

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

and Isaac each had one good son and one bad one, and only the good ones truly walked in their father's footsteps, worshiped God, and inherited the blessing and birthright.

In fact, according to the Midrash in Sifrei Devarim on Parashat Ve'etchanan Yaakov spent his whole life anxious about which of his sons would continue his path, and which would not. Based on their behavior, Yaakov had good reason to discriminate between them. His first son, Reuven, slept with Bilha, Yaakov's concubine, and his second and third sons, Shimon and Levi, massacred the men of Shechem. And, of course, all of his sons apart from Binyamin were guilty of plotting to murder Yosef, and selling him into slavery.

Of the sinning sons, the only one explicitly vindicated within the story is Yehuda, when he puts himself on the line in Egypt. But according to the midrash, it isn't clear at all that the others have been forgiven, even after everything is resolved with Yosef and the family is resettled in Goshen. Some argue that it is only when Yaakov blesses them in Parashat Vayehi that we know they have been welcomed back, and others argue that Reuven's status remained questionable until Moshe, in Vezot HaBracha affirmed "Reuven will live and not die" (Dev. 33:6).

The great medieval commentator, Rashi, seems to be bothered by the idea that the Tabernacle, both an agent and symbol of inclusion and unity, would establish a hierarchy among the tribes of Israel. Rejecting the implied hierarchy of "hanotarim" (the leftovers) as well as other hierarchies suggested in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah 31a-b, Rashi interprets the verse according to the simple meaning of its last word, "k'toldotam" (according to their birth). He writes that tribes will be inscribed on the two stones "in the order in which they were born: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Dan, Naphtali on one, and upon the other Gad, Asher, Yissachar, Zevulun, Yosef and Binyamin." In Rashi's view, the most problematic sons - Reuven, Shimon, Levi - are even represented first!

The message is clear: everyone, no matter who they are or what they have done, will be equally represented in the *Mishkan*. And so the stones, whose explicit function is to remind the priest that he is a representative of the people of Israel, ALSO communicate the imperative for inclusion and equal representation.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Tetsavveh

Shabbat Zachor

February 24, 2018 | 9 Adar 5778

Annual | Exodus 27:20-30:10 (Etz Hayim p. 503-518; Hertz p. 339-349)
 Triennial | Exodus 28:31-29:18 (Etz Hayim p. 508-513; Hertz p. 342-346)
 Maftir | Deuteronomy (Deut 25: 17-19; Etz Hayim p. 1135-1136; Hertz p. 856-857)
 Haftarah | 1 Samuel 15:2-34 (Etz Hayim p. 1280-1285; Hertz p. 995-998)

D'var Torah: A Symbol of Inclusion

Rabbi Shoshana Cohen, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this week's parasha the children of Israel are commanded to make clothing for the priests who will serve in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Several times we are reminded that the priest is a representative of the people of Israel when he does his holy work. To make sure the priest keeps this in mind when he is doing his work, the tribes of Israel are represented on two separate pieces of his clothing: the *hoshen mishpat* (breastplate) who's 12 precious inlaid stones were each inscribed with a tribe's name, and the *ephod*, the apron-like garment the priest wears as an outer layer, which was held together at the shoulders by two precious *shoham* stones, each inscribed with the names of six tribes.

The Torah describes in verses 28:9-10 how the names are written on these two stones, and the language is a bit odd. Rather than stating explicitly which tribes appear on which stone, it says that six go on one, and the six "leftovers" (*hanotarim*) go on the other. One might infer from

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the word “leftover” a kind of binary hierarchy, with the best six appearing in one group and the worst six appearing in the other. After all, Abraham

D'var Haftarah: Shabbat Zakhor

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

King Saul was a tragic and tormented figure, and the events of this special haftarah for Parashat Zakhor, the Shabbat before Purim, signal the beginning of his tragic downfall. In the special maftir Torah reading for this Shabbat, we read of the command to both remember the evil deeds of the Amalekites and to obliterate them.

Saul, in his role as king, was commanded by the prophet Samuel to carry out this commandment: “Thus said the Lord of Hosts: ‘I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him... Spare no one...’ (15:3) Nevertheless Saul spares Agag, the Amalekite king. Samuel admonishes Saul: “the Lord sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and proscribe the sinful Amalekites, make war on them until you have exterminated them.’ Why did you disobey the Lord...?” (15:18-19) The prophet then takes matters into his own hands, hacking Agag to pieces.

But while Samuel makes it quite clear that Saul forfeited the kingship when he deviated from God’s command, is there anything that can be said in Saul’s defense? When Saul tells Samuel: “I have fulfilled the Lord’s commandment.” (15:13) perhaps he is invoking the inherent subjectivity involved in performing God’s will and his belief that mercy, even here, is permissible. The apologetic nature of so many commentaries throughout the ages concerning the Torah’s command to destroy Amalek indicates the deep dissonance there is between this verse and the rest of our tradition.

Nevertheless, a famous midrash seeks to justify Samuel’s action: “Said Rabbi Elazar: ‘All who show mercy toward the cruel, in the end will become cruel to the merciful.’” (Tanhuma Metzora 1). Mercy IS important, but we must overcome our urge to be merciful when dealing with the wicked, because mercy will ultimately backfire and lead to greater cruelty. (Incidentally, other midrashim see Haman as the progeny of Agag, descended from a child conceived in the short time between his being spared by Saul and executed by Samuel.)

Viewed together, Samuel and Saul are moral foils for each other - two sides in an important dialectic. Samuel is a man of absolutes: God’s word is definitive, and our role is to submit to it and fulfill it precisely, with no deviation right or left. Saul is more of an equivocator: God’s word is subject to interpretation in line with our values.

Each side makes a compelling case and has its passionate adherents. Who said the challenge of being God’s servant is easy?

Parashat Tetsavveh Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this Parasha we receive the instructions for the *Kohanim*, the priests working in the Mishkan, both their garments and the ceremony to turn them into *Kohanim*. This is also Shabbat Zakhor.

- 1) This Parasha opens with a different tone than the previous one. There the people who wished to participate were told to bring a contribution for building the Mishkan. This Parasha opens with a Mitzvah (27:20-21). What are the people commanded to do? How long will this Mitzvah be in effect?
- 2) Early in the Parasha comes the table of content. What topics will be discussed in this Parasha (28:1-4)?
- 3) Reading the instructions for the ceremony to make Aaron and his sons Kohanim (29:1-37), we realize that they are passive through most of the ceremony. Why do you think that they do not have a more active role?

This week is **Shabbat Zakhor**, the Shabbat before Purim during which we read from Devarim (Deut) 25:17-19.

- 4) We are commanded to remember what Amalek did to us when we left Egypt (details in Shemot 17:8-16). Why do you think that the act of remembering is important enough to become a Mitzvah?
- 5) According to Devarim 25, what did Amalek do, and why do you think that we are commanded to remember this aspect of their actions (and take action against them because of it)?

For Further Conversation

- 1) **From the Dvar Torah** - Despite our efforts to be inclusive, what are ways that we nevertheless reinforce hierarchies? What can we do to make sure that different individuals and groups truly receive equal regard and representation?
- 2) **From the Dvar Haftarah** - What are some situations where you feel tension that our instinct to be merciful might in fact lead to worse outcomes?

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