

Parshat Tzav
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If asked what happens in parshat Tzav, you might be tempted to respond, “Exactly what happens in parshat Tetsaveh - plus some extra sacrifices.” And while you wouldn’t be wrong, I think the extremely detailed description of the sacrifices, priestly garments, and initiation rites – combined with the fact that much of the parsha is repetition – prevents us from seeing that what happens in Tzav actually represents three significant turning points. First, a turning point in the Jewish people’s relationship to God. Second, a turning point in the relationship between Moshe and Aharon; and lastly, a major turning point in Aharon’s life, even beyond a seriously huge promotion.

Let’s review what has happened to Aharon until this point. Our first introduction to Aharon, in a way, is his complete absence from Moshe's origin story, where Miriam plays a major role and older brother Aharon is literally not even mentioned. When we do finally hear of him, during the dramatic events of the Exodus, Aharon functions as Moshe’s sidekick, mouthpiece, and occasional Staff Outstretcher.

Fast forward to Mount Sinai, and Aharon is finally given a chance at leadership in the form of Interim CEO and Lawgiver during Moshe’s extended vacation at the top of the mountain. Needless to say, things don’t go exactly according to plan. God sends Moshe on an emergency trip back down the mountain, and Moshe chastises Aharon the moment he sees him. Although he makes excuses, the text rests the blame squarely on Aharon, who has “let the people get out of control” and abetted their idolatry.

Once things have calmed down, Moshe returns to Har Sinai for a meeting with God so intimate and intense that his body is permanently changed. In D’varim we learn that God is ready to kill Aharon at this point, but Moshe successfully intercedes. Thus, unbeknownst to Aharon down below, God continues with the original plan, instructing Moshe to build the Mishkan and install Aharon and his descendents as priests.

As Moshe descends the mountain a second time, having successfully saved Aharon and the rest of the Israelites, let us explore the first turning-point I mentioned at the beginning of this drash. Until now, Moshe has been the only avenue for the people to access God. In fact, he is the only Israelite who may be considered holy or consecrated in any way. Because of this, Moshe must be the one to carry out the priests’ initiation, including performing all of the sacrifices himself during the entire seven days of the ceremony. More strikingly, we read two weeks ago in Pikudei that, at least according to the p’shat, Moshe assembles the entire Mishkan by himself. The l’vi’im are apparently

not eligible to build the Mishkan until Aharon has been initiated. Despite all this hard labor, it's noteworthy that immediately after Moshe builds the Mishkan in Pikudei, a cloud descends, preventing Moshe from entering. This sends a very powerful message. Other than the priests' initiation, here, in the Mishkan, Moshe will not enter as a leader or to intercede for the people. He will not enter the Kodesh haKodeshim, the Holy of Holies. Here, Moshe will simply be a layperson.

How might he feel as he sees that cloud descend? This is not "his cloud", the one that visits the Tent of Meeting, where Moshe receives instruction from God. This is "Aharon's cloud," to which Moshe will never have access. This cloud and the priestly initiation it portends represent a new conduit between the Israelites and God. The Israelites will now be able to relate to God personally through sacrifices, assisted by Aharon, without Moshe's involvement.

Which brings me to the second turning point I mentioned at the beginning, the significant shift in the relationship between Moshe and Aharon. For the first time in his adult life, Moshe must cede power to another, and to Aharon no less, the brother who has always been in his shadow and under his control and who has just led the people astray with an idol. Aharon will no longer be his sidekick or his fill-in. He will have his own unique position, his own lane, his own authority.

It's interesting to note that a shalsholet, a very rare trope mark, appears in the text during the initiation ceremony. This mark is believed to indicate anguish, hesitation, and internal debate. On top of whatever he is feeling about Aharon, the change in hierarchy, or the creation of a sacrificial cult and a priesthood, the sources point out another painful element that heightens Moshe's inner conflict at this moment. Moshe is initiating not only Aharon but also his sons, and their sons will serve in turn. In contrast, Moshe's children are never mentioned in the Torah again after they leave Midian. Over and over, Moshe must perform the labor that will confer on Aharon and his descendents the eternal priesthood, all while contemplating his own children's future, or lack thereof.

By the time the initiation ceremony is complete, so much of what the brothers' relationship is based upon will have changed, and so many potential points of conflict and even jealousy will have been introduced. Moshe and Aharon do seem to find a new mode of interaction, but there's no doubt that it is radically different from the one that came before.

And now we finally turn to Aharon himself, an 80-year-old who has spent his life in the shadow of two great sibling leaders, who has blown his first attempt at leadership, and who is unsure of his fate. The elaborate Mishkan has been constructed. Aharon has

been cleansed with water, blood, and the special, holy anointing oil and girded with exquisite garments, jewels, and holy words. From the outside, even on the first day, he surely looks the part of the magnificent Kohen Gadol, perhaps even glowing in his own way on par with the brilliance of Moshe's face.

Installation as Founding Kohen Gadol would be momentous for anyone, but Aharon's taking on the position under these circumstances is a breathtaking, almost cataclysmic, re-invention. What might he be feeling? Relief? Unworthiness? Satisfaction that he is finally receiving his due? Amazement at God's willingness to forgive even the greatest sins? Imposter syndrome?

The text itself tells us nothing of Aharon's internal state, but the sources, too, wonder about his thoughts at this pivotal moment. They focus on a specific phrase in the parsha to explore this question. God tells Moshe to, "Take Aharon and his sons" and all the necessary supplies, and to begin the initiation ceremony. "Kach et Aharon," "Take Aharon," is a seemingly trivial turn of phrase, but the commentaries find great meaning in these three words. According to Midrash Tanchuma the phrase implies that Aharon is "fleeing from the office" of Kohen Gadol and must be convinced to begin the initiation. Targum Yonatan translates the phrase as "bring Aharon near" because of the rupture caused by the Golden Calf incident. Many sources consider God's utterance of "Kach et Aharon" to be the exact moment when God forgives Aharon. For example, Sifra imagines Aharon hesitating, fearing that he is no longer desired as Kohen Gadol, and describes Moshe quoting this phrase to him as a proof-text that he is forgiven. At the root of all these commentaries is a belief that the Calf incident plunges Aharon into deep consternation and confusion, causing him to question everything he has believed about himself, his future, and his relationship to God.

For seven days, Aharon and his sons remain in seclusion as, over and over, Moshe performs the ritual that will induct Aharon and his descendants into permanent leadership. I can't help thinking about the ancient tradition (still kept in some parts of the world) of women living in separate tents during the week of their periods. Many believe that this practice arose out of a sense that these women are poised at the powerful border between life and death.

Similarly, Aharon is at a critical border. He has just escaped serious punishment from God. His identity is changing in almost every way. The relationship with his brother which has literally defined his life until now (at least in the text) is about to change irrevocably. And he is about to represent an entirely new, intensely personal way for his beloved Israelites to interact with and access God. At the same time, he is beginning a new dynasty, and he must be filled with wonder and pride as he spends this time

secluded with his four sons. (Luckily for him, he does not know that when he emerges he will witness the horrific death of two of them.)

These seven days are crucial for Aharon. He needs this time to internalize that God has forgiven his great sin, to realize that he, like his siblings, is worthy of leadership and greatness, and to embody the role and the responsibility of the priesthood. It hardly seems like enough, but somehow the transformation takes place. Like the creation of the world, it takes seven days to create a new conduit between the people and God, seven days to mark a breathtaking turning point in the relationship between two brothers, seven days to take a sidekick, an arguably failed leader, a sinner - and transform him into a High Priest.

Seven days can change everything - a person, a relationship, a connection to God, the universe. With intention and grace, what else might be possible in our lives and in the world in seven days?

Shabbat shalom.

Sample source: Sifra, Tzav, Mechilta d'Miluim 1 1

1) (Vayikra 8:1) ("And the L-rd spoke to Moses, saying (Vayikra 8:2): "Take Aaron, and his sons with him, and the garments, and the oil of anointment, and the bullock of the sin-offering and the two rams and the basket of unleavened bread.") "Take Aaron and his sons with him": What is the intent of this? Because (Shemoth 32:35): "And the L-rd smote the people with plague because they had made the calf that Aaron had made" implies that Aaron was rejected, from "Take Aaron and his sons with him" all knew that he was (re-) accepted. Whence is it derived that Moses knew that Aaron was rejected? From (Devarim 9:20): "And against Aaron the L-rd was wroth to destroy him, and I prayed also on Aaron's behalf at that time," and it is not written there (as it is in the preceding verse in respect to Moses' prayer on behalf of Israel) "And the L-rd hearkened to me at that time too." From "Take Aaron and his sons with him," Moses knew that Aaron was (re-) accepted. Whence do we derive that it was in Aaron's heart that he had been rejected? It is written at the end of the episode (Vayikra 9:7) ("And Moses said to Aaron) draw near to the altar." (Why was this command necessary?) Had not Moses just presented to him the entire order of sacrifices? (We must say, then, that Moses saw Aaron hesitating, apparently feeling that his service would be rejected, and) to dispel this from his heart, he told him that the L-rd had said to him "Take Aaron and his sons with him," thus apprising Aaron that he had been (re-) accepted.