

Dear Chavraya,

Aaron is regarded in Jewish tradition as the peacemaker, exemplar of what it means to reach out to others, to build bridges and sooth anger and discontent. His is the way of love and compassion toward others, even toward those who are hard to love and would do him harm. It is told of how he would go to each party in a dispute and tell each one how badly the other feels concerning their quarrel. Realizing they had each misjudged the other, the quarrel was soon resolved, the former antagonists making their way to a tavern together. Encouraging each of us to be of such manner, the teaching of the great Hillel, also known for his patience and compassion, comes to us in *Pirke Avot: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, and pursuing peace, loving all people, and drawing them near to the Torah.*

The teachings about Aaron as peacemaker are all rabbinic, the Torah itself giving us very little insight into what comes to be understood as this central dimension of his character. One very strange source that offers a window into the nature of Aaron, but only as refracted through the lens of midrashic imagination, is found in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tissa*. Considered one of the great sins of the desert generation, and also a warning against our own smugness, it is the incident of the golden calf. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. As his absence wears on, the people panic and demand of Aaron that he make them *gods who shall go before us, because this man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.* It is not God that the people seek to replace, but the absent Moses. Aaron collects gold earrings from the people and fashions them into the calf. The question is clear, how could he do this, and so soon after hearing with the entire people the commandment not to make or worship images.

While condemning him on one hand, the rabbis both recognize and create a situation of moral ambiguity in which Aaron has to act. The Torah presents a volatile situation, saying: *the people gathered against Aaron/va'yikahel ha'am al Aharon.* Responding to hints in the text, the rabbis suggest that Aaron's nephew, Chur, son of Miriam, has already been killed by the mob for trying to calm and dissuade them. In a fascinating *aggadah/telling*, as in *Haggadah*, the rabbis present Aaron's fashioning of the golden calf as an act of selflessness, an ultimate reflection of his compassion and concern for others. Concerned that the people will kill him too, he acts, not out of fear for his own life, but out of fear for what will happen to the people if they kill him. Knowing that there is special warning and retribution for the killing of a priest and prophet, a dual role that Aaron represents, he muses on the lesser of two evils: *If I do not listen to them now, they will do to me as they did to Chur, and they will fulfill the verse through me, "Should a priest and prophet be slain in the sancturay of God," and there never will be a 'tikkun'/repair for them. It is better that they make a golden calf, for it is possible that there will be a 'tikkun' for them through 't'shuvah/repentant turning.*

So interpreting Aaron's behavior at the time of the golden calf, the Talmud continues immediately with several teachings that without direct reference seem unmistakably meant to guide us in the way of Aaron. *Rav Huna said: Discord is comparable to a channel formed by a gush of water. Once the channel widens, it will certainly continue to widen.... There was this person who walked along saying,*

“Fortunate is one who hears their own denigration without responding.... Continuing in the way of parable, the rabbis seem to then refer, if not to Aaron then to his disciples who love peace and pursue peace and love all creatures: There was this person who walked along saying, “Even if seven pits are dug in the path of a person of peace/‘shalmanah,’ such a person will be saved from them all. Acknowledging the risks, as Aaron knew them so well, the rabbis affirm the peacemaker.

There is debate among commentators as to whether *shalmanah*, the Aramaic used in the parable for a “person of peace,” should be translated into Hebrew as *ish shalom/a person of peace*, or *ish shalem/a person who is complete or whole*. Of the same root, in language and in life, peace flows from wholeness. May we find greater wholeness within ourselves and in our broken world by walking in the way of Aaron, seeking peace and pursuing peace.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor