

## Aharon and the Journey of Israel

### אהרן ומסעי ישראל

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At the outset of Parshat Masei, the Torah details the entire journey of the Jewish people over the past forty years, beginning with their journey forth from Ramses as the Egyptians were burying their dead, all the way until their encampment in the Transjordan, some forty two stations later. Amazingly, not a single historical event is recorded along these stops- not the splitting of the sea, not the battle against Amalek, not the giving of the Torah, not the inauguration of the Mishkan, not the sin of the spies or of the Golden Calf, not the rebellion of Korach, nothing at all<sup>1</sup>- with one singular exception: a brief description of the death of Aharon, including the date of his death, Rosh Chodesh Av. Why, of all events, does the Torah choose to record the death of Aharon in this context? Surely, the loss of Aharon is significant, but it is not more significant, one would imagine, than the giving of the Torah or the building of the Mishkan.

It seems to me that the answer can be found in the very next verse following the death of Aharon. The Torah retells the story of the immediate aftermath of Aharon's death, that the King of Arad attacked the Jewish count. According to the rabbinic tradition<sup>2</sup>, the Jewish people merited protection as long as Aharon lived in the form of Divine clouds, making them invulnerable to enemy attack. Once Aharon had passed, the Jewish people were left vulnerable to assaults from adversaries.

Yet, leaving this midrashic explanation aside for a moment, we might suggest a different approach, based on the personal qualities of Aharon. In rabbinic thought<sup>3</sup>, Aharon is the paradigm of peaceful interactions, he was a lover of peace, and more significantly, one who pursued it at all costs, healing broken friendships and marriages on the rocks. His love for people, and not his criticisms, brought people closer to Torah. Even in the judicial context, whereas his brother Moshe sought strict application of justice, Aharon counseled compromise and mediation<sup>4</sup>. Remarkably, it was Aharon's approach which was accepted as preferable to Moshe's in halakha<sup>5</sup>. In a word, Aharon kept the entire Jewish people cohesive and unified.

It is no surprise, then, that upon his demise, the Jewish people were left vulnerable to attack, much as they had been forty years prior, when the Jewish people left the weak and elderly straggling behind, and were attacked by Amalek. When we were unified and cohesive, no one dared attack the Jewish people in the desert. When we lost our cohesion, upon the

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<sup>1</sup> In fairness, the Torah does note the absence of water in Refidim (BeMidbar 33:14). It seems to me that this actually highlights the broader argument made here, in so far as the Torah omits the major event of Refidim, the war against Amalek.

<sup>2</sup> See Masekhet Ta'anit 9a.

<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot, Chapter 1. See also Avot D'Rebbe Natan (B) Ch. 24 for beautiful expositions on Aharon's methods for securing reconciliation.

<sup>4</sup> See Masekhet Sanhedrin 6b.

<sup>5</sup> See Rambam Hilkhos Sanhedrin 22.

death of Aharon, once again, we became vulnerable to assault. In light of this explanation, that the Jewish people were made vulnerable to attack due to their lack of unity, as they had been by Amalek four decades earlier, It is striking to note the rabbinic tradition that the King of Arad was actually an Amalekite assault disguised as another Canaanite tribe<sup>6</sup>.

It is perhaps for this reason that the only event which the Torah records concerning the forty year journey of the Jewish people through the desert is the death of Aharon. This is simply not the context in which the Torah wishes to recount the important events of the forty years in the desert, in which case all of the aforementioned events- the giving of the Torah, the splitting of the sea, and many others- would surely have been discussed. The Torah, in essence, seeks to explain only one matter. how it was that the Jewish people managed to stick together throughout their four decades in the wilderness. In no small measure, it was to the credit of Aharon, and his tireless work ensuring that the Jewish people would function as one unified camp, without splintering.

In light of this explanation, it is fascinating to note the rabbinic tradition that following the death of Aharon, not only were the Jewish people attacked, but they actually began retreating backwards towards Egypt, and backtracked eight different encampments<sup>7</sup>. Apparently, without Aharon, the Jewish people were, at least for the moment, incapable of progressing<sup>8</sup>.

In this context, it must be noted that the timing of Aharon's death, the first of the month of Av, is replete with significance. Aharon's date of death is the only such date recorded in the entire Torah, and, in light of the fact that we commence our period of national mourning on the first of Av, one cannot ignore the timing of his death. In light of the Talmudic comment<sup>9</sup> that both the destruction of second Temple, from which we still have not fully recovered, in the national sense, was caused by a sense of fraternal hatred, we would do well, at this time of year, to reflect upon Aharon's capacity to keep the Jewish people unified and cohesive. If the Jewish people survived forty years of desert wandering on account of his unifying presence, perhaps we too will be better able to survive our ongoing exile, even if it is, following the establishment of the State of Israel, largely an exile of choice, by emulating his example.

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<sup>6</sup> Tanchuma Chukat 18.

<sup>7</sup> See Talmud Yerushalmi, Yoma 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> According to this rabbinic tradition, the tribe of Levi literally had to engage in a civil war to force the rest of the Jewish people to proceed forward.

<sup>9</sup> Maskhet Yoma 9b.