



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA  
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

תצוה תשע"ט  
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## COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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## Brothers: A Drama in Five Acts

It is interesting to note the absence of Moses from the parsha of Tetzaveh. For once Moses, the hero, the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver, is off-stage, and this is the only instance where the name of Moses is not mentioned at all since the first parsha of the book of Shemot (in which he is born). Instead our focus is on his elder brother Aaron who, elsewhere, is often in the background. Indeed, virtually the whole parsha is devoted to the role Moses did not occupy, except briefly – that of priest in general, High Priest in particular.

It is important that we have a parsha dedicated to the legacy of the priestly role for Judaism. However, need this focus have removed Moses from the passage entirely? Is there any larger significance to his absence? The commentators offered various suggestions.<sup>1</sup>

One given in the Talmud refers to an event at the beginning of Moses' leadership: his encounter with God at the burning bush. Moses repeatedly expressed reluctance to undertake the mission of leading the people out of Egypt. Finally we read:

*But Moses said, "O Lord, please send someone else to do it." Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses and He said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do." (Exodus 4:13–15)*

The Talmud records a debate about the lasting consequences of that moment when Moses, as it were, refused one time too many. To decline a leadership challenge once or twice is a sign of humility. To continue to do so when it is God Himself issuing the challenge risks provoking divine anger, as happened here. The Talmud comments:

*"Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses" – Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha said: every instance of [divine] anger in the Torah leaves a lasting effect, except in this instance. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: here too it left*

<sup>1</sup> See my earlier essay on Tetzaveh, "Priests and Prophets", *Covenant and Conversation: Exodus, the book of Redemption*, p. 219.

*a lasting effect, for it goes on to say, “What about your brother, Aaron the Levite?” Surely Aaron was a priest [not just a Levite]. Rather, what God meant was: I originally intended that you [Moses] would be a priest and he [Aaron] would merely be a Levite. But now [because of your refusal], he will eventually become a priest and you will only be a Levite.<sup>2</sup>*

According to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the lasting effect of Moses’ reluctance to lead was that one leadership role – priesthood – would eventually go to Aaron rather than to Moses himself. Basing himself on this passage, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1270– 1340) suggests that Moses’ name is missing from Tetzaveh, which deals with the priestly garments, “to spare him distress” on seeing Aaron acquire the insignia of priesthood that might have been Moses’ own.<sup>3</sup>

Without negating this or other explanations, there is also a more fundamental message. One of the recurring themes of Genesis is sibling rivalry, hostility between brothers. This story is told, at ever-increasing length, four times: between Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers.

There is an identifiable pattern to this set of narratives, best seen in the way each ends. The story of Cain and Abel ends with murder – fratricide. Isaac and Ishmael, though they grow up apart, are seen together at Abraham’s funeral. Evidently there had been a reconciliation between them, though this can only be read between the lines (and spelled out in Midrash), not directly in the text. Jacob and Esau meet, embrace and go their separate ways. Joseph and his brothers are reconciled and live together in peace, Joseph providing them with food, land, and protection.

Genesis is telling us a story of great consequence. Fraternity – one of the key words of the French revolution – is not simple or straightforward. It is often fraught with conflict and contention. Yet slowly, brothers can learn that there is another way. On this note Genesis ends. But it is not the end of the story.

The drama has a fifth act: the relationship between Moses and Aaron. Here, for the first time, there is no hint of sibling rivalry.<sup>4</sup> The brothers work together from the very outset of the mission to lead the Israelites to freedom. They address the people together. They stand together when confronting Pharaoh. They perform signs and wonders together. They share leadership of the people in the wilderness together. For the first time, brothers function as a team, with different gifts, different talents, different roles, but without hostility, each complementing the other.

Their partnership is a constant feature of the narrative. But there are certain moments where it is highlighted. The first occurs in the passage already cited above. God tells Moses that Aaron “is already on his way to meet you, and his heart will be glad when he sees you.” How different this is from the tense encounters between brothers in Genesis!

Aaron, we may have thought, would have many reasons not to rejoice on seeing Moses return. The brothers had not grown up together. Moses had been adopted by Pharaoh’s

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<sup>2</sup> Zevachim 102a.

<sup>3</sup> R. Jacob ben Asher, commentary of Baal HaTurim to Exodus 27:20.

<sup>4</sup> Some developed later – see Numbers, chap. 12 – but was resolved by Moses’ humility.

daughter and raised in an Egyptian palace, while Aaron remained with the Israelites. Nor had they been together during the Israelites' sufferings. Moses, fearing for his life after his assault on an Egyptian taskmaster, had fled to Midian.

Besides this, Moses was Aaron's younger brother, and yet it was he who was about to become the leader of the people. Always in the past, when the younger had taken something the elder might have believed belonged naturally to him, there was jealousy, animosity. Yet God assures Moses: "when Aaron sees you, he will rejoice." And so he did:

*And the Lord said to Aaron, Go to the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went, and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. (Exodus 4:27)*

The second fascinating clue is contained in a strange passage that traces the descent of Moses and Aaron:

*Amram married his father's sister Yocheved, who bore him Aaron and Moses. Amram lived 137 years...It was this same Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said, "Bring the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions." They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. It was this same Moses and Aaron. (Exodus 6:20, 26–27)*

The repeated phrase, "It was this same," is emphatic even in translation. It is all the more so when we note two peculiarities of the text. The first is that the phrases, though at first they sound identical, in fact place the names of the brothers in a different order: the first says "Aaron and Moses," the second, "Moses and Aaron."<sup>5</sup> Even more striking is the grammatical oddity of the phrase. Both times, the third person singular is used. Literally, they read: "He was Aaron and Moses," "He was Moses and Aaron." The text should have said, "They" – all the more so since the pronoun "they" is used in the middle of the passage: "They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh."

The unmistakable implication is that they were like a single individual; they were as one. There was no hierarchy between them: sometimes Aaron's name appears first, sometimes Moses'. There is a wonderful Midrash that bears out this idea, based on the verse in Psalms (85:11) "Loving-kindness and truth meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other."

*Loving-kindness – this refers to Aaron. Truth – this refers to Moses. Righteousness – this refers to Moses. Peace – this refers to Aaron.*<sup>6</sup>

The Midrash brings proof-texts for each of these identifications, but we understand them immediately. Moses and Aaron were quite different in temperament and role. Moses was the man of truth, Aaron of peace. Without truth, there can be no vision to inspire a nation. But without internal peace, there is no nation to inspire. Aaron and Moses were both necessary. Their roles were in creative tension. Yet they worked side by side, each respecting the distinctive gift of the other. As the Midrash goes on to say:

**"Moses was the man of truth,  
Aaron of peace."**

*"And he kissed him" [the brothers kissed when they met] – This*

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<sup>5</sup> "This teaches that they were equals" (Tosefta, Kritot, end).

<sup>6</sup> Shemot Rabbah 5:10

*means: each rejoiced at the other's greatness.*<sup>7</sup>

A final Midrash completes the picture by referring to this week's parsha and the vestments of the High Priest, especially the breastplate with its Urim and Tumim:

*"His heart will be glad when he sees you" – Let the heart that rejoiced in the greatness of his brother be vested with the Urim and Tumim.*<sup>8</sup>

The Urim and Tumim were a form of oracle, carried by the High Priest in his breastplate. They conveyed divine inspiration and guidance, a kind of priestly equivalent of the divine word that came to the prophet.<sup>9</sup> It was precisely the fact that Aaron did not envy his younger brother but instead rejoiced in his greatness that made him worthy to be High Priest. So it came to pass – measure for measure – that just as Aaron made space for his younger brother to lead, so the Torah makes space for Aaron to lead. That is why Aaron is the hero of Tetzaveh: for once, not overshadowed by Moses.

"Who is honoured?" asked Ben Zoma. "One who honours others."<sup>10</sup> Aaron honoured his younger brother. That is why Moses (not mentioned by name but by implication) is told in this week's parsha, "Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him honour and splendour" (Exodus 28:2). To this day a Kohen is honoured by being the first to be called up to the Torah – the Torah that Aaron's younger brother Moses gave to the Jewish people.

The story of Aaron and Moses, the fifth act in the biblical drama of brotherhood, is where, finally, fraternity reaches the heights. And that surely is the meaning of Psalm 133, with its explicit reference to Aaron and his sacred garments: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes." It was thanks to Aaron, and the honour he showed Moses, that at last brothers learned to live together in unity.

Shabbat Shalom

Jonathan Sacks

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., ad loc.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 3:17.

<sup>9</sup> According to Ramban, they consisted of letters spelling out the divine name or names, some of which would light up at key moments, spelling out a message to be deciphered by the High Priest.

<sup>10</sup> Avot 4:1