

**Tetzaveh 5779**  
**All About Aaron**

From the moment he enters the story, at the beginning of the book of Shemot, the Torah is dominated by one character - Moses. He appears in every single Torah portion, from the beginning of his life to the day of his death which is the last thing the Torah describes.

Except for one Torah portion - today's.

Today is all about Aaron. It centers on the priesthood - how Aaron is to be selected as High Priest, how his unique clothing is to be made and how he and his family are to be consecrated to serve the Mishkan, the desert sanctuary, and the newly formed Israelite people.

The notes of this Torah portion are the most un-intuitive in the Torah. They are particularly rich and elaborate and tricky - as Avi will confirm.

I would add that the clothing is listed in a strange order. You'd expect maybe head to foot. Or outside to inside. But we get neither. Instead we are told first about either the ephod - a kind of embroidered linen top-of-apron arrangement - or the breastpiece, with four rows of three precious stones. We can see models of that any time we open the Ark.

So why the gorgeous notes? And why the strange order of clothing? And why does Moses not show up this week? And what does all this tell us about Aaron?

What *do* we know about Aaron?

We know his biography. He's Moses' elder brother but he's not mentioned at the outset of the story. We first meet him when he becomes Moses' mouthpiece - when Moses, at the Burning Bush, is complaining that he is not eloquent. God tells Moses that Aaron can come with him. And Aaron does. He does some of the speaking. He helps out with some of the plagues. It is he who throws the people's gold into the fire, producing the Golden Calf. His two eldest sons die mysteriously on the day the Mishkan 'goes live'. He complains about Moses' marriage, and then prays for Miriam's recovery when she is punished for the same complaint, though he, it appears, is not. At the end of his life, he appears entirely to acquiesce to Moses' request that he ascend Mount Hor to die there. And he is mourned by the whole community for thirty days.

That's what happened to Aaron. But who was he? What was he like?

Well, we know that as Moses' big brother - the big brother who, if we are to follow the pattern set by the book of Bereishit, Genesis, should be jealous and vengeful, if not actually murderous, when Moses succeeds - as Moses inevitably will, because we know that the younger always does better than the elder in our story. And yet - not so. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that the Torah mixes up the brothers' positionings - sometimes God speaks 'to Moses and Aaron' and sometimes 'to Aaron and Moses,' as if to say that each is important in their own way. So Aaron must have had some quality that Moses lacked.

The Torah gives us an enormous clue to that quality at the moment Aaron is first described for us. *There is your brother Aaron the Levite, says God. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you and he will be happy to see you.* The Hebrew is *samah belibo* – he will be happy in his heart.

Out of this, the rabbis of the early tradition weave a whole back story for Aaron. Hillel - there's another one of the Aaron family for you - urges us to be *like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity and bringing it close to Torah* (Avot 1:12). The Zohar – the mystical Torah commentary of the 12th century - goes further, and explains how if two people were arguing, Aaron would go to the first and tell them how much their friend was missing them, and how sorry they were. Then he'd go to the second and tell them exactly the same thing. And thus, the next time they saw each other, they would make up.

Happy in his heart. Perhaps this explains the order given for Aaron's clothing, both in its instructions and its manufacture. The ephod and the breastpiece always come first in the list. Ephod represents the people. Breastpiece represents the heart on which it lies. For Aaron, the heart always comes first.

Happy in his heart. It's interesting to note the way that he and Moses seem to exchange roles when it comes to speaking, with Aaron, the talented speaker, becoming more silent, and Moses speaking more. I'm reminded of a piece of video I saw where Itai Talgam, an Israeli conductor, used clips from videos of various orchestra conductors to illustrate different qualities of leadership. He concludes that the imposition of authority from above doesn't work well. His prime example is Maestro Leonard Bernstein. His final clip is of Bernstein 'conducting' the Vienna Philharmonic in the 4th movement of Haydn's 88th symphony. I put 'conducting' in quotation marks because his arms are folded. His baton isn't moving. It is only his face that moves, modulating through a series of expressions. And yet, the orchestra is surging along, clearly enjoying itself, and there isn't a beat out of place. It's so beautiful it just makes you weep. Bernstein understood the mystery of leading with the heart.

And so did Aaron. He's all about heart. This is why the musical notes that describe him in this Torah portion are so exquisite. This is why he is the one chosen, on Yom Kippur, to represent the whole people of Israel in coming before God. This is why he is sometimes silent, as if he recognizes the limitations of speech and is turning his energy elsewhere. It's a job that Moses couldn't have done, for all of his other qualities. Indeed, a quick search yesterday told me that the words 'lev Moshe' – Moses' heart – don't seem to turn up together anywhere in the Torah. It's not easy, to lead from the heart. Aaron's own story proves that. He seems to have been unable to abide the people's pain and distress, caving in to their demands for a physical representation of God. His silence after his sons die might have lasted for years - perhaps a tougher leader would have recovered sooner. He makes no demur when he himself is told to die. He seems to choose to let everything fall away. He is a master of the art of letting go. At the very end of his life, as if to prove this, the Torah tells us specifically that Moses strips off all of Aaron's colorful finery so that Aaron's son, Eleazar can wear it. And Aaron is left in his linen undergarments - those same pieces of clothing that Jews have used for centuries to clothe their dead - perfectly human, perfectly vulnerable, perfectly himself. As indeed, he always was.

Happy in his heart. That's a deep lesson about being a leader. It seems that every day, these days, we are hearing about another crisis of leadership. Perhaps what the Torah is teaching us today is that being a leader isn't necessarily about charisma, or passion, or mission. Instead, sometimes, it's a matter of the heart.

Shabbat shalom.