre Numbers:78.
22. Exodus Rabbah 1:15.
23. Exodus Rabbah 1:16.
24. Exodus Rabbah 26:1.
25. Exodus 1:22.
26. See midrash cited under footnote 19, for her threats.
27. Exodus Rabbah 1:18.
28. Exodus Rabbah 1:13. Parallels are found in Pesikta Rabbati 43 and in Mekhilta Of R. Simeon Ben Yohai, p. 3. This last version adds וְהַסְכִּימָה דַעְתָּהּ לְדַעַר בְּקוּמָה , "and Amram's opinion (decision) coincided with God's decision."
29. Pesikta Rabbati 43. Parallel is found in Exodus Rabbah 1:13. Midrash taken from Pesikta Rabbati because it provides a fuller explanation.
30. Sotah 12a. At least the drowned babies would not be denied life in the next world.
31. Only Pesikta Rabbati has Miriam addressing the Sanhedrin. The parallels do not provide this additional information.
32. The proof text is Psalm 113:9 and is common to all parallels.
33. Exodus Rabbah 1:19. Parallels found in Sotah 12a, Mekhilta Of R. Simeon Ben Yohai, p. 3. Numbers Rabbah 13:20 indicates that Amram was most eager to remarry Jochebed. Another talmudical parallel is found in Baba Bathra 120a.

The later rabbis are preoccupied with the remarriage of Amram and Jochebed, particularly on legalistic grounds. This concern is revealed in Lekah Shmot 6:20 and in Sanhedrin 58b. Sanhedrin 58b states: "Come and hear: 'And Amram took him Jochebed his father's sister to wife.' Does it not (presumably) mean his father's sister on her mother's side (too)?—No. It means his father's paternal sister."

The rabbis merely wanted to clarify that the remarriage was legal, but had Amram married his father's maternal sister, the marriage would have been forbidden. Rabbinical law however would not be applicable here, for the entire incident took place before Sinai.

34. Exodus Rabbah 1:19. Parallel found in Sotah 12a.

35. Exodus Rabbah 26:1.
36. Exodus 2:3.
37. Yalkut Shimoni Shmot 166, p. 107. This midrash appears to be of later origins. It was not found in earlier sources. In this midrash, the  $\text{מֹשֶׁה}$  is Moses and the  $\text{אַהֲרֹן}$  is Aaron.
38. Exodus Rabbah 1:24.
39. Miriam was partly responsible for restoring the two children to her parents. Exodus Rabbah 1:22, Megillah 14a and Sotah 12b-13a suggest that Miriam stood by the bank of the Nile in order to be sure that the infants would be safe, ultimately to grow up as the redeemers of Israel.
- Exodus Rabbah 1:25 tells of Miriam's efforts to find a nurse for Moses.
40. Tanhuma Buber Numbers, p. 16.
41. Exodus Rabbah 1:17. Parallels are found in Sotah 12a; Tanhuma Vayyakhel:4; Tanhuma Buber Numbers, p. 16. The "houses" were a reward to Jochebed and Miriam when as midwives they saved the lives of infants.

## Chapter Two: THE CALL TO SERVE

As Egypt's cruel and bitter oppression continued, the redeemers readied themselves for the anticipated redemption. Sustained by the faith of earlier generations, the children of Amram were destined to be Israel's leaders. A midrash intimates this years before the actual Exodus.

"And the chief butler told his dream...Behold, a vine was before me" (Genesis 40:9): This alludes to Israel, as it says, "Thou didst pluck up a vine out of Egypt" (Psalm 80:9).

"And in the vine were three branches"—Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

"Its blossom shot forth"—the redemption of Israel had blossomed. "And the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes": immediately the vine budded, it blossomed, and immediately the grapes blossomed, its clusters became ripe.

Aaron, Moses and Miriam were part of the divine plan for redemption, and were now ready for the impending task, even if Israel did not fully understand the implications of God's participation in their salvation.

"And God saw the Children of Israel" (Exodus 2:25); as it says: 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people' (Exodus 3:7). "And God knew, (as it is written) 'For I know their pains' (ib.). Another explanation: "And God saw"—that they could not appeal to any good deeds for the sake of which they merited salvation. It is thus explained by Ezekiel: "I caused thee to increase even as the growth of the field. And thou didst increase and grow up, and thou camest to excellent beauty, thy breasts were fashioned, and thy hair was grown; yet thou wast naked and bare" (Ezekiel 16:7). Surely he should first have said 'and thy hair was grown', and after this 'and thy breasts were fashioned', for the lower sign precedes the upper. Then why 'and thy breasts were fashioned' first? This refers to Moses and Aaron who were made ready to redeem them, as it is written: "Thy two breasts are like two fawns" (Song of Songs 4:5). 'And thy hair was grown'—the time had come for redemption. 'Yet thou wast naked and bare'—without any good deeds. Hence it says: "and God knew."<sup>2</sup>

Moses found it necessary to flee Egypt, after he was seen killing an Egyptian taskmaster, but Aaron remained among his people, preaching and proclaiming the word of God. Moses recognized Aaron's prophetic ability and his great linguistic skills as the midrash confirms.

[Moses said]: 'Before I arose, my brother Aaron prophesied to them in Egypt for eighty years,' as it is written: "I made Myself known unto them in the land of Egypt" (Ezekiel 20:5). Whence do we know that it was Aaron who prophesied? For so it says: "And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: "Thus saith the Lord: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest?" (I Samuel 2:27-28).<sup>3</sup>

It appears that God, too, takes note of Aaron's inherent skill and the midrash intimates that He planned to employ Aaron as a leader even as He addressed Moses in Midian.

Another explanation of "from the midst of a bush," is given by R. Nahman, son of R. Samuel b. Nahman. Some trees produce one leaf, some two or three; the myrtle, for instance, produces three because it is called "a thick tree" (Leviticus 23:40), but the thorn-bush has five leaves. God said to Moses: 'Israel will be redeemed for the sake of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and for thy sake and the sake of Aaron.'<sup>4</sup>

As if to concur with God, that he alone is incapable of redeeming the Israelites, Moses hesitates to execute His command.

The midrash provides us with the details.

Moses was at first worthy to receive alone the Divine Communication, but because he said: "Send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him who Thou wilt send" (Exodus 4:13), it was said to him: "Is there not Aaron thy brother the Levite?" (ib.). Here, too, he said: "behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me" (Exodus 6:12). Now all the miracles should have been performed only by him (Moses); but because of this the Divine speech addressed itself jointly to him and to Aaron, as it says: "And the Lord spoke unto

Moses and Aaron."<sup>5</sup>

As God intended both Aaron and Moses to be the redeemers of Israel, he spoke to them simultaneously.

R. Reuben said: When God said to Moses in Midian: "Go, return to Egypt," (Exodus 4:19), the words were divided into two distinct sounds and assumed two characters. Moses heard the Voice in Midian saying, "Go, return to Egypt," whilst Aaron heard it as saying: "Go into the wilderness to meet Moses" (Exodus 4:27).<sup>6</sup>

Aaron and Moses, each receiving their summonses, prepare to journey to the wilderness where they are united after many years of separation. (Moses is now eighty years old and Aaron is eighty three.) There Moses tells Aaron of his task in redemption as commanded by God.

"And Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet" (Exodus 7:11). Just as the preacher sits and preaches whilst the interpreter sits before him, so shalt thou speak all that I shall command thee (to Aaron) and Aaron thy brother will speak unto Pharaoh. By both of them were all these things performed, as it is said: "And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh" (Exodus 9:10).<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning of their careers, the brothers were selected by God for high office, but just as they were distinct individuals so too would their roles be distinct. God intended that Moses and Aaron be different, serving as king and priest respectively.<sup>8</sup> But they would serve only as God directed, fulfilling His will only at His command and for His divine purposes. The rabbis are careful to point out that Moses and Aaron were not responsible for the redemption. Expounding a verse from Song of Songs Rabbah, the rabbis place God's design and Aaron and Moses' role in proper perspective.

"The flowers (ha-nizzanim) appeal on the earth":

the conquerors (nazoboth) have appeared on the earth. Who are they? Moses and Aaron, as it says, "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying" (Exodus 12:1). "The time of singing (zamer) is come": the time has come for the uncircumcised to be cut off (tizzamer); the time has come for the Egyptians to be pruned (yizzameru); the time has come for their idolatry to be uprooted, as it says, "And against all the gods of Egypt I (God) will execute judgement" (Exodus 12:12).<sup>9</sup>

With the redeemers selected and prepared for the great task ahead, the people now had to be convinced to heed the God of their ancestors, the God they had abandoned long ago. Moses and Aaron assembled the elders of Israel and Aaron "performed the signs in the sight of the people."<sup>10</sup> A midrash recaptures the event.

/And Abraham our father transmitted it (the secret sign of redemption) to Isaac and Isaac transmitted it to Jacob and Jacob transmitted it to Joseph and Joseph transmitted it to his brothers. And Asher/, the son of Jacob, delivered the mystery of the Redemption to Serah his daughter. When Moses and Aaron came to the elders of Israel and performed the signs in their sight, the elders of Israel went to Serah, the daughter of Asher, and they said to her: 'A certain man has come, and he had performed signs in our sight, thus and thus...' She said to them: 'There is no reality in the signs.' They said to her: 'He said "Pakod yiphkod"--"God will surely visit you." /Pakod yiphkod implies two redeemers./ She said to them: 'He is the man who will redeem Israel in the future from Egypt, for thus did I hear /from my father/ "Pakod pakadti"--"I have surely visited you" (Exodus 3:16). Forthwith the people believed /in God and (his servant) Moses/ when they heard that the "Lord had visited the children of Israel" (Exodus 4:31).<sup>11</sup>

With the people convinced, Aaron and Moses prepared themselves to confront Pharaoh, bringing with them the message of God. But before we delve into the events that occurred in Pharaoh's court, it is only appropriate that we

examine the nature of God's communications to Aaron and Moses. Some midrashim reveal that God spoke only to Moses, with Moses later transmitting the essence of the message to Aaron. Other midrashim suggest that most of the communication was carried out with Moses, but that Aaron too spoke directly with God when God felt compelled to address him with regard to a specific issue. Sources in Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael and Pesikta De Rab Kahana teach that God spoke directly with both Aaron and Moses. These passages are cited respectively.

"And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt saying." From this I might understand that the divine word was addressed to both Moses and Aaron. When, however, it says: "And it came to pass on the day when the Lord spoke unto Moses in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 6:28), it shows that the divine word was addressed to Moses alone and not to Aaron. If so, what does Scripture mean to teach by saying here, "unto Moses and Aaron?" It merely teaches that just as Moses was perfectly fit to receive the divine words, so was Aaron perfectly fit to receive the divine words. And why then did He not speak to Aaron? In order to grant distinction to Moses. Thus you must say That Aaron was not directly addressed in any of the divine communications of the Torah, with the exception of three, for in the case of these three it is impossible to say that they were not directly addressed to him.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed it is difficult to refute the argument presented by the expounders in Mekilta. They cite three examples where God addresses Aaron alone.

Leviticus 10:8—"And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons with you, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die - it is a law for all time throughout the ages."

Numbers 18:1—"The Lord said to Aaron: You with your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary; you and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood."









rank. Employing the rabbinic method of comparison, Moses may be compared to a general in the infantry while Aaron is a general in the special services area. Surely their tasks and responsibilities are different, but the majority of midrashic texts can leave us with little doubt that they were of equal rank, both united in a joint effort and performing duties indispensable to the success of God's mission of redemption.



16. Exodus 7:1. "The Lord replied to Moses, 'See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet.'"
17. Exodus 4:27.
18. Exodus Rabbah 5:9.
19. Exodus 12:1-2.
20. Pesikta De Rab Kahana 5:15.
21. Exodus Rabbah 15:20. A parallel is found in Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer: 8.
22. Rosh Hashanah 25b.
23. Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha 3. A lovely midrash in Song of Songs Rabbah I:10:1 intimates that the leaders were equal in speech: "Thy cheeks are comely." Just as the cheeks are made only for speech, so were Moses and Aaron made only for speech.' Other parallels dealing with this subject are found in Song of Songs Rabbah II:9:5 and II:13:2.

























































































































Sanctuary without washing hands and feet.....(4)  
Because they had no children.

9. Numbers Rabbah 2:23.

10. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:1. Parallels are found in Pesikta De Rab Kahana 26:1, which states: "Like things befall the righteous" such as Aaron, of whom it is written, "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Malachi 2:6). "And befall...the wicked" (Ecclesiastes 9:4) such as Korah's congregation, concerning whom Moses said to the people of Israel: "Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men" (Numbers 16:26). The latter came in quarrelsomeness to bring offerings and were burnt; the sons of the former came not in quarrelsomeness to bring offerings but likewise were burnt, as it is written, "After the death of the two sons of Aaron" (Leviticus 16:1).

Leviticus Rabbah 20:1, which states: "After the death of the two sons of Aaron" (Leviticus 16:1). R. Simeon opened his discourse with the text, "All things come alike to all; there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked" (Ecclesiastes 9:2). "There is one event to the righteous,"—applies to the sons of Aaron, of whom it is written, "He walked with Me in peace and uprightness" (Malachi 2:6), and "To the wicked" applies to the company of Korah, in regard to whom it is written, "Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men" (Numbers 16:26). The latter entered the Tabernacle to offer in a spirit of contentiousness and ended by being burnt, while the former entered to offer without contentiousness, and ended by being burnt.

11. Leviticus Rabbah 12:2.

12. Pesikta Rabbati 47:2.

13. Leviticus 10:3.

14. Leviticus Rabbah 10:5. Parallels are found in Tanhuma Buber, Ahare 12 and Pesikta Rabbati 47:1, which states: R. Mana of Shaab, in the name of R. Levi, found in the prayer "Deliver them that are drawn unto death" (Proverbs 24:11) an illusion to Aaron's sons and hence an intimation that Eleazar and Ithamar were delivered by means of prayer. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Aaron: As thou livest, such was the decree—that all thy sons would die. Nevertheless, because Moses prayed, I set aside half the decree, destroying two and permitting two to live. Whence do we know that God acted thus? From what we read in the lesson for the day: "After the death of two of the sons of Aaron" (Leviticus 16:1).

15. Yoma 87a.

16. Leviticus 10:4-5.
17. Leviticus 10:6.
18. Leviticus 10:9.
19. Leviticus 10:16-18.
20. The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 37.
21. Leviticus Rabbah 13:1. A parallel is found in Zebahim 101a.

## Chapter Seven: SHAME AND SHARP TONGUE

It is natural for brothers and sisters to have an occasional spat. In spite of the great love and admiration that Miriam, Aaron and Moses displayed toward each other, the biblical narrative reveals that Miriam and Aaron uttered words against Moses as the Israelites settled at Hazeroth en route to the Promised Land.

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he married."<sup>1</sup>

The rabbis provide the details.

"And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married" (Numbers 12:1). Was she then a Cushite woman? Was she not Zipporah? But just as this Cushite is different as regards his body from all other people, so was Zipporah different from all other women by her words and by her good deeds; therefore she was called a Cushite, as it is said, "For he had married a Cushite woman" (Numbers 12:1).<sup>2</sup>

Yet it seems improbable that Miriam and Aaron would slander Moses because he married a woman whose nature it was to perform good deeds. Indeed the rabbis are compelled to reveal the real reason for Miriam and Aaron's harsh words.

"And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses" (Numbers 12:1). Wherever we find the word "dibber"—speak—(in Scripture), it always means something harsh (Genesis 42:30; Numbers 21:5). On the other hand, the word "amar"—say—always expresses something gentle (Genesis 19:7; Numbers 12:6).

"And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses" (Numbers 12:1). This suggests that, although they both spoke against him, Miriam /spoke the first word/. For Miriam was not /accustomed/ to speaking in the presence of Aaron, except when circumstances demanded. The same is true of Baruch and Jeremiah (cf. Jeremiah 36:2).

"And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses" (Numbers 12:1). How did Miriam know that Moses had neglected his conjugal obligations? Because she saw that Zipporah, his wife, took no care for her personal appearance, as is the manner of women. Miriam said to her: 'What is the matter with thee that thou neglectest thy appearance?' She replied: 'Thy brother does not mind!' Thus Miriam knew, and she told it to her brother and they both spoke against Moses.

R. Nathan says: Miriam was standing beside Zipporah when the young men ran and told Moses (that Eldad and Medad were prophesying). When Zipporah heard that she said: 'Woe unto the wives of these men!' [Implying that they would also be neglected by their husbands/]. And thus Miriam knew, and she told it to her brother, and both spoke against Moses.<sup>3</sup>

Miriam, in speaking first, gives the impression to her innocent brother that she is defending Zipporah, yet he fails to see that Miriam, at the same time, refers to her as a Cushite, implying a certain amount of disdain. Aaron in his naive manner concurs with Miriam as she expresses what seems to be a concern about Moses' fulfilling the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28).<sup>4</sup> Thus Aaron, without malicious intent, joins Miriam in asking: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"<sup>5</sup>

Indeed Miriam implies that Moses should have no difficulty in fulfilling his conjugal obligations just as she and Aaron have not experienced any difficulty. And yet Aaron unwittingly joins Miriam in equating their level of prophecy with that of Moses', who speaks with God "mouth to mouth" (Numbers 12:8).

Moses reacted with surprise to Aaron's words, for Aaron never spoke against people. Moses realized that Aaron had certain shortcomings, but he knew that his personal integrity

was beyond reproach.<sup>6</sup>

So Moses said: 'Miriam spoke slander against me, (that I can understand) since women as a rule are talkative. But did Aaron the righteous also need to speak against me?' Moses said: "And Miriam spoke" (Numbers 12:1), but surely not Aaron!

Without investigating Aaron's motives, Moses harshly condemned his peace loving brother.

When, however, he discovered that Aaron had also spoken he began to lament, "Yea, the man at peace with me, in whom I trusted, who did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:10). What is meant by 'Yea, the man at peace with me?' This refers to Aaron, whose function was to bless me with peace, as it is said, "And give thee peace" (Numbers 6:26). 'In whom I trusted': at the time when he stayed the Angel of Death. Whence this? For it is said, "And Aaron returned unto Moses unto the door of the tent of meeting, and the plague was stayed" (Numbers 17:15). 'Who did eat of my bread': this refers to the twenty-four gifts of priesthood which he received from Israel. And after all this praise, '(He) hath lifted up his heel against me,' (as it says), "And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses" (Numbers 12:1).<sup>8</sup>

"Suddenly the Lord called out to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, 'Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting.'<sup>9</sup> This sudden call shocked and embarrassed Miriam and Aaron who were in a state of ritual impurity. God waited as they called for water in order that they might prepare for this divine encounter<sup>10</sup> and made it obvious that Moses was correct in postponing his conjugal responsibilities.

Miriam and Aaron washed and "the three of them went out. The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the Tent, and called out, 'Aaron and Miriam!'"<sup>11</sup>

"And called Aaron and Miriam and they both came forth." Why did not Moses join them? In order that the Israelites should not say that Moses was included with them in the anger of God.

Yet another explanation is that Moses did not wish to be present to listen when God censured Aaron. And still another interpretation is that God did not call Moses to join them because He did not wish to praise him in his presence.<sup>12</sup>

Thus God addressed Miriam and Aaron while Moses remained behind.

And He said, "Here these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!"<sup>13</sup>

"Still incensed with them, the Lord departed."<sup>14</sup> Indeed the text clearly indicates that God's wrath was directed toward both Aaron and Miriam, yet the rabbis are divided as to what punishment actually befell Aaron. Some rabbis teach that only Miriam suffered from leprosy, while Aaron remained free from this affliction.

Similarly you read, "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed" (Numbers 12:9). This teaches that Aaron too became leprous: this is R. Akiba's view.

Said R. Judah b. Bathyra to him: 'Akiba! in either case you will have to give an account: if you are right, the Torah shielded him, while you disclose him; and if not, you cast a stigma upon a righteous man.'

But it is written: 'against them?'

That was merely with a rebuke.<sup>15</sup>

The expounders in Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer add:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If Aaron also be leprous, the High Priest, who is afflicted with a blemish, will not be able to bring an offering upon My altar; but he shall look upon his sister and become astonished, as it is said, "And Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous" (Numbers 12:10).<sup>16</sup>

But other rabbis teach that Aaron was afflicted with this disorder, the leprosy manifesting itself and then disappearing almost immediately.

Why does the verse say, "And He departed" (Numbers 12:9)? This teaches that the punishment removed from Aaron and clove to Miriam: for Aaron was no tale bearer; Miriam however, who was the tale bearer, was thereupon punished more severely.<sup>17</sup>

As Aaron gazed at Miriam in an attempt to heal her, "the leprosy broke out afresh."<sup>18</sup> Aaron thought to himself: "I do not know what to do with my sister; I cannot lock her up, for then I shall be defiled; neither can I proclaim her defiled, nor can I declare her clean."<sup>19</sup> Aaron finally recognized the need for Moses' assistance and turned to him in an effort to restore Miriam's health.

At that time Aaron said to Moses: "Moses, my brother, dost thou think that this leprosy is being visited upon Miriam (alone)? It is visited indeed upon the flesh of our father Amram! I shall tell thee a parable: to what may this be likened? To one who held a glowing coal in his hand; although he keeps juggling it, his flesh is nevertheless seared"—as it is said, "Let her not, I pray, be as one dead" (Numbers 12:12).<sup>20</sup>

Aaron also sensed the need for apology and courageously accepted equal responsibility for the unfortunate incident in order to establish peace among them.

It was at that time that Aaron began to conciliate Moses. He said to him: "Moses, my brother, have we ever done evil to anyone in the world?"

"No," he answered.

"If we have done no evil to others in the world," said Aaron, "how could we think of doing evil to thee that art our brother? But what am I to do? It was an error on our part: we neglected the covenant between us and thee—as it is said, "And they remembered not the brotherly covenant" (Amos 1:9). Because of the covenant drawn up between us,















































divine communications made to Moses exclusively were revealed to Aaron.

"And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord" (Exodus 4:28). Moses began by telling him all the words and all the signs which God had commanded him to perform before the people.<sup>7</sup>

Their harmonious relationship was apparent to all of Israel and even foreigners noted the unique relationship. Pharaoh called for both Aaron and Moses in the midst of the night<sup>8</sup> and Jethro alluded to their complimenting each other when he compared Aaron to the moon and Moses to the sun.<sup>9</sup>

The rabbis also noted their joint effort to enhance the people of Israel.

"Thy two breasts /are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle/" (Song of Songs 4:5). These are Moses and Aaron. Just as the breasts are the beauty and the ornament of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the beauty and adornment of Israel. Just as the breasts are the charm of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the charm of Israel. Just as the breasts are the glory and pride of a woman, so Moses and Aaron were the glory and pride of Israel. Just as the breasts are full of milk, so Moses and Aaron filled Israel with Torah. Just as whatever a woman eats helps to feed the child at the breast, so all the Torah that Moses our master learned he taught to Aaron, as it is written, "And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord" (Exodus 4:27). The Rabbis say: He revealed to him the ineffable Name.

Just as one breast is not greater than the other, so it was with Moses and Aaron; for it is written, "These are that Moses and Aaron" (Exodus 6:27), and it is also written, "These are that Aaron and Moses" (Exodus 6:26), showing that Moses was not greater than Aaron nor was Aaron greater than Moses in the knowledge of Torah.

R. Abba said: They were like two fine pearls belonging to a king which he put in a balance, finding that neither weighed down the other. So were Moses and Aaron just equal.

R. Hanina b. Papa said: Blessed is the Omnipotent who chose these two brothers, for they were created only for the diffusion of the Torah and for the glory of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

This mutual sharing of responsibility, however, could only be based on the great respect that Aaron and Moses had for each other. It was this mutual respect and admiration that enabled the brothers to effectively work together. Moses, in anger, accused Aaron of erring on several occasions, but Moses' criticisms were unjustified and he always apologized,<sup>11</sup> restoring the balance of respect the brothers displayed toward each other.

Moses' respect for Aaron's character is manifested even before Moses meets his brother in the wilderness after many years of separation.

"And he said: Oh Lord, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send" (Exodus 4:13).

The Rabbis say that one must not think that Moses refused to go, he openly wished to pay respect to Aaron; for Moses said: 'Before I arose, my brother Aaron prophesied to them in Egypt for eighty years,' as it is written, "I made Myself known unto them in the land of Egypt" (Ezekiel 20:5).

Whence do we know that it was Aaron who prophesied? For so it says, "And there came a man of God unto Eli, and said unto him: Thus saith the Lord: Did I reveal Myself unto the house of thy father, when they were in Egypt in bondage to Pharaoh's house? And did I choose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be My priest" (I Samuel 2:27-28)? Moses thought: 'If I now trespass upon the domain of my brother, he will be vexed.' On this account, he was reluctant to go.<sup>12</sup>

Moses had great faith in the abilities of Aaron and knew that he could trust him. Thus he was able to utilize















Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron.

The study of Torah instilled in Aaron a faith and courage that was unshakable. When Nadab and Abihu died, Aaron was able to overcome feelings of resentment.

"And the Lord spoke unto Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron" (Leviticus 16:1). Blessed is the man whom suffering has smitten, but who overcomes the intensity of his resentment and raises no cry against the measure of justice.<sup>9</sup>

His deep faith also sustained him in the face of adversity. He courageously appeared before Pharaoh while Moses was in Midian and was steadfast in his faith when Korah sought the priesthood. Aaron even maintained his faith when God sentenced him at Meribah. His simple optimism sustained him in all of his trials and his sanguine attitude endeared him to the people of Israel. He was never quick to judge people as evidenced by his refusal to condemn the crowd gathered following the death of Miriam. He always listened before he spoke in order that he not speak ill of anybody.

'He does not break into his fellow's speech.' Such was Aaron. For it is said, "Then Aaron spoke...../after Moses was finished/, Behold, this day have they offered their sin offering, and their burnt offering.... and there have befallen me such things as these" (Leviticus 10:19). He kept quiet until Moses finished what he wanted to say, and Aaron did not say to him, "Cut thy words short." Only afterward did he say to Moses: "Behold, this day they have brought their offerings," although we are in mourning!<sup>10</sup>

Aaron believed that people were innately good and he did not hesitate to defend them. He not only prayed for Miriam when she spoke falsely against Moses, but protected Israel

after they erected the Golden Calf. His love for Israel was unending and he labored diligently to bring them closer to the will of God.

When Moses said to them that the Holy One, blessed be He, had said to him, summarily, "No uncircumcised person shall eat thereof" [that is, the passover offering] (Exodus 12:48), each one took a knife and placed it upon his thigh and had himself circumcised. Who circumcised them? R. Berekiyah taught in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai that Moses circumcised them, Aaron uncovered the corona, and Joshua gave them the wine to drink.<sup>11</sup>

Aaron's loving deeds on behalf of his people did not go unobserved by God.

"So let the house of Aaron now say" (Psalms 118:3) can be expounded by way of a parable of a householder who conducted himself generously with his tenants. At the time of reckoning up accounts he did not haggle with them. At harvest time, he let them have whatever was left in the granary; and at vintage time, he let them have whatever was left in the wine vat. We do not know, however, what his conduct was towards his own household. Who does know? His servants and the dwellers in his manor house. And who are the servants of the Holy One, blessed be He? The house of Aaron who bring offerings to Him at all times. Therefore "Let the house of Aaron now say" — that is, Let them say what I have done for their sake to every man who rose up against them. Korah and his company rose up against them — the earth swallowed them up. Uzziah rose up and sought to offer incense — "leprosy broke forth in his forehead" (II Chronicles 26:19). And why have I given Aaron such reward? Because he walked in uprightness before Me and studied My Torah, as is said, "The law of truth was in his mouth.... he walked with Me in peace and uprightness...." (Malachi 2:6).<sup>12</sup>

God's great love and admiration for Aaron was also expressed in other ways. He often defended his dignity when the Israelites failed to appreciate him.

"Thus did the children of Israel: according to all that the Lord commanded Moses" (Numbers 2:34).

The standards were specially dear to the Omnipresent, for in connection with them Scripture employs the same expression, 'as the Lord commanded Moses,' as was used in connection with the making of the Tabernacle [see Exodus 39:43].

"So they pitched by their standards, and so they set forward, each one according to its families and according to its fathers' houses" (Numbers 2:34). Scripture informs us that Israel forthwith bestirred themselves to fulfill the words of the Omnipresent in regard to their standards, and did not dally in the performance. "Thus did the children of Israel: according to all that the Lord commanded Moses" (Numbers 2:34). But where was Aaron? R. Joshua b. R. Nehemiah, and R. Levi b. Hayatha, said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abba that when Aaron came to examine their pedigrees Israel said to him, 'Before examining our pedigrees examine that of thy son Eleazar. To whom is he married? Is it not to a daughter of Putiel; as it is written, "And Eleazar Aaron's son took him one of the daughters of Putiel to wife" (Exodus 6:25). When the Holy One, blessed be He, perceived that Israel were treating Aaron with disrespect, He bestowed upon him the honor of mentioning his name before that of Moses; and therefore it says: "Now these are the generations of Aaron and Moses" (Numbers 3:1).'<sup>13</sup>

God also defended Aaron when the Israelites became angry.

"And behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud" [when the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron] (Exodus 16:10). R. Jose b. Simon says: Whenever the Israelites sought to stone Moses and Aaron, immediately "the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud." What does it say further on? "But all the congregation bade stone them with stones, when the glory of the Lord appeared" (Numbers 14:10). And what does it say here? "And behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud." And why all this? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Better let the pillar of cloud be struck, and let not Moses and Aaron be stoned.'<sup>14</sup>

God honored Aaron by not only selecting him to be a redeemer of Israel, but also by appointing him as High Priest.

It is written: "These are the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth" (Zechariah 4:14). R. Levi said: This is to teach

us that God went about seeking for some good ground for redeeming Israel, but did not find one until He came upon the merits of Moses and Aaron.<sup>15</sup>

To no other mortal in the world have I given like honor. For he [Aaron] was clothed in the eight garments of holiness, and whenever he entered the Holy of Holies, the ministering angels would flee from his presence, as we know from the verse, "There shall be no man in the Tent of Meeting when he goeth in" (Leviticus 16:7), where the term "man" refers to the ministering angels, "As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man" (Ezekiel 1:10). Such was the tribute of honor they paid him that they fled from his presence.<sup>16</sup>

Aaron's participation in the life of Israel was not to be taken for granted, and God honored Aaron by reminding the people of his presence with the cloud of glory.

Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and for their sake three good things were conferred (upon Israel), namely, the Well, the Pillar of Cloud and the Manna; the Well, for the merit of Miriam; the Pillar of Cloud for the merit of Aaron; the Manna for the merit of Moses.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the great honor bestowed upon him by God, Aaron retained his most endearing quality, that of humility.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, 'I love you because even when I bestow greatness upon you, you humble yourselves before Me. I bestowed greatness upon Abraham, yet he said to Me, "I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27); upon Moses and Aaron, yet they said, "And we are nothing" (Exodus 16:8). [Literally, "And what are we?"]

Raba, others say R. Johanan, said, More significant is that which is said of Moses and Aaron than that which is said of Abraham. Of Abraham it is said, "I am but dust and ashes," whereas of Moses and Aaron it is said, "And we are nothing."

Raba, others say R. Johanan, also said, The world exists only on account of (the merit of) Moses and Aaron; for it is written here, "And we are nothing," and it is written there (of the world),

"He hangeth the earth upon nothing"  
(Job 26:7).<sup>18</sup>

Aaron respected every person he encountered, even his adversaries.

For so the Holy One, blessed be He, had told him: Show respect to royalty," as it is said, "And the Lord spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron and gave them a charge" (Exodus 6:13). He charged them to show respect to royalty.<sup>19</sup>

Aaron was humble even in the position that was exclusively his.

[Why does Scripture say, "And was afraid of My name" (Malachi 2:5).] At the time when Moses poured the oil of anointing on Aaron's head, he trembled and recoiled, and cried out, 'Woe is me! Perchance I have made improper use of the consecrated matter, to wit, the oil of anointing?' Whereupon the Holy Spirit answered, saying to him, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard; even Aaron's beard, that cometh down upon the collar of his garments; like the dew of Hermon, that cometh down upon the mountain of Zion" (Psalms 133:1-3).<sup>20</sup>

Although Aaron helped to teach Torah, he subjected himself to its authority and observed the very commandments he expected his people to observe.

"As the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so did they" (Exodus 12:28). This makes known the excellency of Israel, that they did exactly as Moses and Aaron told them. Another interpretation: What is the purport of the words, "so did they?" Simply, that Moses and Aaron also did so.<sup>21</sup>

For his humility, empathy and generosity Aaron was loved by all of Israel and his impending death brought deep grief and a great sense of loss to those who knew him.

Notes. Chapter Eleven

1. The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 12. Parallels are found in Perek Hashshalom, p. 59b and in Kallah Rabbathi, p. 52b.
2. Kallah Rabbathi, p. 52b.
3. Eliyyahu Rabbah, p. 63.
4. Eliyyahu Zuta, p. 170.
5. Sanhedrin 6b.
6. Pesikta De Rab Kahana 11:13.
7. Ibid., 8:2.
8. Ecclesiastes Rabbah V:2:5.
9. Pesikta Rabbathi 47:3.
10. The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 37.
11. Numbers Rabbah 11:3. Parallels are found in Song of Songs Rabbah I:12:3 and Song of Songs Rabbah III:7:4.
12. Midrash on Psalms 118:7.
13. Numbers Rabbah 2:20. A parallel is found in Leviticus Rabbah 33:4.
14. Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Vayassa, Chapter 3. A parallel is found in Eliyyahu Rabbah, p. 145.
15. Exodus Rabbah 15:3.
16. Pesikta Rabbathi 47:3.
17. Taanith 9a. Parallels are found in Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Vayassa, Chapter 6; Numbers Rabbah 1:2 and Leviticus Rabbah 27:6.
18. Hullin 89a.
19. Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha, Chapter 13.
20. Leviticus Rabbah 3:6.
21. Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha, Chapter 12.

## Chapter Twelve: LET AARON BE GATHERED TO HIS KIN

- Aaron was one hundred and twenty three years old when God commanded, "let Aaron be gathered to his kin: he is not to enter the land that I have given to the Israelite people, because you disobeyed my command about the waters of Meribah."<sup>1</sup> The time for Aaron's inevitable demise had come and Moses was told to make the preparations.

"Aaron shall be gathered" (Numbers 20:24). This teaches that the righteous are informed of the day of their death, so that they shall bequeath their crowns to their children. Why did not Aaron die in the same way as Miriam, in whose case no human being was aware of her death? Why was Moses told, "Aaron shall be gathered?" This may be illustrated by the parable of a king who had two financial officers. These did nothing without the king's knowledge. One of them had a fine field on the king's estate, and the king required it. The king said: 'Although it is my domain I will not take it away before informing them.' So also the Holy One, blessed be He: 'These two old men, both righteous, never did anything without My knowledge. Now, therefore, when I am about to take them away, I must not do so before letting them know.' Therefore it says, "Aaron shall be gathered."<sup>2</sup>

Moses was deeply troubled that his beloved brother had to die and was unable to convey this message to Aaron.

Moses said to the Lord of the universe. "It is revealed and known before the Throne of Your Glory that you are the Master of all the world and Lord over the creatures that You have created in this world. They are in Your hand and it is in Your hand to do with them anything that pleases You, but I am not fit to convey Your message pertaining to this thing [Aaron's death] to my brother, for my brother is older than me and how can I say to him, 'Go up to Mount Hor and there you will die!'"<sup>h</sup>

God said to Moses: "Don't say anything by way of mouth, rather take Aaron and Eleazar his son and ascend with him to Mount Hor and speak with him [Aaron] gentle and pleasant words."<sup>3</sup>

God instructed Moses that upon reaching the top of the mountain, he should strip Aaron of his priestly garments and dress Eleazar in them. Moses would then have to reveal to Aaron that his time to die had come, for God could not relay the message to the righteous man personally.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "Do Me a favor and speak to Aaron concerning his death for I am too ashamed to tell him."<sup>4</sup>

This mission greatly distressed Moses and almost brought him to the brink of death.<sup>5</sup> But he was a faithful servant of God and was determined to carry out God's wishes to the best of his ability.

After a restless night,<sup>6</sup> Moses met with Aaron and Eleazar and walked with them to the Tabernacle. Normally Moses walked between Aaron and Eleazar but on this day Aaron was positioned between Moses and Eleazar, with the princes and elders on each side and the people of Israel following closely behind.

When Israel saw Aaron in this [position] of honor, they were extremely happy and said that Aaron had been elevated in [degree of] Holy Spirit because they loved him dearly.<sup>5</sup>

The three men made their way to the Tabernacle and Aaron wanted to enter, but Moses would not allow him, and asked Aaron to join him in a walk beyond the confines of the camp. Moses ordered the people of Israel to remain behind<sup>6</sup> and offered no explanation as to where they were walking, for if Israel "had known that he was going up to die, Israel

would not have let him go, but would have asked for mercy on his behalf."<sup>7</sup>

Aaron asked what it was that God requested, but Moses could not bring himself to tell Aaron that he was to die. Moses thought that perhaps through Scripture he might inform Aaron of his fate.

Moses said to [Aaron]: "There is a certain thing in the Torah that I have been meditating on all night and it troubles me greatly, therefore I rose early and came to you."

Aaron said to him: "What is the matter?"

Moses said to him: "I don't know what the matter is but I know that it is in the Book of Genesis. Bring it and we will read it."

They took the Book of Genesis and read every verse and over each one said, "That which He did is good, that which the Holy One, blessed be He created is good." When they arrived to the creation of man, Moses said: "What shall we say to you Adam, who has brought death into this world!"<sup>8</sup>

With this comment (from Yalkut Shimon), Moses told Aaron that his time in this world had ended and that God had prepared a special burial place for him.

"Petirat Aharon," the account dealing with the "Passing of Aaron," portrays a somewhat different attempt on the part of Moses to tell Aaron of his imminent death.

Moses said to him: "Aaron my brother. Perhaps the Holy One, blessed be He, has given you a deposit [for keeping].

He said to him: "Yes."

Moses said: "What?"

Aaron said: "He gave me an altar and table upon which is the shew-bread."

Moses said to him: "Perhaps all that He has

entrusted in your hands He now will demand from you!"

Aaron said: "What?"

Moses said: "Has He not given a light for your keeping?"

Aaron said: "He has not given me one light, rather all seven of them that are burning at the Tent of Meeting."

Moses had desired to have [Aaron] notice his soul, which is comparable to a light, as it is written, "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27). When Moses saw that Aaron did not notice the analogy, he said, "In truth you have been called a pious man."<sup>9</sup>

Aaron in his simplicity was unable to comprehend Moses' allusion and so Moses decided to try a different approach.

Moses said: "Aaron my brother. Enter this cave."

Aaron said: "Surely."

Now Moses wanted to strip Aaron of his priestly garments but did not know how to tell him. He said: "Aaron my brother. This cave into which we are entering, it is not fitting to enter there with your priestly garments on. Perhaps this **very** beautiful cave is defiled, for old graves might be in it, so I think you should give them [your priestly garments] to Eleazar and he will wait for us until we come out."

Aaron said: "It is a good thing you have said" and immediately Moses stripped Aaron of his clothing.

It is impossible to say that when he stripped him of his garments he would die naked and be buried naked, God forbid! Rather every High Priest wears eight priestly garments and an ordinary priest wears four. Aaron had eight and Eleazar four. Moses took four from Aaron and dressed Eleazar in them and made him the High Priest and four [garments] remained on Aaron. They said to Eleazar: "Wait for us until we come out."

They entered and saw a couch spread out and a prepared table and a light that was lighted and ministering angels standing about.

Aaron said: "Moses my brother, how long will

you hide from me the words that God spoke to you? You know that when [He] spoke with you at first, He with his own mouth testified concerning me, "and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart" (Exodus 4:14). And now, why have you hidden the words that the Holy One, blessed be He has spoken to you. Even if it is a matter that concerns death, I will receive it upon myself with a cheerful countenance."

Moses said: "Since you have mentioned the matter of death with your own lips, it was the matter of death, this was the thing of which He spoke to me, and I was afraid to tell you. And now, look, your death is not like that of other mortals, and furthermore, the ministering angels have come for your departure."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed the rabbis noted the special distinction God had bestowed upon Aaron in his last moment.

The souls of these (that is the righteous) will be taken away with a kiss. Said R. Azariah: We find that the soul of Aaron was taken away only with a kiss, as it says, "And Aaron the priest went up into Mount Hor at the commandment (literally 'mouth') of the Lord and died there" (Numbers 33:38).<sup>11</sup>

Aaron was dismayed that he was not informed previously so that he could bid his family farewell.

Aaron said: "Moses my brother, why did you not tell me in front of my mother, my wife and my children?"<sup>12</sup>

Moses did not answer directly and changed the topic.

Moses said: "My brother, do you not know that forty years ago when you made the Golden Calf you deserved annihilation through death, but I stood up in prayer and petition before God, blessed be He, and delivered you from death, as it says, "Moreover the Lord was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him; and I prayed for Aaron at the same time" (Deuteronomy 9:20).<sup>13</sup>

Again Moses changed the subject in order to help Aaron cope with his impending death.

And now, my death should only be like your death, for you are dying and I am burying

you and at the hour that I die, I won't have a brother to bury me, and you die and your sons inherit your position and I die and others inherit my honor.<sup>14</sup>

With this remark, Aaron stretched himself out on the couch and God took his soul.

The rabbis note that the death of this righteous man occurs in the Book of Numbers and note its place in relationship to other events.

R. Eleazar said: Wherefore is (the account of) Aaron's death closely followed by (the account of the disposal of) the priestly vestments? (To inform you) that just as the priest's vestments were (means) to effect atonement, so is the death of the righteous (conducive to procuring) atonement.<sup>15</sup>

R. Yudan said: Why is the account of Aaron's death (Deuteronomy 10:6) put next to a passage which speaks of the breaking of the Tablets (Deuteronomy 10:2)? To teach that Aaron's death was as grievous in the sight of the Holy One as was the breaking of the Tablets.<sup>16</sup>

"And they journeyed from Kadesh; and the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, came unto Mount Hor. And the Lord spoke unto Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor, by the border of the land of Edom, saying: 'Aaron shall be gathered unto his kin'" (Numbers 20:22-24). This bears on what Scripture says: "Because thou hast joined thyself with Ahaziah [the wicked king], the Lord hath made a breach in thy works" (II Chronicles 20:37). Because Israel had associated themselves with the wicked nation in order to pass through their land, they lost a righteous man. For this reason the section dealing with Aaron's being gathered to his people immediately follows the section dealing with the king of Edom; thus: "Israel turned away from him (Edom)" (Numbers 20:21).<sup>17</sup>

Aaron not only died by the kiss of God, but unlike other mortals his body was not destroyed by worms and maggots.

The following seven patriarchs have gone to their eternal rest with great honor and worms and maggots had no dominion over them, that is: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Miriam and

their father Amram.<sup>18</sup>

His place of burial was also special and was selected for him by God.

He left not a mountain in the wilderness, that they might not grow fatigued in climbing up and down. Moreover, although the cloud made the whole wilderness perfectly level, it used to leave an elevated spot where the Tabernacle might rest, and it allowed three mountains to remain; that is Mount Sinai for the Divine Presence, Mount Nebo for the burial of Moses, and Mount Hor for the burial of Aaron.<sup>19</sup>

After God had carried out Aaron's death and burial, Moses left the cave and it disappeared so that no mortal would understand what had happened on Mount Hor.

When Eleazar saw Moses and did not see his father, he said, "my teacher, where is my father?"

Moses said: "He has gone to the Creator on high."

The two of them descended from the mountain.

Israel said to them: "Where is Aaron?"

They said: "He has passed on to the Creator on high."<sup>20</sup>

The people were shocked and did not believe Moses and Eleazar.

How could the Angel of Death strike him? He was a man who had withstood the Angel of Death and had restrained him; as it is written: "And he stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stayed" (Numbers 17:13)! If you bring him back, well and good; if not, we shall stone you!<sup>21</sup>

They even suspected Moses of killing Aaron because of his popularity among the people or Eleazar of killing him to assume his high office.<sup>22</sup>

The people demanded to see Aaron, dead or alive, and Moses turned toward God in order that He might appease and

comfort the people.

To show loving-kindness to him, what did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Aaron's coffin and brought it above the camp of Israel, and all Israel saw Aaron's coffin flying and moving in the air. They then believed that he was dead, and they showed loving-kindness to him, as it is said: "And all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead" (Numbers 20:29).<sup>23</sup>

All of the people in Israel wept for Aaron.

Know that it was so; for what does Scripture relate when Moses our teacher died? "And the children of Israel wept for Moses" (Deuteronomy 34:8); but of Aaron it is written, "They wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel" (Numbers 20:29). That is to say, even the women. Not only (did the women mourn), but they also covered their young children with mud and dust, thereby confirming the word "all." It has been taught: Eighty thousand young men named Aaron followed Aaron's bier. They were the issue of those who wanted to divorce but retracted and their wives became pregnant [for Aaron reconciled them].<sup>24</sup>

Another interpretation: Why did (all) Israel weep for Aaron thirty days (while for Moses only the men wept?) Because (Moses) rendered judgement strictly according to the truth; (but Aaron) never said to a man, "Thou hast acted offensively," or to a woman, "Thou hast acted offensively." That is why it is said, "And all the house of Israel wept for him."<sup>25</sup>

With Aaron's death came the disappearance of the cloud of glory.

When Aaron, the High Priest was born nobody felt it, but when he died and the clouds of glory departed all felt (his loss). The cloud thus made the death known.<sup>26</sup>

The sun beat down fiercely upon Israel<sup>27</sup> and they were exposed to their enemies.

"They have heard that I sigh; there is none to comfort me" (Lamentations 1:21). R. Joshua of Siknin, citing R. Levi, took the verse to be expressive (of Israel's grief at the death) of Aaron the High Priest. You find that when

Aaron the High Priest died, the Canaanites came and fought against Israel, as is said, "When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the South, heard tell that Israel's way of Atarim had set /J.P.S. version: 'that Israel came by way of Atarim'/" (Numbers 21:1). "What is meant by the words: "way of Atarim had set?" That the life of Aaron, the great guide (tayyar) of the children of Israel who had led them through the ways of the wilderness, had set like the sun. Hence, said Israel, "There is none to comfort me" (Lamentations 1:21): not Moses, for he himself is a mourner, and not Eleazar, for he himself is a mourner. "All mine enemies have heard of my trouble, and were glad" (Lamentations 1:21). They said: Now is the time to get at the children of Israel, the time to go and put an end to Canaan's enemies.<sup>28</sup>

With attack by the king of Arad inevitable, the children of Israel were fearful.

When Aaron died the clouds of glory disappeared, as it is written, "And the Canaanite, the king of Arad heard" (Numbers 21:1). What news did he hear? He heard that Aaron had died, and that the clouds of glory had disappeared; he thought that he was free to make war on Israel. Therefore it is written, "And all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead" (Numbers 20:20). With reference to which R. Abahu said: Do not read, 'they saw' (wayir-u) but 'they were seen' (wayyero-u).<sup>29</sup>

They were greatly troubled and some determined that it would be better to return to Egypt. Hence they retreated eight stations.

We also find that they had to go back eight stations — this was for the honor of Aaron and to have the proper funeral rites performed for him — for it is said: "And the children of Israel journeyed from Beeroth-bene-jaakan to Moserah; there Aaron died, and there he was buried" (Deuteronomy 10:6). But was it in Moserah that he died, was it not actually on the Mount Hor that he died, as it is said, "And Aaron the priest went up into the Mount Hor at the commandment of the Lord, and died there" (Numbers 33:38)? How then can Scripture say, "There Aaron died and there he was buried?" It is but to teach that for the honor of Aaron

and to have the proper funeral rites performed for him the Israelites had to go back eight stations. For it is said, "And they journeyed from Moseroth, and pitched in Bene-jaakan, and pitched in Hor-haggidgad, and pitched in Jotbah. And they journeyed from Jotbah, and pitched in Abronah, and pitched in Ezion-geber. And they journeyed from Ezion-geber, and pitched in Mount Hor, in the edge of the land of Edom" (Numbers 33:31-37).<sup>30</sup>

After a vicious struggle with the Levites in Moserah the Israelites submitted to their authority, realizing that it was absurd to return to Egypt. There they gathered and properly mourned their beloved High Priest, who had instructed them in the will and way of God.

Notes. Chapter Twelve

1. Numbers 20:24.
2. Numbers Rabbah 19:17. A parallel is found in Tanhuma Buber, Hukkat 38.
3. Petirat Aharon, p. 93. My translation.
4. Yalkut Shimoni, Hukkat 764. My translation.
5. Petirat Aharon, p. 93. My translation. In Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Volume III:323, it says that the people were happy to see the elevation of Aaron because "the people loved Aaron better than Moses."
6. Petirat Aharon, p. 94. My translation.
7. Yalkut Shimoni, Hukkat 764. My translation.
8. Ibid.
9. Petirat Aharon, p. 94. My translation.
10. Petirat Aharon, p. 94. My translation. A parallel is found in Sifre Deuteronomy 339.
11. Song of Songs Rabbah I:2:5. A parallel is found in Baba Batra 17a.
12. Petirat Aharon, p. 94. My translation.
13. Ibid., p. 94-95. My translation.
14. Ibid., p. 95. My translation. A parallel is found in the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 12, which states: At that time Moses begged for a death like Aaron's death: for he saw Aaron's bier laid out with great honor, and bands and bands of ministering angels mourning him. Now was it in the presence of anyone that he made the request? Nay, when he was by himself he made the request, but the Holy One, blessed be He, heard his whispering. And how do we know that Moses begged for a death like Aaron's death and that God heard his whispering? For it is said, "Die in the mount whither thou goest up, and be gathered unto thy people; as Aaron thy brother died in Mount Hor" (Deuteronomy 32:50). Thus thou dost learn that Moses begged for a death like Aaron's death.

A parallel in Numbers Rabbah 19:19 states: "Take Aaron... and strip" (Numbers 20:25). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'You can comfort him with the assurance that he is bequeathing his crown as an inheritance to his children, whereas you will not do so to yours.'

"And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them on Eleazar" (Numbers 20:28).

15. Moed Katan 28a.
16. Pesikta De Rab Kahana 26:11. A parallel found in Leviticus Rabbah 20:12 states; For what reason was the death of Aaron recorded in close proximity to the breaking of the Tables? Simply this, to teach that Aaron's death was as grievous to the Holy One, blessed be He, as the breaking of the Tables.
17. Numbers Rabbah 19:16.
18. Derek Erez Zuta 58a.
19. Numbers Rabbah 19:16. Parallels are found in Sotah 13b and Tanhuma Hukkat 14.
20. Petirat Aharon, p. 95. My translation.
21. Numbers Rabbah 19:20. A parallel is found in Tanhuma Hukkat 17.
22. Petirat Aharon, p. 95. My translation.
23. Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer, Chpater 17. Parallels are found in Petirat Aharon, p. 95; Sifre Deuteronomy 304 and Lekah Tov, Vayelech, Deuteronomy 31:14.
24. Kallah Rabbathi 52b.
25. The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan, Chapter 12.
26. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:4. Parallels are found in Genesis Rabbah 62:4; Lamentations Rabbah 1:56; Song of Songs Rabbah IV:5:2 and Numbers Rabbah 1:2.
27. Numbers Rabbah 1:2.
28. Pesikta De Rab Kahana 14:2.
29. Taanith 9a.
30. Mekilta De Rabbi Ishmael, Vayassa, Chapter 1.

## CONCLUSIONS

Delving into the realm of midrash not only reveals a clearer picture of Aaron, the high priest, but also enables a better understanding of this creative literature.

The rabbis, because Aaron is the first high priest of Israel, must use their literary genius to portray a character that is deserving of this sacred and high office. At first glance, particularly in light of the biblical account, this appears to be a most difficult task. Aaron, seen only through the eyes of the biblical reader is a weak and insecure man, wavering in his faith, unable to restrain the Israelites from revolt and temptations. He builds the Golden Calf, he requires Moses' help in defeating Korah, he joins Miriam in slandering his brother.

The midrash provides Aaron with a personality that is unavailable through the biblical narratives. The rabbinic literature enables Aaron to explain himself and justify his decisions. The midrash encourages him in making teshuvah, of repenting and acknowledging his misdeeds. What the rabbis successfully do is transform this man into a national hero with whom all of us can identify. We, like Aaron, have shortcomings. We are not always able to do the right thing. We frequently need help from those wiser and more experienced than us. Aaron thus becomes the example of the man continually striving to do better. He is a man who recognizes his limitations, yet lives according

to the best that is in him. He exemplifies the insecurities of the human condition but overcomes his fears by exuding qualities such as love, empathy and sincerity. And like us, Aaron is a dreamer, dreaming of a better world, a world of peace, a world where human life is respected.

Thus the rabbis teach that all humans can aspire to a position of sanctity like that of Aaron's, but only if we live according to the will and way of God. Despite our past, our mistakes, our fears and insecurities, all of us can become high priests and, through the character of Aaron, the rabbis successfully transmit this eternal lesson.

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