

AARON—THE PARADOX OF PEACE AND PASSIVITY

How many of you have ever been asked in a job interview: “describe your strengths and weaknesses?” Most of us are never quite sure how to answer that question. We generally know, sometimes all too well, what our weaknesses are, but we don’t necessarily want to reveal them, lest they be counted against us. So we try to come up with a weakness that isn’t really a weakness, such as “I work too hard” or “I take the job too seriously,” though human resources professionals can generally see right through these answers. If we think about it, though, for most of us, our strengths and weaknesses are often the very same thing, or at least two sides of the same coin. For example, the one who is detail-oriented may not be able to see the forest for the trees. The creative, visionary thinker may have his or her head stuck in the clouds, less able to manage some of the basic tasks of a job effectively. A person with strong convictions may also be stubborn, and the one who is completely open-minded may often be indecisive. These are but a few small examples of this phenomenon—that our strengths and weaknesses are inextricably tied together.

On the Second Day of Rosh Hashana, we saw this phenomenon at work in the person of Isaac, whose passivity and faith were very closely related. As we continue our journey through the Biblical figures that we encounter in our High Holiday scriptural readings, we come to one who really epitomizes this phenomenon—Aaron, the brother of Moses and the High Priest of Israel. Aaron is the central figure in today’s Torah portion from Leviticus, Acharei Mot. Actually, the two goats are the real central figures in the portion, but Aaron is the one who manages the intricate rituals in this process. He is the one whose acts “atone” for not only his own sins, but for the sins of the entire Jewish people. Aaron is mentioned too often in the Torah and the Midrashic commentaries to do a semi-biography as we did for Sarah and for Isaac. Instead, I want to look at two of Aaron’s qualities which deeply demonstrate the paradox of our strengths and weaknesses being inextricably tied together.

Continuing our job interview, we might ask Aaron: “tell us, what is your greatest strength?”

“I am a peacemaker. I have dedicated my entire life to making peace between human beings.”

“Do you have any references?”

“Yes, I have one from Pirke Avot, where Rabbi Hillel says: ‘Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving humanity, and bringing them near to Torah.’”

“Thank you. Do you have any concrete examples?”

“Well, yes. I can bring forth Talmud Sanhedrin 6b.”

Whenever two men had quarreled, Aaron would go and sit with one of them and say, “My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast and rends his clothes as he moans, ‘Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am shamed before him, since it is I who offended him.’” Aaron would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other man say likewise, “My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast and rends his clothes as he moans, ‘Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am shamed before him, since it is I who offended him.’” Aaron would sit with him also until he had removed all rancor from his heart. Later, when the two met, they would embrace.”

In contrast to Moses and even God, who regularly lose their patience with an undoubtedly frustrating band of people, Aaron’s pursuit of peace is a beautiful sight to behold.

However, even peacemaking, when taken to the extreme, can become problematic, even tragic. And that’s exactly what happened to Aaron in the incident of the Golden Calf, for which he is most famous. According to Midrash Exodus Rabba, the transgression of the Golden Calf is so egregious, that all the evils which have fallen upon the Jewish people since that time are, in part, traceable to the incident of the Golden Calf.

Let’s examine the story in Exodus 32 and Aaron’s role in it. Moses is up on the mountain with God receiving the commandments. It takes him longer than expected to return, so the people become impatient, anxious, and unruly. They eventually turn into a mob and demand that Aaron make them a God who can protect them. The people give him their gold, they throw it into the fire, and Aaron shapes it into a Golden Calf. “Vayatzer oto, and he shaped it,” the text says, and the people begin a raucous, idolatrous celebration which involves bowing down to the calf. Moses comes down from the mountain, sees what is happening, and, in his anger, smashes the tablets onto the ground. God wipes out 3000 people involved in the incident.

The rabbinic sages take special pains to absolve Aaron of responsibility for the incident. First, they say, his intentions were pure. Before Aaron shapes the mold, the Midrash says he announces to God that “it is against my will that I am about to do this.” Secondly, the sages say he tried to delay them. First, he asked the people to give up their gold. He couldn’t imagine that they would part with it so readily. Then he declares that “tomorrow will be a festival for Adonai,” hoping that will buy him 24

hours, during which time either Moses will return to help or that he can either reshape the calf or somehow turn the celebration into one for God instead of for the Golden Calf. Thirdly, the sages attempt to blame the entire incident on the “eruv rav,” the mixed multitude that went forth with the Israelites from Egypt. This group included sorcerers and magicians, and they were the ones who shaped the calf. A fourth reason posited by the sages is that Aaron did the dirty work himself to prevent others from sinning. Finally, in the only excuse I accept at all, the sages say Aaron feared for his life. After all, this was a mob we are talking about here, and, according to Talmud Sanhedrin 7a, when a man named Hur stood up and tried to stop the people, they murdered him for his efforts. That story is not in the text, but the sages derive this Midrash from his sudden disappearance from the text. At this point, we can only imagine what is going through Aaron’s mind, since he is there at the beginning of the story and is never mentioned again.

But these are apologetics that, in my opinion, do not follow logically from the text. Quite the contrary, Aaron’s attempts to escape responsibility for his actions are almost shocking. When Moses asks Aaron “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?” He replies: “You know that it is a people bent on evil. They gave me their gold, and I hurled it into the fire, and, suddenly, out came this calf.” He neglects to mention the part about him actually shaping it.

To be fair to Aaron, at least according to my reading of the story, he did try and delay the people. I imagine him trying to reason with them, and who wouldn’t be afraid of such a mob? But, ultimately, the incident is a result of Aaron trying to use his peacemaking skills when the situation called not for peacemaking, but for strong leadership. Aaron was their leader, and if he had spoken up, they would have listened to them, as they listened to Moses. This was a situation that called not for mollification, passivity, and peacemaking, but for someone to stand up to the mob. Unfortunately, this was not part of Aaron’s skill set. His strength as a peacemaker proved to be his weakness as well.

Often the line between peacemaking and passivity is dangerously fine. It’s a tragic part of the history of the world. Allowing Hitler to take the Sudetanland on the one hand and secretly negotiating our way out of the Cuban Missile Crisis on the other are two examples where only history enables us to know whether our course of action was the right one—an actual path to peace or the emboldening of a dictator bent on destruction and evil. What we do about Iran and their potential nuclear bomb is today’s Golden Calf dilemma. Just last night, on Yom Kippur, Iran’s leader,

Ahmadinejad, said that Jews have no historic ties to the Middle East. Is there a red line that can not be crossed where Israel or America or someone has to go in and wipe out nuclear capabilities, or do we trust in the idea that he doesn't mean what he says or is incapable of carrying out promised actions like wiping Israel off of the map? But I'm going to leave the discussion on that one for another time and place before I get into real trouble. And because, honestly, I have no idea what the right answer is here. Taking it back to Aaron, we see that the same qualities that made him the paradigmatic peacemaker of the Tanach could, in the wrong time and situation, lead to transgression, idol worship, and avoidance of responsibility.

OK, Aaron. Thank you for answering that question so honestly and thoroughly. Tell me about another area of strength in your life. "Well, people say I am a gifted speaker." Indeed the Torah itself says that Aaron is known to "speak readily, *diber y'daber hu*." And the second paradox of Aaron has to do with his silver tongue. In contrast to Moses, Aaron was known as a "great communicator." Clearly, Aaron's gift of speech was of great benefit to the Jewish people. He not only used his words to make peace between human beings, but to help free the Jewish people from slavery. When God first asks Moses to go to Pharaoh to tell him to "let our people go," Moses, being a stutterer, asks if Aaron can be his "peh," literally his mouth. So God agrees to let Aaron serve as Moses' spokesperson. Clearly, Aaron's mastery of words enriched the Jewish people. However, our strengths, when used improperly, can also be our weaknesses, and such was the case with Aaron's gift of gab. He has a problem with both in terms of when he uses his words and when he fails to use them.

The most famous incident of Aaron using words improperly occurs in the Book of Numbers 12, in Parashat Beha'alotecha, when Aaron and Miriam speak against Moses because of the Cushite woman he marries. It is considered Lashon Hara, malicious gossip, literally evil tongue, and Miriam is stricken with metzora, a skin disease whose word is considered an acronym, *motzi shem ra*, for bringing out the evil name. It is Miriam who draws the bulk of the punishment, but God is incensed at Aaron as well. Aaron then uses his silver tongue to heal her, but as it says in Ecclesiastes, "there is a time to speak and a time to keep silent." Unfortunately, in this instance he spoke when he should not have, and he spoke words of evil.

There is another instance in the Torah where the opposite seems to occur, a time when Aaron actually does keep silent when perhaps he should have spoken up. This incident occurs in Leviticus 10, Parashat Sh'mini, when his sons Nadav and Avihu are killed for offering *esh zara*, strange or

idolatrous fire in front of the ark that God had not commanded. Aaron's response? Stunned silence. The Torah says simply, "Vayidom Aharon, and Aaron was silent." On the one hand, this may be the only appropriate response. When tragedy strikes, and losing his two sons was certainly tragic, sometimes silence is the only possible response. There simply are no words. On the other hand, maybe this was exactly when Aaron should have spoken up. First, he did not warn his sons, but secondly, if ever there was a time where you might think this peacemaker's anger would be aroused, it was here. Who among us wouldn't be angry? Who among us wouldn't cry out with pain? Who among us wouldn't ask why? Abraham confronted God with Sodom and Gomorah, and Moses confronts God consistently throughout the Torah to prevent God from destroying the Jewish people. But here, the silver tongued speaker falls silent.

It reminds me of a famous story by the Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz called Bontsha HaShweig, Bontsha the Silent. In the story, Bontshe is a victim of poverty and degradation who never complains about his miserable lot in life, so that when he dies, he goes straight to Heaven. There he is greeted by a chorus of angels and is invited by the highest judge of the heavenly tribunal to ask for anything he wants as his just reward. And what is Bontshe's greatest wish? "What I'd like most of all," says Bontshe, "is a warm roll with fresh butter every morning." Hearing this, the judges and angels hang their heads in shame, while the prosecutor breaks out in contemptuous laughter. The point of the story is that Bontshe could have redeemed the entire world with a single word, brought forth the Messianic Age, but instead asks for bread and butter. When we fail to speak out against social injustice, racial inequality, anti-Zionism, and a host of other ills which plague our society, we do the same thing. Aaron, the most gifted speaker in the Tanach, is, in a way, all of us, gifted with words but unable to speak up when perhaps he was needed the most.

But I don't mean to pick on Aaron, only to point out the paradox that he symbolizes for all of us: the gifted speaker who spoke ill of his brother and didn't speak out when he might have needed to, the pursuer of peace who failed to act, for the very sake of peace. His strengths and weaknesses were one and the same, just like so many of us. So on this day of reflection and atonement, I want us to spend some time assessing our own strengths and weaknesses. If you have trouble finding one, start with the other. What are your strengths? Then look to see what the corresponding weakness may be. Are you firm and decisive? See where you might be stubborn. Are you kind and compassionate? See where you might be lacking conviction. Are you a concerned and caring parent? See where you might be hovering too

much. Are you driven and goal-oriented? See if you might not be stopping enough to smell the roses. And remember, always, on this day of forgiveness, to make sure you leave a little space to forgive yourself.

Though I might appear to be judging Aaron harshly, in the end, Aaron is judged by God and the Torah for the good, as evidenced by two more quick stories about him. According to Leviticus Rabba, Aaron died an incredibly tranquil and peaceful death. Accompanied by Moses, his brother, and by Eleazar, his son, Aaron went to the summit of Mount Hor, where a rock suddenly opened before him and a beautiful cave lit by a lamp presented itself to his view. "Take off your priestly raiment and place it upon your son Eleazar!" said Moses; "and then follow me." Aaron did as commanded; and they entered the cave, where a bed was prepared around which angels stood. "Go lie down upon thy bed, my brother," Moses continued, and Aaron obeyed without a murmur. Then his soul departed as if by a kiss from God. This paradigm of peace died in the most peaceful way, with peace in death as in life.

The second story comes in the Book of Numbers after the rebellion of Korach, where the Chief of each tribe given a staff with which to lead going forward. The next morning, something happens to Aaron's staff and not to any of the others. It blooms with sprouts, blossoms, and almonds, representing, respectively, youthful vitality, beauty, and, in the case of almonds, which sprout quickly, the speed, zeal and vigorous devotion with which Aaron served God and the Jewish people. Whatever our paradoxical simultaneous strengths and weaknesses are, as we complete these 10 Days of Awe, the Yamim Noraim, may each of you be blessed with the gifts of Aaron: the gifts of peace, youthful vitality, beauty, and speed, zeal, and devotion to serve our community and the Jewish people.