

Tetzaveh: The Parsha of Aharon HaKohen

I.

The widely noted omission of the name of Moshe Rabbenu from our *sedra*, unique amongst all of the *parshiyot* in the Torah between Shemot and *V'Zot Ha'Beracha*, raises an obvious question regarding the nature of this omission. The omission is particularly glaring in light of Moshe's clear indispensability¹ to even the opening series of the parshah, the triad which directs Moshe to, successively, gather the purest of oils for the menorah, invest Aharon and his sons into the kehunah, and address the artisans who would produce the bigdei kehunah. It would be one thing if Moshe simply was not relevant to the topics under discussion. The omission is altogether more striking given Moshe's crucial role in the parshah.

Moreover, the brief opening of the parshah, before our attention is turned to the *bigdei kehuna* themselves, is also something of a curiosity. The discussion of the *ner tamid* could either have been localized to Parashat Terumah, in the context of the *menorah*, much as the *lechem hapanim* are indeed discussed in the context of the *shulchan*. Alternatively, the discussion could have been postponed for later in the Torah, as the mitzvah is discussed in both Emor and Beha'alotcha.

Finally, the coda of our *sedra* drew even greater attention, with the seeming dislocation of the *mizbeach ha'ketoret* from all of the other vessels of the Mishkan. Ramban², and subsequently, Seforno³, assert that this localization is related to the distinct function of the ketoret relative to other *korbanot*, and, concomitantly, other vessels- the telos of the latter is to engender the devolution of the Divine presence into the Mishkan, while the former is meant to glorify the Almighty upon his descent into our midst. And yet, perhaps there is more to explore in conjunction with this question.

As Ramban notes⁴, this interpretation alone does not explain why the Torah should specify that Aharon himself would offer the twice daily *ketoret*, when, fundamentally, any kohen could perform this *avodah*. Moreover, it does not explain why the final verse in the parshah would reference the method of the purification of the *mizbeach ha'ketoret* on Yom HaKippurim itself, *וכפר אהרן על קרנותיו אחת בשנה מדם חטאת הכיפורים*, information which, one would have imagined, certainly could have waited for *Seder Avodat Yom HaKippurim* in Acharei Mot.

II.

¹ See Ramban to Shemot 27:20.

² See Ramban to Shemot 30:1.

³ Seforno, *ibid*. There are slight differences in emphasis between Ramban and Seforno, especially as it concludes the mollifying nature of ketoret. Overall, however, their approaches are fundamentally aligned.

⁴ See Ramban to Shemot 30:7.

Perhaps we might suggest that this constellation of questions may be resolved by stipulating a basic premise: parshat Tetzaveh is the *parsha* of Aharon HaKohen. Despite Moshe's clear indispensability to the triad at the beginning of the parshah, as noted, the Torah deliberately, and uniquely, sublimates his name, to create greater space and attention for Aharon HaKohen.

At that point, the Torah pivots for the better part of the next three *aliyot* to the construction of the *bigdei kehunah*, לְכַבֹּד וּלְתַפְאֶרֶת, that are *sine qua non* for Aharon to be able to perform his function in the Mikdash. As we know, these vestments not only were essential, but, even more significantly, in no small measure established Aharon, and, *inter alia*, his sons, as kohanim in the first place: ⁵בְּזִמְנָם שֶׁבְּגָדֵיהֶם עָלִיהֶם כְּהוֹנָתָם עָלֵיהֶם.

Subsequent to this section, the Torah details at length the events of the *yemei milu'im*, in which Aharon and his sons were further prepared for their new and crucial roles. Strikingly, Moshe's critical function as the de facto kohen gadol during this period of time, שִׁמְשָׁם בַּחֲלוּק לֵבָן, ⁶is also downplayed, with no specific mention of Moshe's name and role during this process. As appears to have been the case at the outset of the *sedra*, it would seem that the omission of Moshe's name is certainly not a reflection of his detachment from events, but despite his clear and critical involvement. Once again, the Torah appears to be deliberately shifting our attention from Moshe and his contribution to Aharon's investiture.

In the penultimate section of the parshah, the *korban tamid*, the foundation of all of the *avodat ha korbanot* is discussed, in conjunction with the descent of the Divine presence into the Mishkan. It is at this point at which the Torah turns its attention to the *mizbeach ha'ketoret*, Aharon's central role as far as ketoret is concerned, and a reference to the *Avodat Yom Ha'Kippurim*. To appreciate this section as the climax of a parshah uniquely dedicated to the persona of Aharon HaKohen, we need to analyze the unique nature of *ketoret*, and Aharon's relationship with it.

III.

In a striking verse in V'Zot Ha'Beracha, Aharon's role is described, first as a teacher, יוֹרֵד מִשְׁפָּטִיךְ, followed by a pivot to his role in the Mikdash. The Torah continues, יִשְׁיֵמוּ קְטוֹרֶה, לִיעֶקֶב וְתוֹרַתְךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, followed by a pivot to his role in the Mikdash. The Torah continues, יִשְׁיֵמוּ קְטוֹרֶה, בְּאֶפֶךָ וְכִלְלִי עַל מִזְבֵּחַךְ. Remarkably, the *ketoret* is given primacy even over the *korban olah* which opened and concluded the daily service in Mikdash.

⁵ See Sanhedrin 83a. It should be noted that Ramban was of the view, contra Rashi, that there were two distinct halakhot regarding כְּהֵן מְחֻסֵּר בְּגָדִים, one which was uniquely related to the מְכַנְסִים. This latter source, is not affiliated with the אִיסוּר associated with מְחֻסֵּר בְּגָדִים, but rather, the distinct prohibition of מִשְׁמַשׁ בַּעֲרֻה.

⁶ See Ta'anit 11b. It is striking that Moshe specifically did not wear the בְּגָדֵי כְהוֹנָה that week. On the one hand, this point itself emphasizes the extent to which the בְּגָדֵי כְהֵן גְּדוּל are indelibly associated with אֶהְרֵן, and, on the other, amplifies the extent to which their role is to transform זָרִים into כְּהֵנִים, which was obviously irrelevant to Moshe Rabbenu.

This appears to be no accident. The *ketoret*, in its very composition, is inextricably linked with Aharon. As captured inimitably by Chazal⁷, the inclusion of the *chelbinah* in the *ketoret* is paradigmatic for the inclusive nature of our *ta'aniyot tzibbur*. In particular, it is evocative of Aharon's indefatigable efforts on behalf of ⁸פושעי ישראל, so many of whom he succeeded in restoring to lives of far greater spiritual attainment, בשלום ובמישור הלך אתי ורבים השיב מעון.

It is not merely the substantive composition of *ketoret* which is so deeply evocative of Aharon's inclusive stance with *poshei Yisrael*, but, of course, Aharon's finest hour⁹ was perhaps the moment when he stood in the breach, literally, בין המתים ובין החיים, *ketoret* in hand, and stopped the *malach ha'mavet* in his tracks, ותעצר המגפה.

As such, to Ramban's question, it may well be so that Aharon did not have to bring the *ketoret* on a daily basis. But, perhaps, as Ramban suggested, he initiated it. Alternatively, as Ramban¹⁰ would later suggest in the context of the mitzvah of *hadlakat ha'menorah*, which also did not technically require Kohen Gadol, Aharon simply insisted on performing this aspect of the Avodah. His own identification with the message of the *ketoret*, reflecting the fundamental unity of the Jewish people, with a particular emphasis on those whom others would shun as spiritual derelicts, drew the איש חסיד to this particular *avodah*.

In a broader sense, this same rationale may be used to explain why the *sedra* begins with the *ner tamid*. Aharon's deep identification with that mitzvah, despite the fact that he was not obliged to bring it, compelled him to do so¹¹, on account of the subtle insinuation within that Avodah to the later role of Aharon's descendents in purifying Mikdash and sustaining Torah amongst the Jewish people.

Finally, in a parshah that is singularly devoted to Aharon HaKohen, opening and concluding the elements of Avodah that were dearest to him, containing the role of the *bigdei kehunah* and the events of the days of investiture, what could be more climactic than to conclude the parshah with a reference to that one day of year in which the indispensable role of Aharon HaKohen, and subsequently, מבניו תחתיו, was on full display: Yom HaKippurim itself. And, as it self-evident, the zenith of that day was when Aharon entered the *kodesh kodashim*, מבית לפרכת, to which he only was granted access by virtue of the קטרת סמים דקה which he carried.

The employment of the term in this verse, אחת בשנה, later, of course, to be echoed in the parshah of the Avodat Yom HaKippurim in its own right, והיתה זאת לכם לחקת עולם לכפר על בני ישראל,

⁷ See Keritot 6b.

⁸ See Avot 1:12, and Avot D'Rebbe Nattan 12-7:8.

⁹ See BaMidbar 17:13. This moment would have been significant for anyone, as hatzalat ha'rabbim always must be. But, for Aharon, the opportunity to stop a plague in its tracks had unique meaning, given the plague which broke out in conjunction with Chet Ha'Egel.

¹⁰ Ramban to BaMidbar 8:2.

¹¹ See Ramban to BaMidbar 8:3.

מכל חטאתם אחת בשנה, is the apotheosis of Aharon's life mission, when only he could perform the Avodah, when only he could atone for the Jewish people, and ensure blessings of life and health for them in the year to come.