

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XXV: Tzav (Lev. 6:1–8:36)

Essay 2. G-d's forgiveness of Aaron

מדרש רבה "צו את־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו" וכו', רבי יהושע אומר מתחלת הספר ועד כאן פתיב "וְעָרְכוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן" וְנִתְּנוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן. אָמַר מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי הַקֹּב"ה, רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם הַבּוֹר שְׁנוּאָה וּמִיָּמֶיךָ תְּבִיבִין, תִּלְקֹת כְּבוֹד לְעֻצִּים בְּשִׁבִּיל בְּנֵיהֶם, דְּתִגְנוּן תִּמְן כָּל הָעֻצִּים לְמַעַרְכָּהּ חוּץ מִשָּׁל וְזֵית וְשֵׁל גִּפְן. וְלֹא־הָרֹן אֵי אֶתָּה חוֹלֵק כְּבוֹד בְּשִׁבִּיל בָּנָיו. אָמַר לוֹ הַקֹּב"ה חֲיֵיד בְּשִׁבִּילָהּ אֲנִי מְקַרְבּוֹ, וְלֹא עוֹד אֵלָּא שְׁאֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ עֶקֶר וּבָנָיו טְפִלִּים שְׁנֹאֲמַר "צו את־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו" עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash Rabbah**:

“Command Aaron and his sons thus”¹ Rabbi Manah and **Rabbi Yehoshua** of Sikhnin said: **From the beginning of the Book of Leviticus until here, it is written, “and Aaron’s sons, [the priests,] shall lay out [the sections]”**² . . . and **“the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar.”**³ [I.e., there are nine references to “Aaron’s sons,” but only two references to “Aaron and his sons.”]⁴

Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, “Master of the Universe, [can it be that] the well is hated, but her water is beloved? [I.e., do You hate Aaron, but love his sons?] You have apportioned honor to trees because of their offspring; as we have stated here, “[Wood from] all the trees is fit for the arrangement [of wood on which the offerings were burned], except for [wood] from [the] vine and from the olive [tree].”⁵ **Will you not apportion honor to Aaron because of his sons?**

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, “By your life, because of you, I am reinstating him. Not only that, but I will make him the principal and his sons secondary, as it is said, “Command Aaron and his sons.”

- Lev. Rabbah 7:1

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¹ Lev. 6:2.

² Lev. 1:8.

³ Lev. 1:7.

⁴ “Aaron’s sons”: Lev. 1:5, 1:7, 1:8, 1:11, 2:2, 3:2, 3:5, 3:8, 3:13. “Aaron and his sons”: Lev. 2:3, 2:10.

⁵ Mishnah Tamid 2:3. Grape vines and olive trees were the primary fruit-bearing trees of the Land of Israel, in terms of their significance for the fruit they developed. It would be wasteful to use such trees for their wood. Or as the Midrash suggests, the trees are honored with G-d’s protection for the sake of their offspring, i.e., their fruit.

הקשה הלב ארנה דאיפכא הנה לו לומר מימיה חביבין והבור שנואה, כיון דהמכונן הוא לקרב הבור בשביל מימיה, לא כן עתה שמתמנה על מה שמחבב כיון שהבור שנואה.

The *Lev Aryeh*⁶ asks that he could have said it in reverse: “[Is it possible that] the water is beloved, but the well is hated,” since it’s intended that He would approach the well for the water. I.e., as “Aaron’s sons” were mentioned most often, why didn’t Moses put the focus on them by first asking about the “water,” and then shifting the focus to Aaron, “the well”? It is not like this now that Moses is first asking about Aaron, and then that there is surprise that He has affection for the water since the well is hated.

ועוד יש לדקדק מה היתה פוננת משה באמרו שמי טענות הבור שנואה וכו', חלקת כבוד וכו', ואף הקב"ה נותן לו שמי תשובות, מתחלה אומר, אני מקרבו, ואחר כך, אני עושה אותו עקר וכו'. ועוד מהו, בשבילה אני מקרב אותו, והלא משה לא אמר שיעשה בשבילו.

It is necessary to carefully determine what Moses meant when he said the two claims “the well is hated etc.,” “You have apportioned honor etc.” Even the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave him two answers. In the beginning, he said, “I am reinstating him,” and afterward, “I will make him the principal and his sons secondary.”

Also, what is this, “Because of you I am reinstating him,” for Moses didn’t say that [G-d] should do [reinstate Aaron] for [Moses’] sake, but rather for the sake of Aaron’s sons?

והנה רש"י ע"ה על פסוק "ובאשרן התאנף ה' מאד להשמידו" וכו' כתב, זה כילוי בנים וכן הכתוב אומר "ואשמיד פריו ממעל" "ואתפלל גם-בעד אהרן [בעת ההוא]" והעילה תפלתו לכפר מקצת ומתו שמים ונשארו שמים עכ"ל.

Here, Rashi, may he rest in peace, wrote on the verse in which Moses discussed Aaron’s sin in making the Golden Calf: “Moreover, the L-rd was angry enough with Aaron to have destroyed him; I also prayed for Aaron at that time,”⁷ that “This was the destruction of the sons, and similarly, it states, ‘I destroyed his fruit from above.’”⁸ I.e., according to this interpretation, Nadab and Abihu died because of their father’s role in the Golden Calf. Regarding the end of the verse, “I also prayed for Aaron [at that time],” Rashi writes, “And my prayer availed to atone half, so that only two of his sons died, and two remained alive.” Thus, Eliezer and Itamar survived.

⁶ Yehuda Aryeh Leib ben Yehoshua Choshki, author of *Lev Aryeh* (Wilhermsdorf 1674).

⁷ Deut. 9:20.

⁸ Rashi on Deut. 9:20.

ואף כאן יש לדקדק דנה ניהא למאן דאמר תפלה עושה מקצה, אבל למאן דאמר תפלה עושה הכל למה מתו שנים. וצריך לתרץ כמו שתירץ היפה תואר בויקרא רבה על פסוק "קח את־אֶהֱרֹן ואת־בָּנָיו" וכו' שצריך לומר שמשנה התפלל על ארבעתם ושוב מתו בקטאם עכ"ל. ובאמת שפנה מתוך נמי הלשון של "בעת ההוא", כלומר בעת ההיא הועילה תפילתי אבל אחר כך אם ימותו בקטאם אין תפלה זו מועלת.

There is a midrash:

Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi [were talking]. Rabbi Yehuda says, "Repentance accomplishes half, and prayer accomplishes everything." Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, "Repentance accomplished everything, and prayer accomplished half."

- Lev. Rabbah 10:5

Even here we need to investigate. This is good that [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi] said "prayer accomplishes half," if Moses prayed for them and two of Aaron's four sons survived. But regarding that which [Rabbi Yehuda] said, "prayer accomplishes everything"—why did two of Aaron's sons die?

We need to give the solution as the *Yafeh Torah* solved for Leviticus Rabbah for the verse, "Take Aaron along with his sons,"⁹ that we need to say that Moses prayed for the four of them, but nevertheless two of them died from their sins. I.e., perhaps all four were spared from death for their father's sin with the Golden Calf, but then Nadab and Abihu died because of some independent sin.¹⁰

In truth, this also solves the language of Moses saying "I also prayed for Aaron at this time," as if to say, "at this time my prayer availed," i.e., at this time following the incident with the Golden Calf, but afterward, if they died for their sins with the strange fire, my prayer did not avail.

וטעם מיתת הבנים בעון אביהם אף על פי שהיו גדולים היא מדה כנגד מדה, שהרי חור שפסר עצמו על קדושת השם זכה שיתגדל בצלאל בזכותו. אם כן אהרן שלא מסר נפשו הנה מן הראוי שלא יהיו לו בנים גדולים במעלה, והואיל שכן יותר טוב להם המיתה, כמו שאמרו בזוהר ובמפרשים שיותר טוב לאדם למות מלראות הקטון ממנו במעלה הראויה לו, וזהו טעם מיתת שאול כשהגיעה המלכות לדוד וכמו שפיתבנו לעיל בפסוק.

The reason for the death of the sons due to the iniquity of their father, even though they were adults, was a measure-for-measure punishment, just as Hur, who delivered himself to die for the sanctification of the Name of G-d in condemning the making of the Golden Calf,¹¹

⁹ Lev. 8:2.

¹⁰ Some rabbis believe that the brothers died because they offered "strange fire," either because they brought the fire without invitation, or because they had the wrong ingredients, or because they were haughty. But as we will discuss later, other rabbis view their act as laudable and their deaths as a Sanctification of G-d's Name. Thus, perhaps their sin was something else unrelated to their sacrifice of "strange fire."

¹¹ Hur was killed trying to prevent the construction of the Golden Calf, per Sanhedrin 7a, Targum Yonatan, and Rashi on Ex. 32:5.

was a measure-for-measure reward, for he **succeeded to raise Bezalel by his merit.**¹² If so, Aaron, who did not deliver his life to prevent the Golden Calf, should by rights not have great sons. Because of that, death would be better for them, as they said in the Zohar and in the commentators,¹³ that it is better for a man to die than to see someone lower than him at a level at which he himself is suited. This was the reason for the death of Saul, when the kingship of David arrived, and as we have written above in the adjoining essay.

וזהו ענין המדרש הנ"ל, אמר משה לפני הקב"ה אם הבור שנואָה אי אפֿשר שיהיו מִמֶּיָּה חֲבִיבִין, כְּלוּמַר אם יש לך עדיין שנואָה על אהרן שלא הנפֿרת שמו מתחלת הספר ועד כאן. אם כן מזה הטעם עצמו לא היה לך להנפֿיר שם הבנים שלו, ואם הועילה תפֿלתי להצלת הבנים ולזכותם, עקר התפֿלה לא היתה אלא לאהרן ובשבילו היו זוכים בניו אחריו. ואם הנפֿרת שם הבנים מכל שכן היה לך להנפֿיר שמו של אהרן. ואם תאמר שהבנים שלא חטאו כלל מן הדין הוא שיהיו עקר בכהונה, אבל אהרן שחטא אף על פי שאין ליטול הכהונה ממנו הואיל שכתב זכה בך בשביל "וְרָאָה וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ", מכל מקום אינו מן הראוי לעשותו עקר בכהונה כמו שמצינו במשה עצמו דאף למאן דאמר בנבחים שלא פסקה הכהונה ממנו, מכל מקום לא היה הוא העקר בכהונה.

This is the point of the above midrash, and why Moses mentioned “the well” first. Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: If the well is hated, it is impossible for its water to be loved. That is, if you still have hatred for Aaron, whose name you did not mention from the beginning of the Book of Leviticus until now,¹⁴ then for that very reason you should not mention his sons. If my prayer availed to save the sons and to give them merit, the principal of the prayer was only for Aaron and because of him, his sons merited after him.

If you mentioned the sons by name, i.e., “Aaron’s sons,” by all means, you should have mentioned the name of Aaron, i.e., You should have instead said “Aaron and his sons” in every instance. Maybe you will say that according to the law, the sons who didn’t sin at all should be the principal party in the priesthood. Regarding Aaron who did sin, maybe we shouldn’t take the priesthood from him, since he merited it because when G-d appointed Moses as His spokesman, He told Moses that Aaron was coming to meet him “and he will be happy to see you.”¹⁵ I.e., because Aaron was happy for Moses, and not jealous of him, he merited the priesthood.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even though we shouldn’t take the priesthood from Aaron, it is not proper to make him the main part of the priesthood. This is as we found for Moses himself, that even the [rabbi] who said in tractate Zevachim that the priesthood didn’t expire from [Moses], in any case [that rabbi acknowledged that Moses] was not the principal of the priesthood.¹⁷

¹² Ex. Rabbah 48:3.

¹³ Devarim Rabbah 9:5.

¹⁴ I.e., as discussed above, in footnote 4 and the accompanying text, there actually were two references to “Aaron and his sons.” However, there were nine references to “Aaron’s sons.”

¹⁵ Ex. 4:14.

¹⁶ Rashi on Ex. 4:14, based on Shabbat 139a, Ex. Rabbah 3:17.

¹⁷ Zevachim 102a: “And the Rabbis say: Moses became a priest for the seven days of inauguration alone [and after that his priesthood expired]. And some say: The priesthood expired only for the descendants of Moses [but Moses himself remained a priest].”

משום הִי הוֹסִיף, אִם חִלַּקְתָּ כְּבוֹד לַעֲצִים בְּשִׁבִּיל בְּנֵיהֶם כִּי הִנֵּה לָךְ לַחְלֹק כְּבוֹד לְאַהֲרֹן בְּשִׁבִּיל בְּנָיו שְׁמָתוֹ עַל קְדוּשַׁת שְׁמִי, שְׁהָרִי נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא מָתוּ עַל קְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם כְּדִי שְׁיִתְקַדֵּשׁ הַבַּיִת בְּמִיּוֹדָעָיו שֶׁל מְקוֹם, כְּדִכְתִּיב "בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל-פָּנָי כָּל-הָעַם אֶפְבֹּד". וְהַקֵּב"ה הַשֵּׁיב לוֹ, בְּשִׁבִּילָךְ אֲנִי מְקַרְבּוֹ, לְפִי שְׂבָאָמֶת עֲתָה נִשְׁגָּם אַהֲרֹן חֲטָא כְּמוֹ מִשָּׁה, וְיֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁגָרָם תִּקְלָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, מִשָּׁה הִנֵּה יָכוֹל לִטְעוֹן שְׁתַּחֲזוֹר הַכְּהוּנָה לְזַרְעוֹ, הוֹאִיל שְׁמַתְחִלָּה לֹא נִתְּנָה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְזַרְעוֹ אֲלֹא בְּשִׁבִּיל חֲטָאוֹ שֶׁל מִשָּׁה, וְאַף עַל פִּי כֹן מִשָּׁה אֲדַרְבָּא הַלִּיץ טוֹב בְּשִׁבִּיל אַהֲרֹן וּבְשִׁבִּיל בְּנָיו. וְכִשְׂרָאָה הַקֵּב"ה שְׁמִשָּׁה שֶׁהוּא בָּשָׂר וְדָם מִחֵל הַגְּדוּלָּה לְאַחֵיו וּלְזַרְעוֹ, אָמַר, בְּשִׁבִּילָךְ אֲנִי מְקַרְבֵּן אוֹתוֹ כְּלוּמַר הָרִינִי מוֹחֵל לוֹ גַּם אֲנִי בְּמַכְל שְׁכֹן שְׁאֲנִי בַּעַל הַרְחָמִים, וּבְשִׁבִּיל הַטַּעַם שֶׁל חִלְקָתָ כְּבוֹד אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה אוֹתוֹ עֶקֶר, שְׁהָרִי זְכוּת נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא מִן הָרָאוּי שְׁיִהְיֶה מוֹעִיל יוֹתֵר לְאֵב מִלְּאַלְעָזָר וְאַיִתָּמָר שֶׁהֵם אַחֵיהֶם.

Because of this, [Moses] added, if You paid respect to the trees for their offspring, similarly You should pay respect to Aaron for his sons who died for the sanctity of Your name. That is because Nadab and Abihu died for sanctification of the Name of G-d, so that the house, i.e., the Tabernacle, would be sanctified by the honored ones of the Omnipresent. This is as it is written, "Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people."¹⁸ I.e., Rashi on Lev. 10:3 refers back to Ex. 29:43, "And there I will be met by the children of Israel and it (the Tabernacle) shall be sanctified by My glory (בְּכְבוֹדִי)." Rashi states, based on Zevachim 115b, "Read not here בְּכְבוֹדִי 'by My Glory' but בְּמִכְבְּדִי 'through My honoured ones.' Based on Lev. Rabbah 12:2, Rashi adds, "Moses here said to Aaron: 'My brother, Aaron! I knew that this House was to be sanctified by those who are beloved of the Omnipresent. I thought it would be either through me or through you; now I see that these [i.e., your sons who have died] are greater than me and than you!'"

The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered [Moses], "Because of you, I will reinstate him." That is, actually, now that Aaron has also sinned, as has Moses, and more than him, in that [Aaron] caused misfortune to Israel, Moses would have been able to claim that the priesthood should return to his offspring. That's because initially [the priesthood] was given to Aaron and his offspring only because of the sin of Moses in trying to avoid G-d's call at the burning bush.¹⁹ Despite this, Moses, to the contrary, advocated nicely for Aaron and his sons.

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, saw that Moses, who was only flesh and blood, forgave the greatness to his brother and his offspring, He said, "Because of you, I am reinstating him." This is as if to say, "I also hereby forgive him, as I am the Master of mercy." For this reason that you apportioned honor, I am making him the principal, for because of the merit of Nadab and Abihu, it is suitable, for they have availed their father more than Elazar and Itamar, who were their brothers.

* * *

¹⁸ Lev. 10:3.

¹⁹ Rashi on Ex. 4:14.