

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: The Innocence of Aaron?

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Let us study. Tonight a story, disturbing, fascinating, the story of a high priest. And in the presence of a high priest, so to speak, may I begin with a confession. I do not understand. I do not understand Aaron, nor do I understand the attitude tradition has displayed towards him. Why does it pay him homage alongside his younger brother whose character, stature, and stubbornness surely are far more elevated than his? [00:01:00] Why are their names forever bound together in the Psalms as well as in our prayers? *Moshe ve'Aharon ha-kohanav*, *Moshe v'Aharon*, Moses and Aaron.

You rarely mention the first without immediately following with the other. Is it to remind us, again and again, as though the two were different, they were brothers nevertheless? What did Aaron do, I mean really do to deserve the honor of remaining in our sacred history and collective memory as the founder of the priestly dynasty? I'm afraid I have to say it because it's undeniable. I have problems, serious problems with the hero of our study session [00:02:00] tonight. There is something odd about his role in the eternal story of Israel. Why not say it?

He disappoints me. I expected more from a leader, a spiritual guide of his caliber.

In other words, one senses a chasm between the person and the image, between the man and the legend surrounding him, a chasm one finds difficult to bridge. The fact is beyond dispute. In the entire turbulent story of Exodus, it is the chapter dealing with Aaron and the golden calf that disturbs and saddens us most. Our forefathers had just been freed from pharaoh's bondage. They had just witnessed the great miracles, [00:03:00] the crossing of the Red Sea, survival in the desert. They had just heard the voice of the almighty God ordering them to shape for themselves a national destiny anchored in the ethics of memory. And they have already rejected, repudiated, and forgotten the very basis of His commandment, that He is their only God.

Forty days earlier, they had an appointment with God at Sinai. And, freed from slavery, free and proud, they declared as one man *na'aseh ve'nishma*, submitting body and soul to His will, to His law. And all of a sudden they could not resist the temptation of all the Egyptian myths and demons embodied by the magic of idolatry? [00:04:00] What happened to our ancestors, our Mayflower? How could they fall from such heights to such

depths in such a brief moment? No. I do not understand them. But in truth, I understand even less than man who in Moses' absence was their uncontested leader, Aaron, the eldest son of the family.

How could he have joined the mob? And why in such haste, without any resistance? If at least he had tried, with words or deeds, arguments or threats, to reprimand them, to calm their unholy enthusiasm, [00:05:00] if he had tried to slow them down, to win time in order to reflect alone or together, in committees on what was happening, to get advice, find allies, and mobilize friends. If he had made an effort to stall things long enough to implore heaven to come to his rescue, to perform another miracle, to hasten Moses' return, but no. Aaron quickly, too quickly, accepted the ill-fated uprising, did nothing to stop it. How is one to explain this lack of character, this ethical breach on the part of Israel's first high priest?

Better yet, [00:06:00] how did he manage to stay anointed as high priest? Does it mean that high priests have tenure, (laughter) that they cannot be impeached, or that his sin was forgiven? Then why only his and not that of others? Is there one law for important persons and another for ordinary citizens? He wasn't even elected. There was no election campaign, and he

did not record any victory. Isn't it incumbent upon a leader appointed by God, anointed by God to be more ethical and more resolute in matters of principle than the simple members of his community? [00:07:00]

Logically, he should have been condemned before the others and more harshly than the others. We know from Talmudic sources that the tzaddik, the just person, the leader is held to a higher degree of responsibility because of his authority. What about Aaron? Again, I fail to understand the person of history of Aaron, of his exalted place in Jewish history. Oh, there are, of course, enough elements in his life that move me to feel admiration for him. Haven't we spoken enough of him a year ago and two years ago about *vayidom Aharon*, when his two sons died, Nadab and Abihu, and his silence, his silence to this day is a statement of philosophy, [00:08:00] a statement of compassion, a statement of acceptance, a statement that to this day is influencing not only our behavior but our thought process.

So there are, of course, enough reasons to say Aharon is a great man. But what about the golden calf? The golden calf that day was one of the blackest, one of the darkest, one of the most ominous days in our history. And he was a principal character in it. Well, my attitude ought not shock you. Since we began

our study sessions here, our encounters, 28 years ago when I all of a sudden remember the 28th is *b'gematria koach*, the numerical value is *koach*, [00:09:00], 28, *kaf-chet*. We need a lot of *koach* to be here, (laughter) for me to study and for you to be with me in my study.

So what did we do really? For 28 years we have always favored the question. I believe there is quest in question, and I love the word quest. What have we done together since our very first encounter, if not learned the art of questioning a text, of looking for its hidden meaning of reaching for the clues that generations and generations of scholars and commentators and disciples have left us as vantage points? We have studied so frequently, and your presence here confirms it again, that no adventure is as enriching [00:10:00] nor as captivating as the one which searches for ancient messages that have survived centuries, and at every step, every crossroad, absorbed a hypothesis here, a smile there, a light or a song that indicated the road to follow, a shadow or a sigh that moved us to sadness, a sudden and subtle illumination that helped us to go forward with a sense of confidence and hope.

Thus, we have studied a number of biblical characters: Adam and Eve and the anguished mystery of the beginning, Cain and Abel

and the first victory of death through fratricide, the father-son relationship in the Akedah, the metamorphosis of Jacob and Joseph, [00:11:00] the solitude of Moses, and untimely death of Nadab and Abihu, the heartbreaking tale of Yiftach's daughter, the extraordinary story of our eternal beauty queen Esther. Each time we said that for us the past reverberates in the present. Whatever happened then affects us today. Old Abraham is still journeying with his son Isaac towards Moriah, except that in our time the angel did not intervene to save him.

Jerusalem has become once again a sovereign Jewish state, and it will remain a sovereign Jewish state until the last day of all days. (applause) But the danger that threatens it, from inside as well as out, [00:12:00] reminds us of the period in which Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was compelled to fight the fanatics in his own midst. Hate was then the most urgent problem. It still is. Is there an answer, a remedy to hatred? If so, it surely is linked to memory. Memory alone can discern and disarm it. Like study, memory is an opening. If it is sealed, it is stifled. If it is closed, it becomes sterile.

It must be open. Enter it. And you will be surrounded by allies and friends and all those who have lived, who have studied and taught for generations and generations throughout

centuries are, [00:13:00] therefore, our allies and remain our friends. But what about those friends who are still waiting outside? (laughter) They too will be surrounded by our friends and our allies. But first, they must come in. (applause)

In Scripture, Aaron appears on the stage almost [00:14:00] unannounced, as if by accident. We meet him through his younger brother. Better yet, we meet him as if to offer God a convincing argument in his bitter and exhausting argument with Moses about his mission to the people of Israel, for Moses is both timid and obstinate. He is in the desert, a shepherd, when God offers him a choice appointment. God gives him an assignment, and what an assignment, to defy the great Pharaoh and force him to free an entire people whose lord Pharaoh no longer is.

But Moses politely yet stubbornly says no. God offers him [00:15:00] a central role in Jewish history, and Moses answers thank you, but -- The scene, as you remember, filled with beauty and awe, takes place near the burning bush, which burns and burns and is never consumed. Moses, a solitary dreamer, hears God's voice ordering him to remove his sandals for sacred is the ground under his feet. And the voice continues, "I am the God of your father, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of

Jacob." And then, says the text, Moses hides his face, for he is afraid of looking at the countenance of God.

Moses is no doubt shaken. What next? Soon after the celestial monologue goes on. [00:16:00] And God says, "I have seen, seen well, the affliction of my people in Egypt. I have heard their outcry." Moses hasn't uttered a word yet. Profoundly moved -- how can one not be moved by the burning bush and by God's voice? -- he waits. He listens. For the moment it is his only duty to be there and open his ears. Perhaps Moses wonders why the Master of the universe has chosen him of all people, a poor shepherd, why he has chosen him to be His confidant. Suddenly he understands.

God wants something from him. He wants him to do something, something urgent, something dangerous. [00:17:00] He wants him to go back to his native Egypt where a death sentence is hanging on his head. And God says, "I am sending you to Pharaoh," says God. "The children of Israel must leave Egypt." Moses' reaction seems somewhat odd. Though he hasn't lived among Jews for a long time, he was in the Midian, he begins to argue like them. (laughter) And he asks God, why me? Who am I to go to Pharaoh and free the children of Israel from Egypt? Patiently, God tries to reassure him. I shall be with you.

That's good news. (laughter) But Moses is not satisfied. All right, says he. Suppose I accept, I go there, I meet the [00:18:00] Jews, I tell them that the God of their ancestors has sent me. What if they ask me, what is his name? What am I to answer? Isn't it strange? Moses worries over what other Jews, not Pharaoh, may ask him. Still patient, God gives him an enigmatic answer. His name? Not I am who I am, but "eh'yeh asher eh'yeh," I shall be who I shall be, meaning the Eternal, the eternal renewal, the permanent, the immortal being who is always in the future because the present, which is ours, is not His. He is always the future and the present and the past.

So God tells him what other [00:19:00] words to use when speaking to the Jews. He gives him the words that smack with bribery. "I shall strike the Egyptians," said God, "And you shall leave, but not empty-handed." Unconvinced, Moses continues to resist. "They will not believe me." So God, apparently in a good mood, accomplishes a few miracles, just to prove his point and lend Moses courage. Changing tactics, Moses now focuses on himself. "Look, I am not an orator. I am not good at speechmaking. I am a stutterer. My tongue is heavy when I speak." Nothing doing, for God too is stubborn.

"You are a poor speaker?" says God. "I shall be your speech writer." [00:20:00] In despair, one can hear Moses' outcry. "Please, send someone else." (laughter) At this point God gets angry and summons Aaron to enter the narrative. Before he wasn't there. And God says, "I knew all along that your brother Aaron would do the speaking, not you. Incidentally, he is on his way. He saw you, and his heart is rejoicing." Aaron? Who is he? What is he doing here? It is the first time we hear his name mentioned. Up to this moment the text ignored his very existence.

Where was he hiding until now? What was his occupation in Egypt? Was he married? Did he live with his parents? Were they still alive? [00:21:00] Was he thinking about his younger brother, who was to become Pharaoh's nemesis, a kind of public enemy number one? Who told him to hurry to the desert to be reunited with him? As for Moses, was he aware that he had left behind an older brother and their parents? Clearly our knowledge of Aaron's early years is poor, astonishingly poor. And Scripture is of no help to us.

The Midrash -- thank God for the Midrash -- is more generous, offering several pious legends that stress the point that in Egypt, under Pharaoh's rule, Aaron served as a Jewish prophet.

So it was not Moses who was the first prophet but Aaron. And that it was God Himself [00:22:00] who ordered him to go and meet Moses in the desert. In the text his fame is sudden, his career dazzling. As soon as he appears he is appointed by the highest authority to serve as Moses' companion and God's official spokesman. In the Midrash, Moses is punished for having resisted the Almighty's will.

Though God had intended to make him the first high priest, we are told, Moses timorousness caused him to change his mind. In other words, in God's plan in the beginning it was Moses who was supposed to be the high priest. Only because he said no that Aaron got the job. And so the honor of founding the noble priestly dynasty was given [00:23:00] to the older brother. But is the punishment fair? Was Moses wrong in arguing with God? Some of you may guess my answer. No. Moses was not wrong. I would go as far as to suggest that whenever he argued with God, he emerged enhanced. Unlike Moses, Aaron did not argue. He never does.

Kindhearted to the point of apparent weakness, Aaron accepts from God and man alike. He is the eternal yes-sayer. How different the two brothers are. Moses, in his new role of leader, is now the man of action, Aaron the man of words.

[00:24:00] Moses is subject to frequent mood changes. He's never the same. Aaron is not. Moses gets angry. Aaron never does. Moses fights battles, loses some, but never gives up, never gives in, whereas Aaron shuns violent confrontation. Moses is a fervent believer in truth, just as Aaron is a believer in peace. In peace, above everything else, what he really desires is to be left in peace.

It is not that he's always in the shadows, only their sister is always in the shadows. We spoke about her two years ago, about Miriam, and I feel for Miriam. I'm ready to fight her battles. She was a strong [00:25:00] person, and she was part of the great adventure of the liberation of our people. And for some reason she was left aside. And when she appeared, not in a good role, she was punished harshly. Aaron is not always in the shadows. A public figure cannot not be seen in public sometime. But Aaron is seen only when he has no choice. He has to be pushed.

Endowed with a mission, he fulfills it. Given a task, he accomplishes it. But he never takes the initiative. He does not ask for anything. He does what he's supposed to do. He accompanies Moses and speaks for him who speaks for God. And he speaks well. But he says only what God wants him to say, to

Pharaoh on one hand, to the Jewish slaves [00:26:00] on the other. His first act of leadership is, according to Scripture, to share the platform with Moses who summons the elders of the community, of the people, to an urgent meeting. It is he, Aaron, who transmits God's will as formulated by Moses.

The two brothers try to persuade the elders, the *Ziknei Yisrael*, to join them in the march to Pharaoh's royal palace. It is a delegation. Today there are so many delegations going to high places, and there are always too many candidates. Not then. Then the two brothers tried to persuade everybody without success. Neither brother is young anymore. Aaron is 83, [00:27:00] Moses 80. At the entrance to the palace, comments Rashi, Aaron suffers his first defeat. His attempt at persuasion results in nothing. It's simple. The elders are afraid.

One after the other, quietly, meekly, they all retreat and disappear. And Moses and Aaron are all alone when they find themselves face to face with the cruel Pharaoh who dismisses them with contempt. They are humiliated and saddened, saddened because as a result of their intervention, Jewish slaves are made to endure harsher and more unbearable oppression. Well, we know what follows, God's threats, his miracles, Pharaoh's

promises and withdrawals, the suffering of the Jews who vacillate between anguish and [00:28:00] hope. We acquaint ourselves once more with the amazing convulsions of Jewish history.

The script remains constant. God speaks to Moses who speaks to Pharaoh who, annoyed and struck by the tremendous power of the Jewish God whose name he has never heard, promises everything and gives nothing. With a few exceptions, God addresses his words to Moses whom he considers his special envoy, his special interlocutor. Aaron's role? The text defines it with great clarity. It is again he is his brother's prophet. It is from his lips that Aaron receives the Divine message and communicates it to the king. At the end, Moses feels he no longer needs an intermediary. He speaks directly to the enemy leader, short, biting sentences. *Shelach et ami*, [00:29:00] let my people go.

In parenthesis, surely you know some commentators explain, not without humor, that it was fortunate for Jewish history that Moses was such a poor speaker. Otherwise he might have launched into long lectures on philosophy, sociology, (laughter) and human rights. But due to his poor speaking abilities, he had to be brief. *Shelach et ami*. There was no time left for debate. It was yes or no, now or never. A difficult task to convince

Pharaoh, Aaron's was no less difficult. His task was to persuade the Jews to give up slavery and to embark on a long journey and destination unknown. [00:30:00]

At the end, both brothers may claim victory. The text invites drama and ecstasy. We are witnessing a turning point in history. Collective slavery is succeeded by a mass exodus. We read about the nocturnal escape, the flight towards the Red Sea, the miraculous parting of the waves, the rescue of the weak, the death of the mighty. Moses' Song of the Sea giving thanks to God. Now one can breathe. The children of Israel are free and out of danger. Here is the desert. Six hundred thousand men, women, and children begin a journey that after 40 years will lead their heirs to the Promised Land. It's still not easy. [00:31:00]

True, the Egyptian threat has vanished, but there are others: thirst, hunger, people are exhausted. They need a scapegoat, someone to blame. Whose fault is it if nights are dark and cold? Moses. Whose fault is it that food is insufficient? Moses. Everything is always his fault, never Aaron's. Already before crossing the Red Sea they attacked Moses and shouted at him in anger. Why have you brought us here? Weren't there enough graves for us in Egypt? For us it would have been better

to work as slaves in Egypt than to perish in the desert. My friends, Aaron is there. Why doesn't he, the orator, defend [00:32:00] his brother?

Why doesn't he at least share the blame? Aaron does nothing. Three days after being rescued they turned on Moses with a new complaint. They were thirsty and had no water. There was a fountain nearby, but its water was bitter. Commented the celebrated Rabbi of Kotzk, one of my favorite masters, the great Reb Mendel, he said it is not the water but the people that were bitter. And against whom was their wrath directed? Moses again. Does Aaron have anything to say? He says nothing. But tell me. Isn't he co-responsible? The moment they are dissatisfied, the moment things don't look good, people attack [00:33:00] Moses, always Moses.

How can I not love Moses? But why don't they ever protest against Aaron, or at least against Aaron also? Isn't he the official and officially anointed co-leader or associate leader of this community in transformation? Isn't he the number two, the closest aid to the military and political chief? Why isn't anyone ever angry at him? What makes him a kind of Teflon leader (laughter) whom people never criticize personally but only rarely, if at all, together with Moses. Why is he so high

in the ratings? At the station called Rephidim, [00:34:00] a thirsty crowd is ready to stone Moses, again, Moses, not Aaron.

Is it because Moses is always, to quote the French romantic poet Alfred de Vigny, lonely and solitary as if separated from the people by a column of clouds, dwelling always in the shadow of God, in the Ohel Moed, the sacred tent where he receives God's voice? And because Aaron, on the other hand, always stays with the people. Is it because ordinary men and women see in Aaron someone they can identify with, whereas they sense in Moses a superior being chosen, elevated and condemned by God to a destiny made of isolation and solitude known to special leaders alone? Is it possible that the people fear Moses but love [00:35:00] Aaron?

Oh yes, the two brothers are different. And I don't understand. Well, let's admit it. Aaron has the good part. He has almost no power. Moses delegates authority but his is the supreme authority. And Moses is inaccessible. Aaron is not. To receive the law Moses ascends alone unto heaven, alone. Why didn't he invite someone to be with him, a secretary, his brother, his disciple? Aaron, Joshua, and 70 elders, all in positions of leadership, stay behind below. Maybe that is the

characteristic of Moses and Aaron. They are together.

[00:36:00] It's typical.

Aaron is always surrounded by people. Moses will forever use a harsh voice, issuing orders, decrees, commandments, prohibitions. Not so Aaron who, perhaps seeking popularity, wears a smile on his face even when sin seems to prevail. Moses personifies the rigor of the law and its inflexibility. Aaron embodies warmth, goodness, kindness, indulgence. One could almost state, not without some reticence, that Moses wants to be closer to God, but Aaron to people. No wonder people love him. But why does God look upon him with grace, since he has done nothing heroic, nothing out of the ordinary for the sake of his eternal glory? [00:37:00]

Indeed, God is so fond of Aaron and so determined to please him that he orders Moses to personally take care of his brother's career and happiness. It is Moses who must procure Aaron's special vestments. Only Aaron's? No, his son's too. As if Moses wasn't busy enough, as if he had no other worries, but Moses complies. In fact, he is happy for his brother and nephews, Aaron, Eleazar, Ithamar, Nadav, and Avihu receive from Moses himself their priestly clothes. Does Moses think of his own sons, who do not benefit from his high position? If both

the office and the title of priests are [00:38:00] hereditary, those of the teacher are not.

Moses' sons are treated in the book of books as ordinary mortals. At the end they simply and quietly vanish from the stage. Why doesn't Moses, a good Jewish father, after all, see to it that their future is assured? Moses has other more urgent problems probably, God, the law, the collective destiny of his people, its place in history and in the vision of God.

Individual everyday issues are Aaron's domain. It is he who will wear the *Choshen Mishpat*, the pectoral of judgment, with its 12 precious stones with the names of the 12 tribes symbolizing the whole community of Israel. [00:39:00]

Aaron represents the external aspect of leadership, all that is visible, tangible, concrete, form, style, and protocol. Moses, on the other hand, personifies the substance of authority, an inner power that remains secret and inviolate. There too one understands the popularity of Aaron among Jews. But how is one to explain the many favors he receives from God? Does he deserve them? Naturally, one may say, who are we to judge him? But following a short passage about the law of Shabbat, almost immediately after the long weekly portion of the Bible, the parashah *Tetzaveh*, where the role and vestments and

responsibilities of the priests are described in great [00:40:00] detail, we come in the next portion that of *Ki Tissa*, upon the harrow episode of the golden calf.

Why are the two events so closely linked in time, chronologically to one another? Is it to teach us that one was the result of the other, that when spiritual leaders pay too much attention to their appearance and when simply laws of Shabbat are violated, idolatry may not be too far away? Obviously it is the people or a malicious faction of the people and not Aaron, who came up with the idea of producing a golden calf. And the biblical narrative is worth rereading. Remember, when Moses was summoned by God to ascend unto heaven and receive the law, his mission was to last 40 [00:41:00] days.

As his absence grew inexplicably long, impatient skeptics or cynics used the people's feeling of depression, ran to Aaron, and implored him to produce an idol, a god, a new god to lead them. And lo and behold, Aaron accepts. As we said, he doesn't even attempt to discourage them. He doesn't say, look, you are exhausted, have a bite to eat. Go to your tent. Sleep on it. Tomorrow we shall see together what needs to be done. No. His instant reaction is to be on their side. He joins their ranks.

He asks them to bring him the golden rings belonging to their [00:42:00] wives and children, not their own.

Did he think that that would be for them too great a sacrifice? In fact, the entire people brought him its golden rings, and Aaron, rather than saying, now, leave, please. This is a delicate job. Let me work alone. It may take a few hours, several days perhaps. No. He seizes the objects, places them in a mold, and fabricates a calf, or, according to other versions, a mask of a calf, and all those present, in a sudden frenzy, shout *Eyleh elokekha Yisrael*. Look, Israel, this is thy God, the God that brought you out of Egypt. Is Aaron shocked by the blasphemy? Is he hurt? Does he feel the need to shout, to weep, to defend the honor of the God of Israel?

If so, he does not show it, [00:43:00] quite the contrary. He seems in control of himself and in total harmony with the rebels. He goes even farther they. He erects for them an altar, something they did not even figure in their demands. Then he cries out "*chag la'shem mahar!*" tomorrow is a holiday, a holy day dedicated to the Lord. Did he mean the Lord with a capital L? The populous did not hear it that way. For them it meant a holiday named for the idol they could see and touch. Well, again, here is Aaron, a leader at last. People obey him

now, not Moses. And all of them rise early and come to celebrate with him.

They eat, drink, bring offerings. They rejoice. They laugh. They are exuberant. What happened to Aaron, God's emissary and first high priest? How could he [00:44:00] transgress the fundamental Jewish law prohibiting idolatry? Is he so weak, so frightened that he does not dare to antagonize the hysterical mob thirsty for sinful adoration? He, the celebrated speaker, could have used his talent for oratory to convince some, if not all Jews to wait, to think it over, not to go overboard. He could have at least broken the unanimity, provoked descension in the ranks, something which is so easy to do with Jews.

(laughter)

Why didn't he create some critical split? Why didn't he? Oh, my friends, Aaron's conduct is indeed incomprehensible. I don't understand. But then Moses' conduct and God's are also incomprehensible. Studying the [00:45:00] sources, we realize that tradition in general terms does everything possible to exculpate, whitewash and rehabilitate Aaron. Most Midrashic and medieval commentators are so charitable towards him that they make him a victim of a misunderstanding. Aaron emerges as the

most misunderstood character in the Bible. But what about his misdeeds? Oh, it's a matter of perspective.

In spite of what the story tells us, he did nothing wrong, nothing bad, surely not consciously. Listen to the view a Midrash offers us of the situation. Anguished by Moses' absence, he should have been away 40 days only, and it's already the fortieth, the people are agitated. Aaron enlists the help of his nephew, Hur, son of Miriam and father of Caleb, to calm their fears, saying, be patient. Moses will return. [00:46:00] He's on his way back. Wait a few hours. The exhortation does have an effect on the crowd. This is clear since Satan is getting worried. Satan is troubled.

If the high priest is successful, he's successful in his attempt to abort the golden calf, Satan's position is weakened and his plan doomed. As Israel's enemy and God's and all Israel's, Satan needs a Jewish spiritual surrender. And so, to counteract Aaron's effect, efforts and effects, the sorcerer Satan shows the people a mortuary bed suspended in the clouds. And who is in it? Moses. Moses on his death bed. It is at that moment, says the Midrash, that 40,000 men, two Egyptian sorcerers, we know their names Junus and Jumburius, [00:47:00] surround Aaron

and demand, implore that he provide them with a new leader, a visible and concrete god, a new leader since Moses is dead.

In other words, it's not Aaron's fault. It's Satan's fault. Better yet, Hur and Aaron, knowing that the image is false and diabolically misleading, try to preach the good word, the word of truth and moral courage. For a while the two relatives are alone facing the hysterical mob. Alone? But where are Aaron's four sons? Where are Moses' children? Why don't they hurry to join forces with those few who fight in the name of faith and faithfulness? Are they asleep? Hiding perhaps? Have they escaped? For the moment, Aaron and his nephew are the only ones to defend God's name.

And soon Aaron will [00:48:00] be alone altogether, for the mob kills Hur. Aaron is now totally alone against thousands and thousands of infuriated and fanatic worshippers of an idol. No wonder he is afraid. It's human. He is afraid of also being assassinated, and then what? God has not ordered him to die for his sake. Neither did Moses. In fact, nobody has revealed to him the future law according to which idolatry is one of the three prohibitions one must not transgress even at the price of one's self-sacrifice. That is why, suggests the Midrash, Aaron yields to the crowd's dangerous and obscene passions.

Others view Aaron as a shrewd tactician and a keen psychologist but still on the good side. If he proposed the husbands among his people to bring [00:49:00] their wives' jewels to him afterwards it is because he knew the wives' mentality. He knew they would refuse. First because they love jewels, but more important, because unlike their husbands, says the Midrash so kindly, wives, women knew the meaning of gratitude. Having witnessed the miracles accomplished by God, they, the women, would not repudiate him just like that for a silly calf, even if it is made of pure gold. That is why he said to the men afterward, go and bring your wives' jewels.

At the end, claims the Midrash, the men were forced to bring their own jewels to the high priest so that he could make a golden calf, however, it is not he but the two anti-Pharaoh Egyptian sorcerers who made the calf, not him. And if Aaron told the crowd to come back next day [00:50:00] for a celebration it is because he had hoped that Moses would reappear during the night. He needed time. That is why, says Rashi, he had the idea of building an altar, to give himself time. So if the celebration did take place it is because Moses was really late, six hours late. Was it therefore his fault again? Moses again?

A Midrashic commentator in Vayikra Rabbah goes as far as praising Aaron for building the altar. He did it so as to prevent the people from doing it. He thought to himself, if they do the construction, they will do it fast. I will be slow. Furthermore, Aaron thought, it is better if the guilt falls on me than on the entire community. To put it differently, in taking the blame on himself, something he had never done, Aaron sacrificed his honor for the sake of Israel. [00:51:00] That is Kiddush HaShem. His invitation to the feast next day, he did not say "*Chag la'egel*" but "*la'shem mahar*". He didn't say, come and celebrate the calf. He said, come and celebrate God.

I confess the efforts of the defense are impressive. Even in heaven Aaron receives a friendly reception. God is angry with his people but not with the high priest. Worse, God all of a sudden is annoyed at Moses but not at Aaron. God's voice sounds severe, harsh as he speaks to his favorite prophet, and he says *Lech Reid ki shiheit amkha*, go, go down, for your people has engaged [00:52:00] in corruption. *Shiheit* is a terrible word. It implies violence and adultery, which, the word leads in derivative to *l'hashit*, to destroy. The people is destroying itself by destroying its ideals.

So in this case, *shiheit* also includes idolatry. And which of the three sins has most angered God? Several interpretations exist, but clearly God seems disappointed with Moses. Poor Moses, who wasn't even present at the crime. In the Midrash, God informs him of his deception. *Reid*, he said, go down in rank, for your people has engaged in corruption. Moses now is losing his rank. Practically speaking, Moses is chased from heaven. [00:53:00] Deeply hurt, Moses is compelled to defend himself. He said, *Amkha*, my people? Isn't it also yours?

At that moment, says the Midrash, five destructive angels are ready to kill him. But Moses invokes the memory of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so God consents to take him under his protection. Analyze these tales, these legends and you will admit that they are perplexing. Why has Moses, rather than his brother, become the culprit? Isn't he on assignment in heaven? Hasn't he been summoned by God himself to receive the law? Why then is he held responsible for something that has been done by someone else? Is it that God's ways in matters of justice have always been [00:54:00] inscrutable?

Perhaps we ought not to be too harsh with the supreme judge over creation. He knows what he is doing and why. In politics, as in everything else, isn't Moses the chief? Isn't the chief

always responsible? If the people under his leadership strays from the good way, it is also his fault. But who is mainly to be blamed? The people. And so God has a sudden change of heart. Now he is determined to chastise the people of Israel. And to Moses he gives a detailed report of what happened and declares, "I am going to annihilate these people, and a few I shall make the founder of a great nation," end of quote.

Which means of another [00:55:00] nation. Now everything is clear. God is disappointed, offended by, disgusted with his chosen people. Instead of changing prophets, he will change peoples. And we know the next phase. In extreme situations, Moses rises to the even greater and nobler heights. *Va'yechal Moshe*, and Moses prayed, or according to Rabbi of Kotzk again, *zey hobben im krank gemakht*, they made him sick. He pleads, nevertheless, in favor of the children of Israel, all descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he succeeds in softening the Lord's position.

Then he leaves heaven with the two tablets of the law in his arms. Down below, at the feet of Sinai, he sees Joshua, his favorite disciple, who has been waiting [00:56:00] for him. And they go to the encampment. Moses has no idea what he will find there. From a distance he perceives sounds of the noisy

celebration. Does he think that it's meant for him, a welcoming party? But then he sees the golden calf, the dancers, the idol worshippers. And in his anger he throws to the ground the tables of the law, breaks them, burns the calf, and then, only then, does he turn to his brother and speak to him.

And from the text you feel the emotion, his emotion. He speaks to him with surprising tenderness. He doesn't ask him, what did you do, and why did you do it? How could you have taken part in something so silly and so vile? [00:57:00] But he said to him, what did the people do to you to make you commit such a terrible sin? Marvelous Moses. Aaron's answer, sadly disappointing. Instead of taking the blame upon himself, as the Midrash has suggested to him earlier, he seizes the opportunity offered by Moses and lays all the guilt on the anonymous people. You know, he says to his brother, you know what the people is capable of. It made me act under duress.

He does not deny having asked for the golden jewels, nor having thrown them into the fire, but maintains that the golden calf was not his doing. Whose then was it? He doesn't know. He merely threw the golden jewels into the flames, and out came the golden calf, just like that, by itself. In his statement he also omits [00:58:00] any reference to the altar, which he built

with his own hands, and also his invitation to the crowd to come back and take part in the celebration the next day. Now, I am asking you, is this appropriate behavior for a leader? As for Moses, he seems to bear no grudge towards his brother.

He does love him. And his love is fraternal and shielding and moving. Full of understanding, it is he, Moses, who put the words in his mouth to enable him to better defend himself. Yes, he did light a fire and place golden objects in its flame, but that was all he did. And even this he did because he had no choice. Had he refused, the mob would have killed him. Better yet, Moses suggests that Aaron was merely a tool in the hands of the crowd which needed to vent its [00:59:00] frustration. The golden calf episode actually revealed the base instincts that the people carried in its subconscious.

Thanks to the complicity of the high priest Aaron, all that was hidden appears on the surface. Moses can now take the steps necessary to cleanse the soul of the people of Israel. And his first move is a collective catharsis, a true bloodbath.

Perpetrated by whom? By the tribe of the Levites. They attack the culprits involved in the idol worship. But tell me, isn't Aaron one of them? Actually, he is the father of Levi. He is part -- *Moshe V'aharon* are actually part son of Amram, the

Shevet Levi, the Levites. Later [01:00:00] he became a kohen. That's later.

But he should feel something close, something very close to the Levites. He was one of them. He should be one of them. But actually, he enjoys singular privileges of immunity. The high priest is untouchable. The Levites, some Levites, affirms Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, he didn't want to generalize. He didn't want to condemn the whole tribe. He said some Levites, armed with spears, charged the sinners and slay them. Moses's orders are executed without restraint or pity. Even the relatives, half-brothers and uncles, are not spared. On that day, we are told, 3,000 men and women die.

Then, determined to close that sad and shameful chapter once and for all, Moses turned to God and implored him to do the same. Close the chapter. [01:01:00] And he said something beautiful. He said, if you forgive thy people, good. If not, *m'cheini na missifrikha*, erase my name from your book. There is Moses in all his splendor. God's messenger is threatening God. He issues him an official ultimatum. It's either/or, forgiveness or separation. And God yields. He cannot and does not want to continue his work without Moses. And so, everything falls back in order. And now the story may continue.

Though diminished, the Jewish people will proceed on its long and arduous journey toward the Promised Land, and Aaron will serve as he did before in the sacred role of high priest. But again, I do not understand. How could [01:02:00] a leader who followed rather than lead, a man who has betrayed his calling even superficially, how can he remain the spiritual guide of an entire bereaved community? How is it possible that the people did not voice its anger? Was there no one to say openly what many must have thought privately? Namely, that something was wrong in high circles? If no one thought about it or said it, Aaron did.

Secretly in his heart, I think he must have felt guilty, not only for having collaborated with idolatrous insurgents but also for having been, if indirectly, as a result, as a consequence, the cause of death of so many people. At times I wonder whether he forgave himself. I wonder because I remember the tale of his two unfortunate sons, Nadab and Abihu [01:03:00] whose tragic and untimely death in the sacred tent was the subject of our study session last year. We tried then to explore and comprehend the meaning of *va'yidom Aharon*, the silence of Aharon. He was mute.

Faced with the catastrophe that struck his family, he said nothing. There was nothing he could say. And numerous texts conduct the exegesis of and offer praise for his silence. They speak of his dignity, of his moral strength, of the depth of his faith in divine justice. One might conclude that that was the most meaningful, the truest moment in his life. Well, I would now humbly suggest a different hypothesis. And I would connect it with the episode of the golden calf. And if I would ask myself, and what if the two stories were related and even intertwined? Let's elaborate. [01:04:00]

Imagine Aaron feeling guilty and thinking that the death of his two sons was nothing but punishment for his role in the degrading affair of the golden calf and its bloody consequence? Is it too farfetched? And what if we were told that he kept quiet because he felt guilty? He knows that no transgression goes unpunished except that occasionally it takes time for the punishment to strike the sinner. Is such a reaction on the part of Aaron so inconceivable? Having said that, I must add that if he felt guilty, he was the only one to feel guilt. After the death of Nadav and Avihu, God speaks to him directly without Moses as intermediary.

God has not overlooked his error. He seems to have elevated him. [01:05:00] He came closer to Aaron. As for the people. We are told that they mourned his death during 30 days. And so, tradition in the Midrash and in our memory and in everywhere, tradition attributes many virtues to Aaron. The Midrash does not stop praising his love for his younger brother. He was happy. He was exuberant upon learning of Moses' appointment as God's messenger to Egypt. He was never jealous of his achievements. If in Scripture brothers do not enjoy favorable reviews, Moses and Aaron are the exception to the rule.

Never was there a moment of discord in their relations. Sharing their official functions, together they led their people to its national and religious destiny. Together they are punished, not for the golden calf, mind you, but for having struck the rock when the people were in need of [01:06:00] water. Neither entered the land of Canaan. At the end, when Aaron's hour was near, it was Moses who alone accompanies him up the mountain. It is Moses who prepares him, dresses him in mortuary shrouds. It is Moses who stays with him until he rendered his last breath.

In truth, the abiding image of Aaron is that of humanist. Forever ready to help anyone need appeasement, he's called *Ohev*

shalom v'rodef shalom. He loved and pursued peace. Had there been a peace prize, he would have been the ideal candidate.

(applause) Whenever a conflict erupted among family or associates, [01:07:00] he was there to reconcile spouses, friends, and rivals. In legend that is his particular strength. He devoted his entire life to uniting and reuniting the brokenhearted, to creating and recreating harmony between human beings as well as between them and their creator.

Is this reason enough to forgive his role in the golden calf affair? Is he rewarded because he was always on the side of his people, even if it meant not being on the side of God? I do not know. All I would venture to say in conclusion is this. If God and history have forgiven him, why should we be more stringent? Although I am not a kohen, as he was, I am only a Levi. I try to follow in his footsteps. Like him, I try not to indict, never to be a prosecutor when it comes to fellow Jews.

[01:08:00] Instead, as a Hasid, an admirer of Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, I try to serve as the *melitz yosher*, the defender of the Jewish people.

Furthermore, in years past, as we have said earlier, in all the 20 years I have never promised you answers, only questions.

(laughter) And questions have a strange habit of remaining open.

Except all the questions, what they have in common is one thing. We may question, but beware of answers, if the answers are against our people. Never did Aaron act against his people, our people. Therefore, we admire him. Thank you. (applause)

[01:09:00]

M1:

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