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Kol Rinah  
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I was talking with Pastor Carlos on Thursday and he asked me how I usually read and think about the very long list of genealogies in the Torah. I explained that I usually skip them, and pay them absolutely no attention.

I've learned and taught at various times about why certain genealogies appear where they do in the Torah, but I'd never paid attention to the genealogy that appears in Exodus 6. Maybe you haven't either. To recap where we are in the story, God has sent Moses back to Egypt. Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, asking him to let the Israelites go worship God in the wilderness for three days. Pharaoh says no, and takes away the straw the Israelites used to make bricks.

The Israelite foremen go and complain to Aaron and Moses, and Moses in turn complains to God. God tells Moses that this is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God named yud hey vav hey, and I'll free you, and take you to the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But the people won't listen to Moses.

God tells Moses to go back to Pharaoh, but Moses protests, why should Pharaoh listen to me, "a man of impeded speech" (6:12). God tells Moses again to go to Pharaoh, and then we have a genealogy introduced in 6:14 that gives the sons, which become clans, of Reuben, then Shimon, then Levi, and with lots more info and detail on Levi's descendants, including Moses, and Aaron, and then focuses on those closest to Aaron—his cousins, wife, children, daughter-in-law.

It's clear that the purpose of the genealogy is to zoom in on Aaron and Moses. But why here, at this moment in the narrative?

Robert Alter, who just completed his magisterial translation of and commentary on the Hebrew Bible, point out that this is kind of the beginning of Moses and Aaron really working to free the Israelites; it's right after this that the real contest with Pharaoh begins, first with magic rods and tricks, and then with plagues. Genealogies introduce major narratives, some say. It's kind of like a chatzi kaddish.

A source critical, documentary hypothesis approach says that this is the, Priestly, or P version of Moses' and Aaron's call. The previous version at the burning bush was J/E but this is where the P version is woven in, and it's P, and we can tell because it focuses on Aaron and his descendants, who are the core of the priesthood.

One strand of the Jewish interpretive tradition of this section of Torah argues that the genealogy comes to validate and credential Moses and Aaron, while another strand says it's to indicate that they are human, and not divine figures.

But my take is that at this moment, this first moment in a standoff between powerful leaders, the Torah tells us about where Moses and Aaron come from, reminding us, and them, of who they are—the great people from whom they are descended, and also focuses on the present—the people closest to them for whom this really matters.

We all need to be reminded about why the things that are hard to do are necessary. We need to think about, and remind ourselves and be reminded about who we're doing all this for.

As parents, rabbis, leaders, volunteers—for we do things for ourselves, but really for others. Nonprofits do well when they tell the stories of those they serve.

I was discussing this with my dad, who has thought a lot about Exodus, and written extensively on the Passover Haggadah. He suggested the converse as well, that God also needs reminding about the past, and the present, and to show up and do what God promised. Right at this moment, things look bleak. But when we are reminded of actual human beings, who we actually know and care about, it can spur us into action, create greater resolve.

What is the thing that you know you need to do?

Who are the people, that will benefit most from it, that it's really for? Picture them, name them, imagine them—some might be long gone, some might be very young.

And when Shabbat's over, just as God, Moses and Aaron get to work, so may we.  
Shabbat shalom.