

Who Will Speak For Me?

By Rabbi Jeffrey Lipschultz

I am happy to be back in the Midwest in our wintery community after a nice break in my childhood home in Phoenix, Arizona. I like to joke that it was seventy four degrees when we entered the plane on January 3rd and was surprised to see the snow on the ground here in the Quad Cities. They say the cold air brings character to our Jewish souls, that is why the Hasidic dynasties still dress in fur even in the middle of summer in Jerusalem. So enjoy the cold air, it's a mitzvah to live through it.

One of the tough rituals I have done for the last twelve years when I go to Phoenix is to visit my brother's grave every January 3rd, the day he died in his tragic accident. This year, right before heading to the airport on January 3rd, I stopped by again to see him with my two children and explained to them what Uncle David was like as a brother. Ari is now seven and is starting to recognize what it means and it's a tough conversation to have, especially as I mention he is named after his uncle. He sometimes asks who will speak for David now that he is gone and I often say, 'you speak for him, you share his name'. This phrase is what sticks in my mind as we begin *Parshat Va'era* in the book of Exodus which we read this week at services.

This week's parshah begins with Moses being sent back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh to free the people of Israel. Moses is daunted by this task and asks how he can bear such a burden. God tells him, 'I will be with you and will perform many wonderful miracles'. In chapter six of our parshah God says to Moses "Therefore say to the people of Israel, I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you from their slavery, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments. And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in to the land, concerning which I swore to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage; I am the Lord".

Moses gives God a difficult challenge by stating in verse 30 of chapter 6, "And Moses said before the Lord, 'Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh listen to me?'" God then says to Moses in chapter seven, "You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall speak to Pharaoh, that he sends the people of Israel out of his land." This is the challenge that God puts to Moses, he will speak to him but his brother Aaron shall speak for Moses. This is something that I think deeply about this time of year, how Moses the younger brother was eclipsing the older brother Aaron, and this seems to be ok with Aaron.

The Torah is not filled with stories of brothers who love each other. As we enter the book of Exodus we find an anomaly in our scripture, that of Moses and Aaron, siblings who seem to not only get along but embrace the greatness of the other. In Exodus, when Moses encounters the burning bush God speaks to him, telling him to meet his brother Aaron. Aaron receives a similar message telling him, "Go out to the wilderness and meet Moses." The Midrash Tanhuma states that the brothers truly loved each other but it was Aaron who embraced Moses and accepted where his lot was in life. The Midrash uses as proof a section in the Song of Songs which seems contradictory. "*O that you were like a brother to me,*

that nursed at my mother breasts! If I should find you outside, I would kiss you; and none would despise me. 2. I would lead you, and bring you into the house of my mother, who teaches me; I would give you to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate. 3. His left hand should be under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.” The Rabbis look at this quote from Song of Songs and ask if brothers in the bible don't have great love for each other, what makes this section so applicable? The answer is that the brothers Aaron and Moses seem to break the pattern of sibling rivalry, deadly competition and hatred that the bible is so full of. They find a way to make their differences work. Moses is uncomfortable speaking but Aaron is not. Moses is foreign to his people, having been raised in Pharaoh's court, but Aaron is the man of the people and can connect both as Israelite and intermediary to Pharaoh. The brotherly love and compassion that Aaron and Moses show toward each other becomes this great example that we hope to live by. It is this teaching in Exodus that I am dedicating to my brother David, who was such a beacon in my life and has now been gone for twelve years.

Aaron seemed to take his status with humility. The Midrash Tanchumah states that the brothers loved each other and cherished each other, even as Moses was given the leadership of his nation and his brother acted as his emissary. I often wonder how the shadow of Moses felt on Aaron, but the Midrash points to Exodus 4:13 to prove that Aaron accepted his brother's greatness with love. It states, "See Aaron is setting out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will rejoice in his heart." The verse states not only did Aaron rejoice verbally for Moses' greatness, but he accepted it in his heart and thus the love of Aaron was complete even as his younger brother eclipsed him.

My brother David was such a fundamental part of my life, a great journalist, a fantastic athlete, and funny and smart, but I was his Rabbi. My brother had so much faith in his ability to conquer difficulties that he reveled in the challenges of life. He told me once when we were eating lunch in NYC about the time he first arrived in the city and was almost overwhelmed by its size and its importance. Now here he was starting his job at Forbes magazine as an online reporter, launching its website seventeen years ago, proud that he overcame the challenge that he put before himself in life. He went on to become a great writer and reporter both for Forbes and Smart Money magazine and many other great newspaper outlets, slaying so many dragons that came before him.

I am two years older than David but sometime in our teens he seemed to pass me by in so many aspects of life (academically, athletically, etc.), but I was his Rabbi and now that he is gone I am the one who can speak for him and everything he stood for. Life is full of these struggles we sometimes lose people in our life way to early, but we must find our voice for them even when they are gone. Aaron embraces his voice for Moses and we are told that the way of Aaron is the way of peace because even though they were distinct individuals it was Aaron who found a way to make peace with his brother's greatness. Each year on January 3rd I stand by his stone and ask whether I am worthy to speak for him and represent the values that he wanted to carry on. This year Ari, my oldest, asked that question knowing that he bears his name. I told him his job is to stand with Alex and be each other's support in times of need; maybe you will be able to stand before kings and rattle them just like Moses and Aaron.

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