

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About
Numbers chapter 20, verses 23 – 29 – The Death of Aaron
Melton Gesher at JCC, April 15, 2013
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- A) Background and chronology
- 1) According to Numbers 33:38-39 Aaron died on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after Israel left Egypt and at the age of 123.
 - 2) That number fits with the note in Exodus 7:7 that Aaron was 83 years of age at the time of the exodus.
- B) The Man Aaron and the People's Love for Him
- 1) Sefer Devarim chapter 34, verse 8
 - a) Compare this verse to the verse about Aaron, Bmidbar 20:29b; what is said about Aaron that is not said about Moshe?
 - (I) Rashi on the verse in Devarim - "The House of Israel" – *The males, whereas concerning Aaron, because he had pursued peace and brought peace between man and his fellows and between husband and wife, it says 'All the house of Israel', meaning both men and women.*
 - 2) There is a beautiful and extensive rabbinic tradition that views Aaron as a gentle and peace loving soul that saw the good in everyone and endeavored to mediate every conflict without taking sides.
 - a) Ethics of the Fathers / Pirkey Avot chapter 1, mishna 12 - *Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah.*
 - b) Seder Eliahu Raba 13:63; 20:112; 25:128; Avot dRebbi Natan1 12:48-51; Avot dRebbi Natan2 24:48-51 [translation - Legends of the Jews (1909), vol 4, chapter 5, 643] - *How shall I be able to lift up my eyes to Aaron's face? I, to whom Aaron was so kind, blush to do evil.*
 - c) Ibid - *My son, dost thou not know what he is doing with whom thou hast quarreled? He beats at his heart, rends his garments in grief, and says, 'Woe is me! How can I ever again lift up my eyes and look upon my companion against whom I have acted so?'*
 - d) Ibid - *I come to thee because I hear that thou and thy wife live in discord, wherefore thou must divorce her. Keep in mind, however, that if thou shouldst in place of thy present wife marry another, it is very questionable if thy second wife will be as good as this one; for at your first quarrel she will throw up to thee that thou art a quarrelsome man, as was shown by thy divorce from thy first wife.*
 - e) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin page 6b - *Moses's motto was: Let the law pierce the mountain. Aaron, however, loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between man and man.*
 - 3) What is the source of this tradition?
 - a) Other than this one word 'all', which is pretty amorphous, there is no direct biblical source for this beautiful tradition.
 - b) My suggestion (which I later found that Rabbi Jonathan Sacks adopts as well) is that the biblical source is the account of the Golden Calf.
 - (I) Shmot chapter 32, verses 1 – 7, 21 - 25
 - (II) Devarim chapter 9, verse 19
 - c) Aaron comes out of this looking very bad, but God did not punish him. On the contrary, he was made the Cohen Gadol.

- (I) He looks weak and powerless, a man lacking principles or lacking the personal integrity or the force of conviction to stand up for them.
 - He could have been stalling for time
 - He could have made a cost benefit analysis that it would be better to commit idolatry that to cause the people to kill him and be guilty of murder.
- (II) Our sages apparently concluded that it was a most positive character trait that caused him to sin. His love of human beings, his inability to every judge unfavorably, caused him to sin. He did not have a critical bone in his body, he could not bring himself to rebuke his fellow.
- (III) His downfall was not a negative character trait, but an unbalanced positive one.
- (IV) The message is huge: the key to ethics and interpersonal behavior is balance, the golden mean, the middle way. And even though it is beautiful to be a total man of peace, and we may need such people, there is still a price to be paid!
- (I) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation, Parshat Kee Tisa - *Peace is not the only virtue, and peacemaking not the only task of leadership. We must never forget that when Aaron was left to lead, the people made a golden calf. But never think, either, that a passion for truth and justice is sufficient. Moses needed an Aaron to hold the people together. In short, leadership is the capacity to hold together different temperaments, conflicting voices and clashing values. Every leadership team needs both a Moses and an Aaron, a voice of truth and a force for peace. Every leadership team needs both a Moses and an Aaron, a voice of truth and a force for peace.*
http://www.ou.org/index.php/torah/article/between_truth_and_peace/#.UWxWt6U5vww

C) "Let Aaron be gathered to his kin" - Life After Death

- 1) The opening position of the Torah
 - a) Breishit chapter 2, verse 7; chapter 3, verse 19
- 2) Being "gathered to his kin" in the Torah
 - a) Avraham - Breishit chapter 25, verses 7 – 9
 - b) Yishmael - Breishit chapter 25, verses 17
 - c) Yitzchak - Breishit chapter 35, verses 28 - 29
 - d) Ya'acov – Breishit chapter 49, verses 29 - 33
 - e) Moshe – Bmidbar chapter 27, verse 13 and chapter 31, verse 2; Devarim chapter 32, verse 50
 - f) Aaron – here and in Devarim 32, verse 50
- 3) The biblical punishment of karet, being cut off from one's people, seems to clearly the flip side of the above.
- 4) Other verses in the Tanakh on the subject
 - a) I Shmuel chapter 28, verses 3 - 14
 - b) II Shmuel chapter 12, verse 23
 - c) Sefer Kohelet chapter 3, verses 19 – 22, chapter 12, verses 5b – 7
- 5) Resurrection
 - a) Sefer Daniel chapter 12, verses 1 – 3, 12
- 6) The wicked go down to the nether world
 - a) Bmidbar chapter 16, verse 30
 - b) I Shmuel chapter 2, verse 6
 - c) Yeshayahu chapter 14, verse 11 and tens more in Yeshayahu in other prophets
 - d) Sefer Tehilim chapter 9, verse 18 and many more in other books of the Writings
 - e) Sefer Mishlei chapter 15, verse 24

- 7) Conclusion – the Torah and the Tanakh have a belief in the afterlife, but it is amorphous and unclarified, it is also un-emphasized. Later Judaism develops the concept of the future world but it is not at center stage. It is not the purpose of life on earth, as salvation of the soul is the goal of Christianity for example.