

Aaron's Path to Priesthood

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take Aaron and his sons with him, the vestments, the anointing oil, the bull of sin offering, the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble the whole congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Lev. 8:1-3).

This passage opens chapter 8 of the Book of Leviticus which describes the priestly ordination rites of ancient Israel.

'Take' Aaron, says the text. The Jewish sages who have pondered this passage over generations seize upon a tiny detail and creatively ponder its significance. Is Aaron simply one element among others in the list of ritual instructions, or is there something noteworthy about the Lord directing Moses to 'take' Aaron? In the traditional ways of rabbinic enquiry, what intriguing path is opening up here?¹

'Take Aaron.' The great French Torah scholar of the 11th century known as Rashi interprets this to mean: "Take him with words, and persuade him." Rashi is noting that the Hebrew word used here for 'take' usually refers to moving an object physically. Because the text applies it to a person Rashi understands the term to refer to the act of persuasion. In other words, the text doesn't say, 'Tell Aaron' or 'Speak to Aaron' or 'Call Aaron to the tent of meeting.' Rather, it says, 'Take Aaron', i.e., 'persuade him to come and take his part in the rites of ordination.'

But why does Aaron need to be persuaded? Surely to be ordained a priest of Israel is a great honour. What could Rashi be getting at here?

Rashi's approach appears again in the next chapter (9:7) where Moses says to Aaron, 'Draw near to the altar'. Again, Rashi interprets Moses as persuading Aaron: 'For Aaron was embarrassed and afraid to approach.' Whereupon Moses said to him 'Why are you embarrassed? This is what you were selected for.'

According to this view, Aaron felt unworthy because of his part in the sin of the Golden Calf. It

deeply troubled him. In fact, say some traditional commentators, even just seeing the 'horns of the altar' sent him into a panic as it reminded him of the golden calf! So Moses calmed him and reassured him that the Lord understood, and that Aaron remained the one chosen for this special service.

Further still, in the storytelling of the midrash, the sages speculate that Moses would have liked the honour of the priestly role for himself. Yet he accepted the divine choice of his brother, lovingly drawing Aaron out from his hesitancy and confusion.

The sages describe a poignant interaction between brothers, between partners-in-mission. Lest we think of Leviticus as a 'dry' text, the Jewish sages teach us otherwise, creatively mining it for insights into the human fragility of leaders, into divine compassion, perseverance in vocation, and brotherly love.

The reader is thus drawn into a discussion about vocation, God's call. We see from the Moses-Aaron interaction that divine choice is the starting point for vocation, but human support and encouragement are essential for it to take root and thrive. With reference to the text, the tradition, and your own life experience, share your thoughts on this important and sensitive topic. Also, note how Rashi's opening insight influences the way you hear the rest of chapter 8 of Leviticus. •

1. Sources: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (New York: URJ, 2008); Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Leviticus* (London/New York: Soncino, 1983); Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1999); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 1992). Scripture: NRSV

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