

# Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778\*

## Chapter XXV: Tzav (Lev. 6:1–8:36)

### Essay 1. Why the priesthood remains with Aaron's offspring

**מִדְרָשׁ** "צוֹ אֶת־אֶהָרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו" וְכֹי, זֶה שְׁאָמַר הַכָּתוּב "שְׂנֵאָה תְעוֹרֵר מִדְּנִים" שְׂנֵאָה שְׂנֵאָה אֶהָרֹן בֵּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאַבְיָהֶם שְׂבִשְׂמִים הִיא עוֹרְרָה עָלֵיהֶן דִּינֵי דִינִים. אָמַר רַבִּי אֲסִי מְלַמֵּד שְׂהִיָּה אֶהָרֹן נוֹטֵל קֶרְבָּנִים וּפּוֹחֵסוֹ לְפָנֵיהֶן וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶן דְּעוּ שְׂאִין בּוֹ מִמֶּשׁ וְכֹי. הוּא שְׂמֵשָׁה אָמַר לְאֶהָרֹן "מָה־עָשָׂה לָךְ הָעַם הַזֶּה", מוֹטֵב הִנֵּה לָהֶם שְׂיִדּוֹנוֹ שׁוֹגְגִים וְאֵל יִדּוֹנוֹ מְזִידִים, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב "וּבְאֶהָרֹן הִתְאַנְּף ה' מְאֹד לְהַשְׁמִידוֹ" וְאִין הַשְׁמָדָה אֶלָּא כְּלוּי בְּנִים וְכֹי עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash**:

There is a verse, **“Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it.”**<sup>1</sup>

**This is what Scripture is saying about “Hatred awakens judgments,”**<sup>2</sup> that the **hatred that Aaron presented between Israel and their Father in Heaven awakens up upon them judgment upon judgment. . . . Rabbi Asi said, this teaches that Aaron would take their sacrifice for the Golden Calf and squash it before them and say to them, “Know that there is no substance to this,”** i.e., the Golden Calf can’t do anything for you.

**This is the reason why Moses told Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought such great sin upon them?”**<sup>3</sup> Moses meant: **“It would have been better for them that they be judged as unintentional sinners [thinking there was some benefit to be derived from the Golden Calf] and not be judged as intentional sinners [knowing the truth]. . . .” This is as it is written, “Moreover, the L-rd was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him,”**<sup>4</sup> **and the expression “destruction” means to finish off his sons and daughters.**

- Lev. Rabbah 7:1

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 6:1.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. 10:12.

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 32:21.

<sup>4</sup> Deut. 9:20.

יש לדקדק למה אמר שגאָה שגָתן אהרן ולא אמר חטא שהחטיאם אהרן כמו שאמר הכתוב "כִּי־הִבֵּאתָ עָלֶיךָ חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה". ואימתא במדרש על פסוק "וַיַּחַל מֹשֶׁה", אמר משה לפני הקב"ה והלא אין בו ממש למה אתה כועס על עמך הוי למה ה' "תורה אפך" עכ"ל. ואם כן לפי דברי משה הוא יותר טוב על ישראל שאין בו ממש והקב"ה צריך למחול להם בשביל זה, ולפי דברי אהרן אדרבא הוא יותר חמור עונם בשביל שאין בו ממש. וזהו השגאָה שגָתן אהרן בין ישראל להקב"ה, שלפי דבריו שיותר קשה להם בשביל שהיה דבר שאין בו ממש, לא היה לו לעשות כן, דהא מוטב שידינו נכו'.

**We need to check why it said, “the hatred that Aaron caused,” and didn’t say, “the sin that he caused them to sin,”<sup>5</sup> as Scripture said, “that you have brought such great sin upon them.” A midrash, Ex. Rabbah 43:6, discusses the verse, “But Moses implored the L-rd his G-d, saying, ‘Let not Your anger, L-rd, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand.’”<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing this midrash, Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, “Isn’t it so that there is no substance to this? Why are you angry at your people?” The actual text of the midrash reads:**

Moses said, “Master of the Universe, they have made an assistant for You, but You are angry with them? Why, this Calf that they have made will assist You. You will cause the sun to rise, while it will cause the moon to rise. You will look after the stars, and it will see to the constellations. You will cause the dew to descend, and it will cause the winds to blow. You will make the rains come down, while it will be responsible for the growth of plants.” Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to him: “Moses, even you err regarding the Calf, for there is no substance to it.” [Moses] said to Him: “If this be the case, ‘why are You angry with Your people?’”

- Ex. Rabbah 43:6

**Thus, according to the words of Moses, it was better for Israel that there was no substance to this, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, needed to forgive them because of this.**

**But according to the words of Aaron, to the contrary, their iniquity was more serious because there was no substance to this.**

**This is the hatred that Aaron presented between Israel and the Holy One, Blessed be He: that according to the words that it was more serious for them because it was something without substance, he should not have done this, that it would have been better if they had been judged as unintentional sinners and not be judged as intentional sinners.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ex. 32:21.

<sup>6</sup> Ex. 32:11.

ומה שאמרו, אין השמדה אלא כילוי בנים, קשה דהלא אף בישראל נאמר "כיאמר ה' להשמיד אתכם", ושם רצה לומר בין האבות ובין הבנים ומנין לו שפאן באהרן אינו רוצה לומר אלא כילוי בנים.

**What they said, “ ‘destruction’ means to finish off the sons,” is difficult to understand. For regarding Israel, isn’t it said, “because the L-rd was determined to destroy you,”<sup>7</sup> and that means both the fathers and the sons? From where does [the author of the Midrash] know that for Aaron, it means to finish off the sons?**

וגש לומר שמתחלה הנה ראוי משה להיות כהן ואהרן לוי, אמנם במה שאמר "שלחנא בנדתשלח" חרה אפו של הקב"ה ונטל ממנו הכהונה. אמנם לא ניטלה אלא מבניו של משה, כי משה עצמו הנה כהן כל ימי חייו, שפינון שעלה שוב לא ירד. ומעתה אהרן זכה בכהונה בשכר "ויראה ושמח בלבבו" זכה לעדי החשן הנתון על לבו. וכשהקב"ה חרה אפו על אהרן אי אפשר להשמידו רצה לומר על אהרן ממש שימות, אלא אדרבא יש לו להיות ולהיות כהן ויהי משכורתו שלימה על כל צדקותיו אשר עשה, ועוד שפינון שעלה שוב לא ירד, אכל בניו שאינם באים אלא מפחו של אהרן אביהם, השתא דהורע פחו הורע נמי פתם, ומעתה על פרתה צריה לומר שאין השמדה האמור פאן באהרן אלא כילוי בנים.

**It can be said that initially, Moses deserved to be a priest and Aaron a Levite, but when [Moses] said, “Please send [this instruction] by another agent,”<sup>8</sup> the anger of the Holy One, Blessed be He, blazed forth, and he took the priesthood from [Moses].<sup>9</sup> However, it was taken only from Moses’ sons, for Moses himself was a priest all the days of his life, since one who has already ascended will not descend.<sup>10</sup> Now that Aaron merited the priesthood as a reward for his willingness to speak to Pharaoh, if Moses were to refuse to do so, as it says, “He, I know, speaks readily; even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you.”<sup>11</sup> He merited to wear the breastplate ornament which was placed over his heart.<sup>12</sup> While the anger of the Holy One, Blessed He, blazed forth against Aaron, it was impossible [for Him to want] to destroy him, that it meant to say regarding Aaron that he would literally die. Rather, to the contrary, he should live and be priest and have a full reward for the acts of righteousness that he did. Further, one has already ascended will not descend, but his sons had come to the priesthood only by the power of their father, Aaron, so now that his right is inferior, also their right is inferior. Therefore, you necessarily need to say that the destruction spoken about here isn’t about Aaron but rather it means to finish off the sons.**

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 9:25.

<sup>8</sup> Ex. 4:13.

<sup>9</sup> Ex. Rabbah 3:17.

<sup>10</sup> The question of whether Moses was a priest is debated by the rabbis. In Zevachim 101b, Rav says that Moses was a high priest. In 102a, a majority of the rabbis held that Moses was a priest for the seven days of the inauguration of the Tabernacle, but that afterward his priesthood expired.

<sup>11</sup> Ex. 4:14.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi on Ex. 4:14 (based on Ex. 28:29; Shabbat 139a; Ex. Rabbah 3:17).

והאי דנקט הלשון של כילוי בנים ולא קאמר מיתת בנים, צריך לומר שהקב"ה לא הנה רוצה לגזור עליהם להמיתם, אלא כשהנה אפו על אהרן הנה רוצה שבניו לא יהיו עוד כהנים כמו שעשה למשה. ואמרין במדרש סוף וילך "כיענה כמות אהבה" אמר משה מאה מיתות ולא קנאה אמת, ואם הנה בותן הקב"ה הנהו ל'אחרים היתה להם קנאה גדולה. ומשום הכי נקרא כילוי בנים, דוקא כילוי, ואין צורך לכל הדוחקים שכתב ה'נפה תואר. ועיין עוד לקמן בסמוך. וטעם זה הועיל דוקא לבניו של אהרן שכבר היו גדולים ונשובים, ולא הנה מועיל לבניו של משה שהיו קטנים, שהרי הבן שני נולד לו כשהלך למצרים.

**As the language taken is “to finish off the sons” and it’s not saying “the death of the sons,” it’s necessary to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, didn’t want to decree their deaths upon them. Rather, when His anger blazed against Aaron, He wanted [Aaron’s] sons to no longer be priests, as he did with Moses, in taking the priesthood away from Moses’ sons. It says in the Midrash at the end of parshat Vayeilech: “ ‘For love is as fierce as death, jealousy is as mighty as the grave.’<sup>13</sup> Moses said, “[Give me] one hundred deaths and not one [incident of] jealousy,” and if the Holy One, Blessed be He, had given the priesthood to others, there would have been great jealousy.”<sup>14</sup>**

**Because of this, it is called “finishing off the sons” and not “the death of the sons,” the “finishing off” specifically, and there is no need for all the forced explanations that were written by the Yafeh To’ar.<sup>15</sup> See further in the next essay.**

**This reason of avoiding jealousy specifically benefitted the sons of Aaron, who were already great and important, already serving as priests. But [this reason of avoiding jealousy] was not helpful with regard to Moses’ sons, who were young, and who were not yet serving as priests, for the second son was born to him when he went to Egypt after his time in Midian.**

Lest one think Aaron’s sons escaped all punishment, see Chapter XXVI: Shemini, essay 2. This discusses Rashi on Deut. 9:20, which says that G-d was prepared to kill all four of Aaron’s sons because of the incident with the Golden Calf. Moses prayed for them, and while Nadab and Abihu died, Eliezer and Itamar survived.<sup>16</sup>

Also see Chapter LIII, Haazinu, essay 3, discussing in greater length Ex. Rabbah 43:6, in which Moses suggests G-d should not be jealous of an idol with no substance. Rabbi Nachmani explains there that in cases where the Israelites actually practiced idolatry, it might indeed be considered a greater sin to worship something with no substance than something beneficial to man. However, in the specific case of the Golden Calf, only the mixed multitude worshipped it as a god, whereas the Israelites wanted it only as a replacement for Moses. In that specific case, Moses’ defense was effective in saving the Jewish people, and may be another reason why Eliezer and Itamar survived and were not stripped of the priesthood.

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<sup>13</sup> Song of Songs 8:6.

<sup>14</sup> Deut. Rabbah 9:9.

<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac Ashkenazi Jaffe (d. late 16th century), rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Constantinople. *Yafeh To’ar* was his commentary to the Midrash Rabbah: Genesis (Venice, 1597–1606); Exodus (Venice, 1597); and Leviticus (Constantinople, 1648).

<sup>16</sup> Of course, the reason for the deaths of Nadab and Abihu is greatly debated by commentators.