"*Naso:* Was Aaron the natural choice for the Priesthood?"

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

There is a connecting theme underlying some of the topics dealt with in our sidrah, namely, individuals or groups who were set apart from the rest of their brethren in the camp, whether on account of their elevated status or, conversely, because they might constitute a source of contamination. The former These included the Levitical offspring of Moses – Gershon, Kehat, and Merari – who were each charged with specific tasks related to the erection, dismantling, or transportation, of the portable desert Sanctuary and the care of its vessels (Nu. 4:21-49). This is followed by the instruction regarding those with certain potentially contagious diseases or impurities who had to reside outside the camp as a precaution against their spread (5:1-4). There then follows the episode related to the woman who is suspected of having 'separated herself' (*Sota*) from her husband through an act of adultery (vv. 11-31), which is followed by the description of 'anyone, man or woman, who explicitly utters a Nazarite's vow *to set himself apart* for the Lord' (6:2ff). This, in turn, is followed by the instruction to the priests – set apart by reason of birth for their special calling, sacred duties and life-style – to utter a prescribed formula when blessing the people (vv. 22-27). The lengthy final section of the sidrah (7:1-89) brings that notion of separation into bold relief with its description of the consecration of the Sanctuary, and its altar and utensils – the repositories of holiness – from which a non-priest must 'keep himself apart' on pain of death (Nu.1:51).

Significantly, the basic meaning of the word *kodesh* is 'separation', 'detachment,' 'withdrawal.' The translation 'holy' derives from the fact that the state of holiness necessarily

involves an element of withdrawal from involvement or contact with the physical and mundane activities, or pursuits that may border on the distractive or seductive. This accounts for what, at first glance, may appear anomalous, namely that the same root – *k-d-sh* – used to denote holiness, is also used to describe a male and female prostitute – *Kadesh* and *k'deishah,* respectively (See Deut. 23:18). These terms are, however, a reflection of that basic notion of 'being set apart', for one can set oneself apart from normal society to embrace either a holy way-of-life or a grossly unholy one.

As a *Kohein,* it is with considerable diffidence, however, that I write about the special status and position of privilege enjoyed by priests in Jewish life and tradition since biblical times. For, we priests have no right to feel smug when we reflect on the fact that the priestly status was only bestowed on the offspring of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, as a second choice. God's first choice as His earthly representatives were the firstborn of each and every tribe of Israel who had the privilege of leading the spiritual life and rituals within their families (Note the first Passover Lamb ritual that was performed was in family groups.). They forfeited that privilege, however, when all the tribes, with the exception of Levi, worshipped the Golden Calf (See Nu. 8:16-22). So, there is something ironical and counter-intuitive in the choice of Aaron and his family to replace the firstborn, given the leading role that Aaron himself played in that same idolatrous episode!

There are, in fact, two accounts of the latter episode: Ex. 32:1-14 and Deut. 9:12-29. In the first, the role of Aaron and his instructions to the people who clamored for him to make the Calf are stated in every detail, to the extent that his name is mentioned five times in the

opening six verses! In the second account – repeated by Moses to the nation prior to his death – there is not a single mention of Aaron's part in the making of the Calf, with everything being blamed on the people (See vv. 12, 16, 21). God's displeasure with Aaron is referred to therein in but a single verse (v.20) – and with no reference to its cause! Moses seems to have played it down, and mentioned it merely to disclose to the nation that he had successfully interceded with God on behalf of his brother.

An early Midrashic tradition – no doubt picking up its cue from the Moses account – represents Aaron as having been coerced to make the Calf on pain of death, either by the leaders of the agitation or by the Mixed Multitude that came out of Egypt with the Israelites (See Mid. *Shem. Rabb*. 41 (10), based on the verse, 'And the people gathered around Aaron' (Ex. 32:1). The fact that idolatry had been established as one of the three cardinal sins (the other two being immorality and murder), for which one had to be prepared to lay down one's life rather than transgress, seems, however, to have been ignored by the authors of this Midrash!

Another suggestion has it that God did, in fact, punish Aaron, namely with premature death; and hence he was prevented from entering the Promised Land and died in the desert. The death of his two sons has also been understood as his punishment, though the theological difficulties inherent in that correlation are obvious, given that the Torah states specifically that 'children shall not be put to death for [the sins of] their fathers' (Deut. 24:16).

It might also be argued that before the Golden Calf episode God had already designated Aaron as High Priest and his sons as priests (See Ex. 281ff) and had fully detailed their respective roles in the Sanctuary, even to the various vestments that they would wear. To have punished him there and then would have destroyed the image of the priesthood in the eyes of the nation, as articulated in the instruction to the people to show deference to its members and to view them as the repositories of divine holiness (See Lev. 21:8; Tal. *Gitt*. 59b). It would also have left a leadership vacuum, leading to bitter rivalry, and possibly civil war, between those – such as Korach and his followers (See Nu. chs.16–17) – who coveted that position. God simply *had* to forgive Aaron, therefore, for the higher purpose of maintaining the unity of the nation and the integrity of the civil and spiritual administration.

Aaron's remorse and God's faith in him was demonstrated almost immediately following the quelling of Korach's rebellion when Moses stood in the gate of the camp and summoned 'all who are on the Lord's side' to step forward and deliver punishment upon the initiators of the Calf apostasy. 'All the sons of Levi' – which certainly included Aaron – were the first to respond to the call to exact punishment in the name of God.

We have already referred to the unique DNA sequence of the human genome that is shared exclusively by priests – and which has accordingly been designated, 'the Cohen Modal Haplotype' – and which has been traced back through their line at least as far as the period of the second Temple, some two to two-and-a-half thousand years ago (See Skorecki K, Selig S, Blazer S, Bradman R, Bradman N, Waburton PJ, *et al*: *"Y-chromosomes of Jewish priests," Nature. **385** (6611)32*. See 'Torah Thought' on *Emor* 2022). The existence of this

genealogical line serves also to explode the speculative theory of Arthur Koestler, in his book, *Thirteenth Tribe* (1976), that Ashkenazi Jewry did not originate from ancient Israel but from a Turkish tribe called the Khazars who converted to Judaism in the 8th century CE and migrated to Eastern Europe in the 12-13th cents.

We are well familiar with this type of national 'identity fraud' – calculated to deny Jewry its antiquity and history, and, *ipso facto*, its claim to its ancient ancestral land – from similar allegations by Palestinian groups, and by their supporters around the world who, with pernicious anti-Semitic intent, back their claims and trumpet their tropes.

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In the light of Aaron's sin through involvement in the creation of the Golden Calf – and the fact that God, notwithstanding, confirmed him in the High Priesthood and bade him recite that daily blessing of the people – we may understand why even non-observant priests are also duty-bound to participate in the blessing of the people and in the recitation of its prescribed formula as set forth in our sidrah (Nu. 6:24-26).

The Talmudic, and later rabbinic, name for this ritual was *Nesi'at kapayyim*, literally 'raising of the hands.' This was the biblical mode of blessing and petition and is specifically referred to in the context of Aaron who 'raised his hands towards the people and blessed them' (Lev. 9:22). In Medieval Ashkenazi communities it was more popularly referred to as *duchaning*, after the 'dais' (*duchan*) on which the priests stood to bless. And, just as the priests had their

hands and feet washed by the Levites before performing the rituals in the Temple, so, after its destruction (70CE), the tradition of the Levitical washing of the hands of the priests was continued.. The Temple priests walked barefoot, and hence it was necessary to wash their feet also prior to the blessing.

Among Rabbi Ishmael's Thirteen Principles of Biblical Interpretation – recited each morning at the commencement of our prayers – there is one which states that 'a law may be inferred from its context.' This prompted the Talmud (*Ta'an.* 26b) to point out the significance of the fact that the Torah placed the Priestly Blessing immediately following on from the section dealing with the Nazirite (Nu. 6:1-21). Since the Nazirites vowed to abstain from wine, the sages inferred contextually that any priest who had become inebriated was prohibited from blessing the people. In some of our congregations, it is not unknown for groups of people to slip away from the service while the haftarah is being recited to gather together for a 'lechayim.' While not approving of this practice, it is perhaps appropriate in this context to remind any Kohein participant that he might bear this Talmudic caution in mind!

The Priestly blessing states, 'Blessed are You…who has commanded us to bless His people Israel *in love'* (*b'ahavah*). This formulation is unique in that it makes love of Israel a pre-requisite for reciting the blessing. This prompted the statement that, 'any priest who does not have warm feelings toward his congregation should not participate in the ritual' (Zohar, *Parashat Naso*, 147b).

Love, sympathy, peacemaking, and tolerance, were, according to our tradition, the hallmarks of Aaron's character, to the extent that the illustrious Hillel issued the challenge to all to

aspire to be ‘disciples of Aaron’ in that respect (Mish. *Avot* 1:12). And this may also explain why, notwithstanding his involvement in the Golden Calf episode, God chose him as His High Priest.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Jeffrey