

Parashat Chukat 5778, 2018:

*Who Was Aharon?*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Aharon was the first Kohen Gadol, and one of the greatest people in the history of our nation. Yet, as King Solomon taught us long ago, “For there is no righteous man on earth who does good and sins not.” (*Sefer Kohelet* 7:20, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Unfortunately, this verse rings true in Aharon’s case as well, especially regarding his most grievous sin, namely, the creation of the *Eigel Hazahav* (the Golden Calf). What could have caused him to fall to this level? At first glance, it seems that Aharon was motivated by fear, as we find in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 7a*, wherein it relates how his nephew, Hur, was murdered by the people for refusing to participate in the construction of the Golden Calf:

“And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it.” [*Sefer Shemot* 32:5] What did he actually see? — R. Benjamin b. Japhet says, reporting R. Eleazar: “He saw Hur lying slain before him and said [to himself]: If I do not obey them, they will now do unto me as they did unto Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the prophet, ‘Shall the Priest and the Prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of G-d?’” (*Megillat Eichah* 2:20, Talmud translation, *Soncino Talmud*, brackets my own)

Even if Aharon was motivated by a visceral and understandable fear of death, it would not, however, have been sufficient cause to engage in any form of *avodah zarah* (idol worship) since, as the Ramban notes in his *Commentary on the Torah*, such an act is “... in the category of those sins that one should be willing to die for rather than violate.” (see *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 74a*).

Why, then, did Aharon play such a seemingly ill-conceived role in the construction of the *Eigel Hazahav*? A convincing answer is found at the end of our Talmudic passage:

“Shall the Priest [i.e. myself, Aharon, the *Kohen Gadol*] and the Prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of G-d?” – and [if so,] they [the Jewish people] will never find forgiveness. Better let them worship the Golden Calf, for which offence they may yet find forgiveness through repentance. (Brackets my own)

In short, in a poignant and profound act of self-sacrifice, Aharon compromised himself and his *schar l’olam habah* (reward in the world to come) in order to prevent permanent damage to *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish People). What was his underlying motivation? In my estimation, he did this because of his nearly unlimited love for the Jewish people, and his desire to bring about peace and love between them. This idea is found in Rashi’s (1040-1105) *Commentary on the Torah* in the context of his analysis of a verse that appears in this week’s *parasha*: “The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 20:29) Rashi opines: **The entire house of Israel** [refers to both] the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife.”

Upon careful reflection, it appears that there is much more to the story than that which Rashi shares in this gloss. In fact, his comment is based upon a fascinating passage that appears in *Midrash Aggadah* (Buber) that underscores the most prominent aspects of Aharon’s personality, and the unparalleled manner in which he was perceived by the Jewish people:

“And the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days” – that which was said regarding Aharon was greater than that which was said in regards to Moshe. [In Moshe’s case the Torah states: “And the sons of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days...*Sefer Devarim* 34:8] This means that **only** the men wept for Moshe, whereas in Aharon’s case the text states, [“the **entire** house of Israel,”] which included both the men and the women. (Chapter 20, section 29, this, and the following translations, brackets and emphases my own)

We are immediately taken aback by the singular difference that obtains between the people's reaction at the passing of Aharon, in contrast to that of Moshe. In Aharon's case, all of the Jewish people, including the women, cried for 30 days upon his death, whereas in regards to Moshe, only the men cried for this period of time. This is difficult to understand, since it seems that Moshe should have received the greater emotional response from his beloved nation. After all, as Hashem's *shaliach* (messenger), he led the people out of Egypt, helped them cross the Sea of Reeds, brought them to the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and continuously taught them the Holy One's Torah! Our *Midrash* continues its powerful exposition:

This [all-inclusive reaction of the fledgling Jewish nation] took place because Aharon pursued peace (*rodef shalom*), loved peace (*ohav shalom*) and brought about harmony between a man and his wife and between a woman and her friend. As the text states: "In peace and righteousness he [i.e. Aharon] went with Me, and he brought back many from iniquity." (*Sefer Malachi* 2:6)

How did Aharon accomplish these often-daunting tasks? Once, again, we turn to the *Midrash*:

When Aharon heard that two men, or a husband and his wife, were in the midst of a dispute, he would walk toward one of them and say to him: "Your friend has come to me, and he is totally upset that he has angered you. Moreover, he/she beseeched me to come to you to seek permission for him to approach, so that you may forgive him." In addition, Aharon would not leave the aggrieved individual until he had effectively removed all hatred from his heart. In this way, he would set the stage for peace between them, and only then go on his way.

As the continuation of the *Midrash* so clearly demonstrates, Aharon emerges as the people's counselor and advocate, ever driven by his everlasting dedication to *shalom*:

When one of the injured parties would encounter their friend, following their session with Aharon, they would hug, embrace and kiss one another. So, too, was his approach when he heard about a fight between a man and his wife – he would not take leave from them until they achieved an authentic reconciliation. Therefore, both the men and the women cried for Aharon upon his passing.

We live in a fractious world of unending dissension. It appears that Aharon's approach is desperately needed to help heal the endless *pirood* (discord) that so powerfully impacts us all. As

Hillel taught us so long ago: “Be of the students of Aharon – loving peace, pursuing peace, loving your fellow beings and bringing them close to the Torah.” (*Pirkei Avot* I:12) With Hashem’s help, may these words be realized soon and, in our days, and may we, too, be counted amongst the students of Aharon. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.