

Aaron, the Chief Priest

Yahrzeit date – 1st of Av

It is propitious that we end our school term with a short essay concerning what lessons we can gain by studying the high and noble character of Aaron the High Priest. Our sages told us of several highpoints (for example, see Rashi to VaYikra 10, 3 "VaYidom Aaron") but we shall concentrate now on his great efforts to bring about peace between fellow men.

We are taught in Avot (chap. one) – "Be of the disciples of Aaron, love peace and pursue, love all creatures and bring people close to Torah".

Just what did Aaron do?

The post-Talmudic treatise "Avot de-Rebbe Natan (12, 3) relates that when Aaron saw even a wicked Jew, he greeted him amicably with the blessing of "peace". Thereupon that villain would have pangs of conscience, considering thoughtfully "How can I continue sinning?! It may perchance be brought to Aaron's knowledge, and then he will cease to treat me honorably?"

So too when Aaron saw a pair, or a married couple, bickering and arguing, he went to each disputant separately and (as a white lie) said: "I happen to know that the other party is very much interested to make peace with you, but he doesn't know how to go about it. He doesn't want to take the first step. How would it be if you and I "make believe" as if you are making the first step for "patching up", even though we both know that he sent me to be his messenger for the first pacification". And so Aaron beguiled thousands of people during his long lifetime. Our sages teach that after his hearse there was a line of 80,000 children, all being the newborn children of those bickering parents amongst whom Aaron brought about the peace (Messechet Kalla Rabbati, chap. 3) and thereby causing their birth. Therefore, at Aaron's death "All of the House of Israel mourned him" (Bamidbar 20, 29) which includes the women too. However, Moshe Rabbenu who was constantly chastising the Jews, when he died, it is recorded "The sons of Israel mourned him" (Dvorim 34, 8) certainly not "all" of them, as written by Aaron.

In Midrash Sifri (Shmini, 1) our sages say that Aaron never uttered the word to a sinner "You have sinned!". His way of influence was by love.

Therefore let us continue in his path of life, and record here several gems of thought delivered unto us by our sages.

(A) "All that is written in the Torah is calculated so to bring about the general peace. Even waging wars, which the Torah adjures us to do under certain circumstances, is also only for that goal, in order to bring about an everlasting peace" (Midrash Tanhuma, Tzav, 3).

(B) Before every outbreak of hostilities, one must broach the hand of peace unto our enemies (see Rambam, Hilchot Melachim, chapter 6 para. One).

Although we were commanded directly by G-d to initiate war against Sichon (Dvorim 2, 24) nevertheless we find the Jews preferring peace (Tanhuma, Hukat, 22 see also Tanhuma, Shoftim, 18).

(C) "G-d desired to deliver the Torah unto Israel. However, ever since their departure from Egypt they were factitious, constantly nasty with each other. However when they reached Mount Sinai, wondrous was it that they were united. G-d then remarked: "All of the Torah is for the sake of peace. To whom shall I deliver the Torah? Only to a nation who can appreciate the value of peace" (Yalkut Shim'oni, Yitro, paragraph 273, and briefly cited by Rashi, Shmot 19, 2).

I would add here that the constant greeting call, when two Jews meet, is "Shalom". So too upon parting, this is their keyword. Nothing is occasional or haphazard. This choice of a word has great significance.

(D) "How important it is to live mutually in peace. For even if Jews are idolatrous, but if they live together peacefully and amicably, they can not be prosecuted or punished for their crimes. However if they are divided against each other, Satan can bring about their punishment" (Midrash Bereshis Rabbah, 38. Cited by Rashi, Bereshis 11, 9).

And it is proper that we add a few words concerning the high spiritual values of those noble souls who take the time, effort and the trouble to bring about peace amongst their fellow brethren. Thus we find in the Midrash the following dictum: "See a Kal ve-chomer. If the stones of the holy altar in the temple, since they bring about peace between G-d and humanity (since G-d thereby absolves the penitent from all guilt), therefore the Torah adjures us not to raise a sword or knife against those stones (Shmot 20, 22) even more so (will be the reward of) he who brings about peace between man and fellow man, or even more so between man and wife, how much this z'chut will avail him to lengthen his life" (distance the sword from his head). (Midrash Tanhuma, 17).

(E) No man is more humbled than he who attempts to bring about peace amongst fellow creatures" (Kallah Rabbati, 3). The reason for this is obvious. In order to make peace, one must bring about a certain compromise. That is to say, each side of the controversy cannot be justified entirely, but must back down somewhat. Being so that each litigant is absolutely certain of his vindication, he perforce bears some rancor to that messenger of peace who attempts to bring about a compromise. Therefore that person stands to lose part of his honor or part of the love that he enjoys. This of course requires great "Yir'at Shomayim" and humility to be ready to offer that, for the sake of peace.

Our Sages sum up: "He who pursues peace (to bring it about between others, even if he himself is not involved in that argument) his prayers will never be entirely ineffectual" (Kallah Rabbati, 3).

Therefore let us all honor Aaron's memory, by following in his footsteps, by doing our best to bring about general peace. May G-d bless us all.