

# UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

*by Rabbi Shlomo Jarcaig*

After the Torah's description of the census of each of the twelve tribes and their configuration while encamped in and when traveling through the wilderness, the Torah then focuses on the populations and arrangement of the Kohanim (priests) and Levi'im. "These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the firstborn was Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar and Isamar...Nadav and Avihu died before G-d when they offered an alien fire before G-d..." (Bamidbar/Numbers 3:2,4) In the middle of the lengthy narrative about the composition of the Jewish people, the Torah interrupts itself to repeat the story of how his two oldest sons died. Why does the Torah recap this story in the middle of this parsha, one that is primarily a census of the Jewish people? Furthermore, our Sages constructed the Torah portions such that this one is always read the Shabbos before Shavuot (Festival of Weeks), the time when we celebrate Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah amidst the splendorous revelation at Sinai. What is the significance of this placement?

It is a custom of the Jewish people to accept upon themselves some of the customs of mourning during this period of the Counting of the Omer between Pesach and Shavuot. This behavior was established to raise our consciousness so that we may learn from the death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who all passed away within this short period of time. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander (Mashgiach/Spiritual Mentor of Ponovezh Yeshiva in B'nai Brak, close disciple of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler) explains that this tragedy befell the Jewish people because of a fine character flaw. As much as each of them wanted to achieve great spiritual growth and accomplishment, each was not sufficiently happy to see another equally or more successful than he. As much as the primary pursuit of each student was the sanctification of G-d's name, the purity of motivation was not complete. Were their absolute aspiration to bring blessing to the Divine, they would have been ecstatic to behold others fulfilling mitzvos (Divine commands) and being successful in their service of G-d, because, ultimately, that is the fulfillment of the Divine will. This lack of delight at the success of others indicated the smallest seed of selfishness was present in their Divine service; G-d's interests were not their absolute priority.

Aaron's personality, however, did epitomize this character the students of Rabbi Akiva were missing. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos/Ethics of the Fathers (1:12) encourages us in the name of the great Sage, Hillel, "Be of the disciples of Aaron: love peace, chase peace, love the Jewish people and bring them closer to Torah". The Maharal (acronym of Rabbi Yehuda (ben Betzalel) Loewe; 1526-1609; Chief Rabbi of Moravia, Posen and Prague and a seminal figure in Jewish thought in the last half millennium, he authored numerous works in all fields of Torah) asks why the Mishnah does not

simply tell us to love and chase peace. Why does Hillel need to reference Aaron? Further, what indication do we have from the Torah that Aaron was the paradigm of a lover of peace such that we are encouraged to strive to be his disciples? The Maharal explains that the greatest testament to Aaron's nature is the fact that G-d chose him to be Kohen Gadol (high priest). The job of the Kohen Gadol is to unify the Jewish people in their Divine service. He can only accomplish this if he genuinely loves each Jew and wants them all to fulfill their potential. Aaron, chosen to be Kohen Gadol, must have perfected these character traits and anyone who subsequently tries to love or chase peace is following his example.

Nadav and Avihu, whose deaths interrupt our narrative, erred in this very area. The Talmud explains that the underlying cause of their sin: as they followed Moshe and Aaron, they expressed their anticipation of the days after the passing of Moshe and Aaron when they would become the leaders of the next generation. This sentiment indicated a desire to lead - not purely for G-d's sake - but ever so slightly for their own, akin to Rabbi Akiva's students. This insertion contrasts the greater storyline. The Torah describes the order of travel and encampment of the different tribes to demonstrate that every group - and each individual - has its own unique place and role. Not everybody is supposed to be the Kohen Gadol. To attain great spiritual heights one should strive to be like Aaron and appreciate everyone - including one's self - for what he has to offer.

The Torah refers to the three million Jews encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai in the singular, "...and [he] Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain." (Shemos/Exodus 19:2) Rashi explains that the grammar indicates they were like one person with one heart. Thus, this week's portion of the Torah is read prior to Shavuot to remind us that it is only through unity that we can truly receive the Torah.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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