YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

**Shiur #15: The Actions of Aharon**

Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that a High Priest left the Temple and the entire nation was following him. When they saw Shemaya and Avtalyon, they left him and went after Shemaya and Avtalyon. Eventually, Shemaya and Avtalyon went to say goodbye to the High Priest. He said to them: “Let the sons of the nations come in peace.” They said to him: “Let the sons of the nations who do the work of Aharon come in peace. The sons of Aharon who do not do the work of Aharon should not come in peace” (*Yoma* 71b).

A *mishna* in *Yoma* (7:4) describes the procedure after the High Priest finishes his Temple service on Yom Kippur. He would remove his priestly garments, return to his normal clothing, and walk home accompanied by the Jewish multitudes. This procedure surely brought with it relief that the *avoda* (service) went well and powerful admiration for the man who led the way. Since our tale appears as part of the *gemara*’s commentary on that *mishna*, it seems that the above episode took place on Yom Kippur

The High Priest, accustomed to public adulation as he leaves the Temple, cannot overcome his sense of insult when the populace abandons him in favor of two scholars. Since these two scholars stem from non-Jewish stock, he attempts to put them in their place by reminding them of their less distinguished lineage. The Gemara (*Gittin* 57b) says that Shemaya and Avtalyon were descendants of Sancherev, an enemy monarch. How can their *yichus* (lineage) compete with that of the High Priest? Shemaya and Avtalyon remind the priest that actions matter much more than lineage. When we think about the authentic legacy of Aharon, these two converts claim the mantle in a far more profound fashion than this High Priest. Their traveling to greet the High Priest reveals that they honored others and were not obsessed with their own dignity.

Maharsha cites *Horayot* 13a which instructs us that a scholar who is a *mamzer* (bastard) takes precedence over a High Priest who is an ignoramus. Indeed, what we do with our lives determines our worth far more than which family we happen to come from. A similar theme emerges from the introduction to *Chayei Adam,* where R. Avraham Danzig warns of the perils of excessive pride. After discussing how wealth, strength, intelligence, and lineage can all lead to this personality flaw, R. Danzig ranks *yichus* lowest on the scale of qualities. The other qualities at least sometimes benefit humanity, but lineage alone offers no help to anybody. He cites several sources cautioning against arrogance based on ancestry, including our Talmudic dialogue between these scholars and the High Priest.

This High Priest was no sterling personality, as evident in his jealousy and pettiness. Ritva tries to neutralize the insulting tone of the priest by claiming that the term “*benei amamin*” could also refer to the Jewish people. If so, the priest did not allude to Shemaya and Avtalyon’s past. Ben Yehoyada also mitigates the crime by saying that the High Priest attempted to praise them through highlighting their rising from humble origins to greatness. However, neither approach truly coheres with the story. As Maharsha notes, Shemaya and Avtalyon‘s reaction makes it clear that the priest attempted to insult them. Indeed, the Second Temple period saw many High Priests who were less than noble, and this man was apparently one of them.

Which aspect of Aharon’s lifework do these scholars refer to when they note the priest’s shortcomings? Rashi points to Aharon’s traditional role as the pursuer and promoter of peace. The High Priest, a biological descendant of Aharon, fails to play this role when he adopts a more contentious posture. According to Rashi, this High Priest violates the prohibition on *ona’at devarim* (*Bava Metzia* 58b) in reminding converts of their past.

*Avot* 1:12 portrays Aharon as the paradigm of peace. “Hillel would say: Be like the students of Aharon. Love peace, pursue peace, love humanity, and bring them close to Torah.” Is this role of Aharon explicit in the Bible? The Torah clearly depicts Aharon acting as Moshe’s mouthpiece (*Shemot* 7:1), as bringing plagues (*Shemot* 7:19, 8:2, 13), and as performing the service in the Tabernacle, but where do we see him as a peacemaker?

Aharon does plead with Moshe to pray on behalf of Miriam after she is stricken with leprosy (*Bemidbar* 12:11-12). We could view this as an act of reconciling a disagreement among siblings. Furthermore, the priestly blessing concluding with a request for peace (*Bemidbar* 6:26) may also indicate something about Aharon’s legacy. However, I believe that the real source for associating priesthood with peace is not in the *Chumash* (Pentateuch).

Know then that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant might be with Levi, says the Lord of hosts.  My covenant was with him of life and peace, and I gave them to him, and of fear, and he feared Me, and was afraid of My name.  The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and did turn many away from iniquity.  For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts (*Malakhi* 2:4-7).

*Malakhi* depicts the priest as someone who teaches Torah, a role also alluded to in Moshe’s blessing of the tribe of Levi (*Devarim* 33:10). He also twice mentions peace as part of the priest’s job description. Indeed, *Avot deRabbi Natan* 12 and *Sanhedrin* 6b cite this verse in the context of identifying Aharon as a lover and pursuer of peace. Only in this late prophet’s book do we discover this important trait of our first priest.

An interpretation cited in the *Gaon Yaakov*, a commentary appearing in the *Ein Yaakov*, suggests that this *gemara* actually intends to focus on a different trait of Aharon. At the burning bush, God informs Moshe that his older brother will happily greet Moshe when Moshe sets out on his return journey to Egypt (*Shemot* 7:14). *Shabbat* 139a (and see *Shemot Rabba* 3:17) says that Aharon received the priestly garments as a reward for doing so. Some analysis reveals the greatness of Aharon at this moment. Older brothers usually dislike being outdone by younger brothers. To strengthen the point, let us posit that Aharon had already risen to a leadership role among the Israelites in Egypt. According to the Sages(*Shemot Rabba* 3:16), Aharon already achieved prophecy while in Egypt and was surely used to recognition and privilege. He suddenly hears that a younger brother away in Midian for decades has been selected as God’s chosen messenger. While those of lesser character would harbor resentment, Aharon meets Moshe with undiluted enthusiasm.

If so, Aharon not only exemplifies the pursuit of peace, he also exemplifies the ability to rejoice in another’s success. The High Priest in our Talmudic story lacks precisely this trait. Not content with his own unique role, he strongly resents the public’s reverence for two scholars. How distant his character is from his illustrious ancestor! *Gaon Yaakov* adds that converts share this quality of Aharon. For much of Jewish history, joining the Jewish faith meant leaving the winning team (on a socio-political level) and joining a downtrodden minority. To some degree, the ability to do so depends upon being secure in one’s own identity, even though others seem to have it better.

Aharon exemplifies two crucial attributes, loving peace and taking joy in another’s achievement. Shemaya and Avtalyon were his disciples in a much deeper way than his biological descendant the High Priest.