

Tetzaveh 5781 - The Space Between

This week's parashah is unique in that it doesn't mention Moses at all. From the time he comes on the scene to the end of the Torah when he dies, Moses is present in every parashah - except this one, where he is addressed at the beginning as "you" - and then not again.

The whole parashah belongs to Aaron - his function, his clothes, his family. And this means that we can focus, for once, on who he is and what he can teach us.

Aaron and Moses are the first Prophet/Priest dyad in our tradition. (In due course, the dyad will become a triumvirate of Prophet/Priest/King.) Each of these leaders serves a different function. We can quickly see that Moses' role as a prophet means he is out in front, directing, inspiring, occasionally punishing, leading directly and firmly.

But Aaron, as a priest, occupies what I'll call "the space between."

The pattern repeats over and over again. Aaron is Moses' intermediary to Pharaoh, almost his translator. Aaron is the one who takes the (literal) heat when the people want to rebel, stalling them in their rage (which of course goes awry and produces the Golden Calf). Aaron mediates between the people and the Holy One in the Mishkan. And in the book of Bamidbar, we will once again see Aaron standing in the middle space.

The scene is familiar. The people have messed up once again, and a plague descends on them. Aaron runs to the Mishkan; he takes his fire pan and puts incense on it; and *he stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked.*¹ This is the verse that I chose to describe the role of our healthcare workers in the prayer I wrote early in the pandemic and which we have been reciting at every service since.

¹ Bamidbar 17:13

It's this positioning of Aaron which inspires the Rabbis to create the Midrash you can find in the margin of page 165 of your Siddur. It's from the commentary *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* on a verse in *Pirkei Avot* which encourages us to be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving all living creatures and bringing them to Torah. As you can see, the Rabbis imagine Aaron as mediating a dispute between two friends by telling each of them how much the other is sorry. This technique is known as "shuttle mediation" - and once again, here is Aaron in the space between.

Let's leave those thoughts there for a moment while we notice where we are standing in Jewish time. It has just been Purim, and there are two mitzvot of Purim that also operate in the space between. The first is *mishloach manot*, the sending of gifts to each other; the second is *matanot l'evyonim*, the giving of gifts to the poor.

Can we draw an analogy between these mitzvot and Aaron? I think we can.

Firstly, let's consider the theme of what is visible and what is hidden. The name of the Holy One is missing entirely from the book of Esther, focusing our attention instead on its human interactions. Aaron the man is shrouded entirely in his priestly vestments - he's there, but he's hiding in plain sight. That's what it means to occupy the space between - to embody the human rather than the Divine.

And secondly - notice Aaron's special task. It is his job, his alone, to tend the Menorah. He is the one who must keep the flame burning, tending its wicks so that the light is a *ner tamid*, perpetually burning. Only the purest olive oil may be used. Aaron is a creator of light.

So Aaron inhabits humanity, and Aaron brings light.

In my email last week I asked our community to minimize one of the gifting mitzvot this year and maximalize the other. Both concern the space between. One is about the space between friends - the one we reach across when we gift food to each other. But the other is about reaching beyond our own circle to those we do not know, to those who are in need, who may never know that we have given to them (there's that hiding in plain sight again).

I suggest a trip to the LA Budget website after Shabbat. Our congregant Danny Mintz works with this organization with specific responsibility for hunger issues. At the moment, one in five Louisiana families cannot adequately feed their children. One in five.

We can emulate Aaron and interpose ourselves, this Purim, between them and poverty. We can emulate Aaron and do so gently, diplomatically. We can literally place ourselves, like Aaron, between the living and the dying.

As we read Aaron's Torah this week, let us practice it too.

Shabbat shalom.