



When Moshe Leaves

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The absence of a leader creates a vacuum, and this vacuum invites a question: What kind of leadership are we seeking? At the beginning of Parashat Ki Tissa, Moshe is absent. When he ascended the mountain at the end of Parashat Mishpatim, he entered the cloud, and left behind an alternative leadership structure, appointing two individuals in his stead: Aharon and Hur. Who are they, what happens to them—and what do we learn from them about the essence of leadership?

I. “With You”: Leadership that is present with the people

Moshe’s ascent to the mountain is described as follows:

שמות כד:יב, יג-יד, יח

¹² וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה עֲלֵה אֵלַי הַהָרָה וְהִיָּה שָׁם...: ¹³ וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִשְׁרָתוֹ וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַר הָאֱלֹקִים:

¹⁴ וְאֵל הַזִּקְנִים אָמַר שָׁבוּ לָנוּ בְּזֶה עַד אֲשֶׁר-נָשׁוּב אֲלֵיכֶם וְהִנֵּה אֶהְרֵן וְחֹר עִמָּכֶם מִי בֶעַל דְּבָרִים יִגֹּשׁ אֲלֵהֶם:

... ¹⁸ וַיְהִי מֹשֶׁה בְּהָר אֲרָבָעִים יוֹם וְאֲרָבָעִים לַיְלָה:



Exodus 24:12,13-14,18

¹²God said to Moshe, “Come up to Me on the mountain and wait there.” ... ¹³Moshe set out with his attendant Yehoshua, and Moshe ascended the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he said, “Wait here for us until we return to you; behold, Aharon and Hur are with you; whoever has a matter may approach them.” ... ¹⁸And Moshe was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Moshe is absent, and for a long time. As he turns toward the mountain, he tries not to leave a leadership vacuum. He turns to his partners in leadership—the elders, Aharon, and Hur. Moshe leaves behind an alternative leadership structure, and in fact, instructs both the people and the elders to turn to Aharon and Hur together: “Whoever has a matter may approach **them**.” By Moshe’s command, the various roles of leadership are carried out by a plurality of people.

Furthermore, Moshe defines what their role will be during his absence. In doing so, he essentially marks two clear leadership functions. First, to be “with you”—to be present, close to the people and by their side, holding the space in a time of uncertainty. Second, to be an address: “Whoever has a matter may approach them.” They are to be a focal point for inquiry and response, figures to whom questions and disputes can be brought. Leadership in a time of crisis—and perhaps in general—is not merely responsible for management and decision-making; it is, first and foremost, a matter of presence and providing an address that people can approach.

II. Aharon: A leadership of connection and peace

Aharon served as Moshe’s primary partner in the mission to Pharaoh: “See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aharon shall be your prophet” (Exodus 7:1). This



fraternal partnership recurs repeatedly (e.g., 5:1; 6:13) and is emphasized in the genealogy of the tribe of Levi in chapter 6: “It is the same Aharon and Moshe to whom God said, ‘Bring out the Israelites....’ They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh... the same Moshe and Aharon” (Exodus 6:26-27). Additionally, even though the *mishkan* (tabernacle) has not yet been consecrated and he has not yet been inaugurated as high priest, Aharon is already at this point in the Torah identified with his priestly role: “Aharon and his sons shall set it in order... a perpetual statute” (27:21).

In interpreting Aharon’s role as a leader, our Sages sought to highlight one dimension of his character. They describe Aharon’s internal quality in words that have become a sort of maxim—and perhaps a leadership motto in particular:

משנה אבות א״ב

הָיָה מִתְלַמֵּידוֹ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמִקְרִיב לַתּוֹרָה:

Mishnah Avot 1:12

Be of the disciples of Aharon—loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow people and drawing them near to the Torah.

Aharon’s character, then, is that of a mediator and a priest—one who stands between the people and God, and perhaps also between factions of the people themselves—a pursuer of peace. He accomplishes this through, and by means of, a fundamental love for humanity.

III. Hur: Leadership through self-sacrifice

Unlike Aharon, Hur is a figure with whom we are hardly acquainted in the Torah. Midrashic tradition identifies him as the son of Miriam (Rashi on Exodus 24:14, based on Sotah 11b)—the

next generation of the family, the nephew who joins the two brothers. Thus, a kind of familial leadership triangle is formed: Moshe, Aharon, and Hur—three men from the lineage of Amram and Yokheved.

Yet, when the sin of the Golden Calf occurs, the only address to which the people turn according to the verses is Aharon: “The people gathered against Aharon and said to him, ‘Arise, make us a god’” (Exodus 32:1). Contrary to Moshe’s instructions, Hur is nowhere to be found. The *midrash* fills this gap and offers an explanation for his absence (and the fact that Hur is never mentioned again in the Torah):

ויקרא רבה יג

בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁעָשׂוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה, בְּתַחֲלָה הָלְכוּ אַצֵּל חוּר, אָמְרוּ לוֹ קוּמִים עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים, כִּיִּן שָׁלָא שָׁמַע לְהֵן עֲמָדוֹ עָלָיו וְהָרְגוּהוּ.

Vayikra Rabbah 10:3

When Israel committed that act, they first went to Hur and said to him, “Arise, make us a god!” Since he would not listen to them, they rose against him and killed him.

What type of leadership does Hur embody in the *midrash* as he stands before the people? Hur represents a model different from Aharon. He says “no,” he resists, and he is willing to pay with his life rather than allow the act to occur. If Aharon embodies the leader who is a “lover of peace and pursuer of peace,” acting out of a desire for reconciliation through compromise, mediation, and concession, then Hur embodies the rigid backbone—the absolute devotion to values even at a heavy personal cost.

There is a striking similarity—as well as a striking difference—between the midrashic description of the appeal to Hur and the Torah’s description of the appeal to Aharon. The responses of the two men are, of course, diametrically opposed. On the other hand, in both



cases, the people turn to only one individual. We do not know if Aharon and Hur presented themselves as individuals, or if the people chose to approach only one of them. Either way, we do not see shared leadership. For whatever reason, Moshe's attempt to fill the power vacuum with a plurality while he was up the mountain failed.

IV. Three atop the hill: Shared leadership

There is a moment in which the verses describe a shared leadership where the three—Moshe, Aharon, and Hur—appear together, during the war against Amalek:

שמות יז:יב

... מֹשֶׁה אָהֳרֹן וְחֹר וְעָלוּ רֹאשׁ הַגִּבְעָה: ...¹² יָדַי מְשֻׁבָּה כְּבָדִּים וַיִּקְחוּ אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַּחְתֵּי וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ וְאָהֳרֹן וְחֹר תָּמְכוּ בְּיָדָיו מִזֶּה אֶחָד וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֶמּוּנָה עַד בֹּא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:

Exodus 17:10,12

¹⁰... Moshe, Aharon, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.... ¹²But Moshe's hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aharon and Hur supported his hands, one on each side, and so his hands remained steady (*emunah*) until sunset.

The image is powerful: before us stands Moshe the leader, the man of law and prophecy, with his hands raised—a movement that determines the fate of the battle. But “his hands grew heavy,” as if he is unable to bear the burden of leadership alone. Aharon and Hur support him, each from a different side.

The Torah's conceptualization—“his hands remained steady (*emunah*)”—is not merely a technical description of physical stability; it is also a description of trust (*emun*). It is the trust of a leader who recognizes the limits of his own abilities and knows how to rely on others. It is



the trust of partners who are willing to be “supporters” rather than the ones out in front—to be the flanks that hold up the person at the center. It is trust in a leadership created by the combination of a mediating priest (Aharon), a devoted, self-sacrificing figure (Hur), and a prophetic leader (Moshe).

This scene sheds new light on what occurs in our *parashah* in the story of the Golden Calf. When Moshe is absent and the pressure mounts, it seems the people do not turn to a group of leaders. The tripartite balance is broken. Instead of a team where there is one who says “yes” and one who says “no,” one who supports and one who is supported—and perhaps one who carries a multitude of voices together—only one leader remains: Aharon. In his effort to prevent bloodshed and preserve the people, his path leads to a dangerous compromise.

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A reading of the verses and the *midrashim* reveals three distinct types of leadership: Moshe is the prophet, the lawgiver, the bearer of the Torah. His brother Aharon is the Priest: a lover of peace, one who softens, reconciles, and draws people near. And the third, Hur, is the one prepared to “give his soul for the Holy blessed One, and not allow [the Israelites to sin]” (Shemot Rabbah 48:3)—to refuse and to take a stand even at the cost of his life. Together, these three create a portrait of leadership that does not rely on a single individual, but rather on a relationship between different figures with distinct characters who balance and support one another.

Perhaps this is the deeper message of “behold, Aharon and Hur are with you.” It is not merely a technical solution to Moshe’s absence, but a proposition made by invoking a specific memory of crisis—the war with Amalek. Worthy leadership is not only a question of “who is at the head,” but of who is “with you.” Worthy leadership is not just a question of “who is in



charge,” but of who “supports the hands.” How can we build a leadership of steadfastness and trust (*emunah*) atop the mountain?

In a time when the leader does not return on time, when the leader is seemingly absent, when the cloud obscures our vision, when the world feels empty of direction—we can ask anew. We ask not only “Where is Moshe?” but also: What kind of integrated leadership are we seeking? What combination of compromising listening, decisive words, and the capacity to lean on others do we seek—and perhaps even demand—from our leaders?

