

Aharon's Finest Hour
Reflections on the *Ohev Yisrael* Par Excellence

Korach 5783

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I.

If there is one figure in Torah who is famous for a moment of profound silence, it is Aharon. Upon witnessing the instantaneous death of his sons Nadav and Avihu, Aharon contains, within himself, and his silence, the dialectical tension of the moment: he is pulled in one direction as an inconsolable, doubly bereaved father, and in the opposite direction by his ongoing responsibilities as Kohen Gadol, on the very first day of the Mishkan's operations. Given these two equal and opposite forces, Aharon's response is silence- not the silence of having nothing to say, but a silence which reflects the deep truth that there is nothing that can possibly be said.

Aharon's capacity to project spiritual dignity through silence is all the more impressive in light of his generally genial and outgoing nature, on account of which he has been immortalized as Chazal's paragon of warmth, inclusiveness, and interpersonal concern¹.

Even as Aharon's silence upon learning of his sons' death is the most celebrated example of such quiet fortitude, there is another instance of profound silence in Aharon's life that bears careful examination.

Korach's rebellion, to be sure, was directed against Moshe, and the legitimacy of his leadership. And yet, as Moshe himself quickly understood, Aharon, and his position as Kohen Gadol, was the true subject of Korach's envy. Unlike Moshe, who reacts vigilantly to Korach's charges, and at multiple levels, Aharon does not react at all; once again, Aharon chooses silence.

Ramban² takes note of Aharon's stoicism, and attributes this response to Aharon's sanctity and humility. Aharon, Ramban asserts, was projecting a sense that, as far as he was concerned, Korach may well have been more qualified than he was for the post of Kohen Gadol. The only reason which Aharon continued to serve in the position, dubious as he was of his own qualifications, was that he had been commanded to do so.

¹ Avot 1:12, Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 6b.

² BeMidbar 16:4

Ironically, it was precisely this self-doubt, this sense of his own limitations, that made Aharon a finer and more deserving candidate than Korach could ever be³. If there is one cherished virtue when it comes to serving as Kohen Gadol, as the atoner-in-chief for all of Israel, it is an abiding sense of one's own frailty and fallibility. Only one who knows the full measure of fracture and brokenness could possibly plead for the people with a full heart.

Even if Aharon possessed no other qualities to recommend him for the position, which he most certainly did, his capacity to react to Korach's vicious personal assault without a shred of defensiveness, but rather with abundant modesty, would itself, set him apart.

While Moshe is most widely celebrated for his humility, we would do well to remember Aharon's as well. Perhaps it was most manifest during Korach's malicious rebellion, but truly, it was always thus. From the moment Moshe returned from the deserts of Midian to a role of prominence, Aharon did not grudgingly step aside for his younger brother, but did so with 'joy in his heart'⁴.

II.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise at all that in the very sedra in which his position is assaulted, Aharon scales even greater heights than he previously had. When, for the second time in this parsha alone, Hashem threatens to destroy the Jewish people, Moshe realizes, that unlike on the first occasion, when it was possible to defend the Jewish people as having been seduced by the nefarious machinations of Korach⁵, there can be no defending the people through prayer now. Instead, Moshe directs Aharon to "walk quickly" with the Ketoret in the direction of the stricken congregation, to expiate them.

Once again, Aharon says nothing at all, allowing his actions to speak for themselves. In place of "walking quickly" towards the people, Aharon literally *runs*, and places his body in between the Angel of Death and the "kahal."

The use of the latter term in this context is highly significant: while in the rest of the narrative, the Jewish people are described as an *edab*⁶, a term associated with wicked behavior in the aftermath of

³ See Rashi to VaYikra 9:7 based on Sifra 8. Aharon's sense of inadequacy was deeply linked to his involvement in the sin of the Calf, as explored in the essay.

⁴ Shemot 4:14. C.f. Shabbat 139a.

⁵ See Ramban to BeMidbar 16:21.

⁶ Going back to the narrative of the spies, see BeMidbar 14:1; 14:2; 14:7; 14:10; 14:27; 16:3; 16:5; 16:6; 16:11; 16:16; 16:19; 16:21; 16:24; 16:26; 17:5; 17:6; 17:7; 17:10; 17:11. It is striking that the only exception in the combined narrative of the spies and Korach's rebellion, BeMidbar 14:5, a verse in which the Jewish people are referred to as *kahal adat bnei yisrael*, is a verse in which Moshe and, in particular, Aharon, are pleading with the Jewish people to forego their wicked designs. (See comment of Ramban ad loc.) Moreover, in the intervening section of the text dealing with the laws of libations, which,

the sin of the spies, through the rebellion of Korach which it precipitated⁷, when the Jewish people are described in relation to Aharon, they are a “*kahal*.”

The latter is a term of dignity and chosenness, as reflected in its usage in the context of the Korban Pesach⁸, Matan Torah⁹ and its reenactment every seven years in the mitzvah of *hakhel*, the Sanhedrin¹⁰, as well as laws concerning the imperative of maintaining national purity¹¹. As it concerns Aharon, the term *kahal* is deeply significant in that it connotes Aharon's singular responsibility to atone for the people on Yom Kippur, *v'chiper ba'ado uvi'ad beto uvi'ad kol kehal yisrael*¹².

A man, in all of his greatness, who once bore a major portion of the responsibility for the outbreak of a plague in the midst of the camp, after the sin of the Golden Calf, now stops a deadly plague, nearly five times as lethal as the one for which he bore responsibility, in its very tracks.

He does so with utter selflessness, as the people had been brought to this crisis specifically by calling into question his legitimacy. And, he does so with boundless fortitude, literally holding in his hands the very same ketoret that his precious sons' died holding. For his role in the sin of the Golden Calf, as well as for the death of his two eldest sons, it is a moment of profound redemption for Aharon. Indeed, it is his finest hour.

And yet, striking though not altogether surprising, upon rescuing the Jewish people, the very same people who had only the day before gathered en masse awaiting his downfall, Aharon engages in no self righteousness nor any form of self-congratulation. With characteristic understatement, Aharon returns to his post in the *Ohel Mo'ed*¹³, to resume his daily work of atoning for the sins of the Jewish people.

We, who aspire to Hillel's mandate to be counted amongst Aharon's students, behold, with a mixture of reverence and love, a man whose greatness was expressed in extroversion, in his genuine warmth and concern for others, 'through love of his fellow man, bringing them close to Torah'.

Of equal importance, however, was his capacity for silence accompanied by determined action, reflecting the still waters of spiritual depth which reflected his boundless faith in the Almighty,

according to Ramban, was meant to comfort the stricken people (see Ramban to BeMidbar 15:2), the term *kahal* appears as well. See BeMidbar 15:15.

⁷ See Ramban to BaMidbar 16:1.

⁸ See Shemot 12:6.

⁹ See Devarim 4:10; 5:19; 9:10; 31:12; 33:4.

¹⁰ See VaYikra 4:13-14, 21.

¹¹ See Devarim 23:2-4, 9.

¹² VaYikra 16:17; See also 16:33.

¹³ BeMidbar 17:15. See, however, Netziv, ad loc., who argues that Aharon sought to pray for the Jewish people that the plague should not return.

authentic humility, and, in equal measure, his love for his “*kahal*,” even when, and especially when, they had not been commensurately gracious with him.