

Parshat Chukat

The Peacemaker.

(Based on a sicha that I heard from Rav Lichtenstein shlit"a - 5753)

Aharon dies in this week's parsha. Thus far in the Torah, he has been portrayed as Moshe's brother and spokesman, and as the High Priest. However our Rabbis focused upon a personality trait that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. The Midrash describes him as a most beloved figure, greater in his popularity than even the great leader, Moses. The people love Aharon deeply. How does the Midrash discover this observation? - It is based on a comparison of pesukim. The Torah tells us that after Aharon's death:

"The ENTIRE House of Israel wept for him for thirty days" (Bamidbar 20:29).

The Midrash with its exquisite sensitivity to language notes that in the description of Israel's mourning for Moshe:

"The Israelites wept for him ... for thirty days" (Devarim 34:8)

They wept for thirty days for both Moshe and Aharon. But WHO wept? For Moshe it was "The Israelites" but not "The entire House of Israel!" It would appear that Aharon had captured a greater popular appeal. Rashi says:

"The entire House of Israel: men and women. Because Aharon pursued peace and would promote love between husbands and wives who were in a state of friction and disagreement." (Rashi 20:29)

The Midrash says it slightly differently:

"Why did Israel cry for Aharon for thirty days? Because.. he never said to any man : "You sinned" ... (as opposed to) Moshe who criticised them harshly," (Sifra Shemini 1/Avot deRabbi Natan 12:4)

So what exactly is the trait that made Aharon so popular? What was his charm, what attracted the masses of Bnei Yisrael to him? The Mishna in Avot tells us:

"Hillel says: Be one of the disciples of Aharon. He loved peace and pursued peace; loved people and drew them close to the Torah" (Avot 1:12).

But the Midrash in Avot DeRabbi Natan fills in the details of the story:

"When Aharon went on his way and a wicked person encountered him, Aharon greeted him. The next day, that man wanted to commit a sin, but thought, "Woe is to me! How will I raise my eyes afterwards and look at Aharon? I am ashamed before him, for he greeted me" (Avot d' Rabbi Natan 12:3).

When two people quarrelled Aharon went and sat down with one of them and said to him, "My son, know that your friend has said, 'I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aaron would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him, "Know that your friend is saying, 'Woe is to me! How shall I raise my eyes and look at my friend? I am ashamed before him because I have sinned against him.' " Aharon would sit with him until he had dispelled the ill feeling from his heart. When the two friends later met, they embraced and kissed each other (ibid. 12:3).

There were thousands in Israel who were called by the name: "Aharon," for if not for Aaron, they would not have come into the world. Aharon made peace between husband and wife so that they came together, and they named the child that was born after him! (ibid. 12:3).

In other words, Aharon is a man whose mission it is to draw people together in peace and harmony. He is so dedicated to this task, so driven, that he will resort to subterfuge in order to convince rival parties to settle their differences. And he was successful too! He would find a way to break down barriers, replace acrimony with harmony, turn suspicion into trust and hatred to love.

Now this would seem to be indisputably fantastic. But one wonders, if Aharon is so great, why Moshe would not have acted in the same manner? Aharon "loves peace and pursues peace." Moshe "rebukes the nation with harsh words." Quite a contrast! If Aharon's techniques produced such unbelievable results, why could Moshe not have learned something from his elder

brother? Or might we suggest that the difference is deliberate?

i. A DIFFERENCE OF ROLES

Of course we can speculate that the difference was very much a function of their respective roles. Moshe is the leader. The buck stops with him. As the man at the top of the pyramid he must know how to say things straight, how to bring the nation into line when necessary. It might not win him a seat at the polls, but sometimes a responsible leader must also engage in unpopular measures that will take the nation forward. Aharon did not have the same degree of responsibility. He could afford to smile at everyone. As High Priest he said a daily blessing of Peace. He could pursue goals of harmony and conciliation without fear that his gentle and easygoing demeanour would be abused in crisis situations. Moshe had to keep a greater distance, and sometimes had to make the hard decisions, to confront the nation with their sins and failures.

ii. A DIFFERENCE OF IDEOLOGY

But possibly we could suggest something more fundamental here; an argument between Moshe and Aharon as to correct conduct, a debate of moral principle and propriety.

Let us return to the stories above:

"When Aharon went on his way and a wicked person encountered him, Aharon greeted him. The next day, that man wanted to commit a sin, but thought, "Woe is to me! How will I raise my eyes afterwards and look at Aharon? I am ashamed before him, for he greeted me" (Avot d' Rabbi Natan 12:3).

Aharon befriends a "wicked person." Moses can turn around to Aharon and say to him: Who do you think you are? What message are you sending to the nation? Here is a man who is a well know liar and cheat, he has been convicted for fraud, he beats his wife, he doesn't eat Kosher. You see him in the street and you are his best friend. You are condoning his actions! You are accepting him as a full member of the community! How can you act in this manner? This man is not going to repent! He will go home and sit in his armchair and feel smug about his association with the High Priest. Aharon! You are no.2 around here. Support the righteous, not the wicked!

The story with the two arguing men is no better. The two men are quite happy blaming the other person for the fight. Until Aharon comes along. Aharon engages in deception in order to reconcile the two factions. But what if the ploy fails? And even if it succeeds, can Aharon engage in fabrications and lies? Do the ends justify the means here? Are we allowed to invent false stories in order to settle a simple dispute between stubborn adversaries?

BALANCING VALUES

But maybe this is precisely the point of difference between Aharon and Moshe. Aharon argues that peace and harmony, communal unity, Achdut, Shalom have such a pivotal position in Judaism, in life, that truth may be compromised to reach that end.

And Moshe disagrees. Moshe, the man of Emet insists that one cannot blur the lines and fudge the boundaries. A sinner is a sinner. And if we begin to compromise truth, then it is a slippery slope that can end in dangerous places. No tactics are worth hiding the facts. Better to say it as it is even if it is unpopular.

TRUTH vs. PEACE

Strange as it sounds, there are many situations in which this debate, the struggle between the values of Truth and Peace comes to the fore.

Does one always have to tell the truth, even if it will hurt someone?

Does an Orthodox community associate and accept a non-Orthodox congregation – the value of Unity – but maybe blurring lines of truth and exclusivity, as their warmth and openness, in a sense, accepts the non-Orthodox as a legitimate "alternative?"

We might have a truth that Eretz Yisrael rightfully belongs to the Jewish people. Do we compromise that truth for a Peace agreement, or does that push us limits beyond a reasonable limit? Because some truths are so fundamental that they are at the source of our very identity and no peace is worth trading that Truth.

Ironically, even basic "consensus" values such as Peace and Truth can sometimes be at variance. And it is not at all clear as to how these two values might be resolved.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel tells us that the ultimate role of a judge is to find the line which embraces BOTH truth and Peace. Quoting the prophet Zecharia, he talks about the ideal fusion of these values of Truth and Peace:

"Rabban Shim'on ben-Gamli'el used to say: The world stands on three things: on **law**, on **truth** and on **peace**; as is said, "Judge in your gates truth and the justice of peace (Zecharia 8:16)".

Shabbat Shalom!