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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Hukkat

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“And when the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel.” (Bemidbar 20:29)

Aaron the High Priest was an honored and beloved leader of the children of Israel. At his death, he was mourned by the entire congregation, even more than the mourning that took place at the death of Moses. What were Aaron’s outstanding virtues that made him such a remarkable leader?

As High Priest, Aaron was involved on a regular basis with the Temple service. He wore distinctive priestly garments and carried himself with dignity. It would have been natural for people to feel distant from him; he was a holy man, a master of Temple ritual. Yet, the people felt close to him. He was able to maintain the gravitas of his office, while still remaining accessible to the public.

Aaron managed to balance ceremonial dignity with human kindness. He did not become a ritualized automaton; nor did he lose his sense of connectedness with the people. He could have come across simply as an impersonal Temple functionary; but he didn’t. He could have compromised the formal dignity of office by acting informally, joking around during the ceremonies, or by arriving late at the Temple service or skipping the service altogether whenever he wanted. Had he behaved in this fashion, he would not have been a respected or effective religious leader.

Aaron’s greatness, according to the Pirkei Avot (1:12), laid primarily in his sensitivity to the needs of the people. Aaron “loved peace and pursued peace; he loved people and brought them closer to Torah.” Aaron well understood that the role of a religious leader was to interact in a loving way with others. The responsibility was not to talk at them, but to listen to them and discuss with them, to make time for them, to worry about their worries and to rejoice in their joys. In spite of his heavy ceremonial responsibilities as High Priest, Aaron was there for people when they needed him. He was a soothing and comforting spirit in the community. He found ways to bring people together, to dispel controversies.

The key to Aaron's successful spiritual leadership was his ability to balance ceremonial responsibilities with an unshakable commitment to the people. He understood the importance of religious ritual, and he also understood that religion should reflect love, compassion and inclusiveness. Carelessness in religious service undermines the meaning and holiness of the rituals. Harshness in religious leadership undermines the beauty and attractiveness of Torah.

The great Hebrew poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik, lamented the negative turn in the religious life of his day in Eastern Europe: "Halakha has an angry face...Strict, severe, hard as steel—strict justice...[it] sets forth its ruling and leaves no room for differentiation: Its yes is Yes, its no is No...fossilized piety, obligation, enslavement... (quoted by Zvi Zohar, "Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East, pp. 4-5)

Aaron made sure that religion and halakha did not have an angry face. The goal of Torah is not to enslave us but to liberate us; it is not to undermine our basic humanity but to bring out the best in us. It demands dignified observance of religious ceremonies and rituals; but it also demands a spirit of love and kindness in our interpersonal relations.

Aaron's goal was to serve God and to bring people closer to the service of God. He conducted the ceremonies of the High Priest with precision and seriousness—he thereby taught people the awe of God. He conducted his personal life governed by love of others, by a commitment to increase peace and harmony among the community—he thereby taught the people that the face of religion is benevolent, wise and smiling.

When Aaron died, all the people of Israel mourned their loss. When the religious model of Aaron dies, so all of us become mourners. If, however, we can strive to emulate the example of Aaron, we can love peace and pursue peace, love our fellow human beings and bring the world closer to the ideals of Torah.

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