

Parshat Titzaveh- 2019/5779 The Birth of Jewish Institutions

Among the many themes in the book of *Beresheet*, Genesis, is that of sibling rivalry. Horrible crimes are committed so as either to prevent one brother from inheriting their place as rightful heir or from their position as their father's favorite- even though they are not the firstborn. Cain kills Abel; Isaac's inheritance of his father's line is insured by his mother, Sarah, who banishes Abraham's actual firstborn son, Ishmael; Jacob literally steals the firstborn blessing destined for Esau from his blind father; Jacob's sons conspire to banish their father's favorite, Joseph, all the while suggesting to their father, Jacob, that Joseph was dead.

If the theme of all these stories was that the ends always justified the means, the Joseph story begins to break this mold. Up until Joseph, the message seemed to be that one could and should do anything necessary to become the next singular inheritor of the Abrahamic line. So the Torah recounts how Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or in some cases, their mothers, manipulated their family interactions to eventually establish these men as the forefathers of the Jewish people.

Not so with Joseph. In Joseph's case, he was the victim of his brother's subterfuge. Yet, the narrative in the Torah follows Joseph as he is traded to Egyptian merchants, as he eventually uses his divine power of interpreting dreams to bring riches and glory to Pharaoh and Egypt. It follows Joseph as he forgives his brothers, reunites his family, including his father, and saves them from famine. Here, the Torah teaches us that the victim of sibling rivalry can become the inheritor of the Abrahamic line.

Based on this theme, one might assume that the hero of the second book of the Torah, of *Shemot/Exodus*, is Moses, and although his character plays a central role in the freeing of Israelite slaves, of accepting the Ten Commandments and of teaching of the remaining commandments to the Children of Israel, we know that Moses is not the inheritor of the Abrahamic line, only the conduit through whom G-d will form a new nation. For this to occur, for the Jewish people to have any continuity, there must be a change in focus from a singular inheritor to Jewish institutions, each run by laws and traditions.

For starters, Moses is a reluctant leader. He speaks poorly, and even in his inaugural meeting with G-d at the incident with the burning bush atop a mountain, he pleads with G-d to consider using his brother, Aaron, as the divine messenger. G-d replies that Aaron "is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you." As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out, "How different this is from the tense encounters between brothers in Genesis!" Indeed, Aaron had all the reasons to hate Moses: they not only didn't grow up together, Moses was brought up by Pharaoh's daughter, a privileged life of riches. All this, while Aaron was worked to the bone as were other Israelite slaves. If the lessons of Genesis were anything of a guide to Aaron, he would be justified to fear that the younger brother might try to inherit what belonged to him.

Yet, Aaron was different. He knew that his mother put the baby Moses in a floating basket in the Nile River to save him; he knew that the banished brother had come back to help save the Israelites, in the same way that the banished Joseph would be the salvation of the Jewish people in his generation. And for that reason, he rejoiced upon meeting Moses. Indeed, Moses and Aaron did everything together: they argued with Pharaoh in his palace, they worked as a team to initiate each of the plagues, they organized the Israelites on their exodus from Goshen.

Curiously, as Rabbi Sacks points out, Moses' name is not mentioned once in this week's parsha, Tetzaveh. In fact, it's all about the formation of the priesthood around Aaron and his sons, their special garments, the Urim v'Tumim breastplate box work by Aaron that had one precious stone for each of the 12 tribes, and their special priestly rituals. Rabbi Sacks notes a discussion in the Talmud in which Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai gives a reason why Moses is not cited here: he notes that in the burning bush episode, when Moses tries to get G-d to choose Aaron, it is written that G-d actually becomes angry at Moses by reminding him, "Who gave man a mouth? or who made a man mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? is it not I the G-d?" Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai notes that when it says that G-d gets angry in the Torah, the effect is never lasting, that is, G-d always reverses his anger, *except* for this case with Moses. And so, the notion is that in anger, G-d seeded the institution of the priesthood in Aaron and in his line.

I see this in different terms. In my reading, Aaron is a true hero, someone who broke the mold of past biblical sibling rivalries because in his mind, the

ends were not personal, rather they were for the salvation of the Israelites from slavery, for the future of Jewish people. I see his receiving the mantle of the priesthood, and of having a whole parsha devoted to him, as a reward for his belief in Jewish institutions, not mere men. Indeed, this is why in our parsha, Moses is told that he is in charge of making the priestly garments for his brother "for honor and for glory." Moreover, Moses can't just hire any bargain-basement tailor, certain not the likes of Motel Kamzoil. Rather, G-d tells Moses to find those that are חֲכָמִי-בַיָּדָה, wise-hearted, and filled with רוּחַ הַחָכְמָה, the spirit of wisdom. In other words, they must be G-d-inspired, with the skill of a Michelangelo, who was known in his day as "il divino".

The story of Moses and Aaron is one of love, not rivalry, between brothers, of sacrifice of self for the betterment of others, of the development of institutions that obey laws and traditions, not selfish whims.

It is impossible for me to reflect on this story without thinking of the rivalries and divisions amongst our current day leaders. Too often, we see the reflection of Genesis characters, individuals bent on subterfuge and dishonesty, lying and cheating against their brothers and sisters so that they, and they alone, can grab the mantle of power. And just as with characters in Genesis, any selfish end seems to justify any means.

But when these reflections go to their darkest place, that is so say, when I watch nightly cable news, I am comforted by remembering that in our community as well as all over this country, regular people still get along with each other quite well. And that is because the vast, vast majority follow institutions that care about the whole, not about how much fame and fortune individual leader amass. I see everyday among us those endowed with רוּחַ הַחָכְמָה, the spirit of wisdom, in what they do or make. They have created a divine fabric of society; they- the Burmese refugee who makes our sushi at Wegman's, the curious scientist who helped us discover that our own downtown Buffalo library has first edition volumes of Copernicus, Ptolemy and Kepler, the family who transformed a fallen downtown factory into a food-truck rodeo garden. Our future will be written as a parsha to these people, of brothers and sisters who work and live in unity.

Shabbat shalom