“The Death of Aaron, Pursuer of Peace”

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This is the week we read about the deaths of Aaron and Miriam. Miriam’s death receives one brief verse in the Torah, with no mention of a communal mourning period. One commentator explains this as a gesture of modesty toward Miriam, whom he identifies as the greatest of the prophetic voices of her generation.

Miriam is not only the source of water for the wilderness tribes, but also the exemplar of quiet strength and spiritual expression. She risks everything to encounter Pharaoh’s daughter and save her infant brother. She leads the dancing and singing at the miracle of the Reed Sea. She demonstrates equanimity in her weeks of healing from *tzara’at.* But modesty or no, it feels as if she gets short shrift.

But Aaron’s death gets hardly any more mention than Miriam’s. Therefore, the Rabbinic tradition gives him a sort of mini-*hesped*, a short eulogy. Following the *derekh eretz* of eulogies, it concentrates on the good he purportedly did in his lifetime. Here it is, from Pirkey Avot chapter 1 in the Mishnah:

*Hillel and Shammai received the Tradition from their teachers. Hillel would say: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving all humanity and bringing them closer to Torah.*

Notice that this eulogy does not mention the Golden Calf incident, where Aaron capitulates to the people’s clamor to create an idol in the absence of Moses and, apparently, God. Did Aaron facilitate the making of the Calf? Clearly, he did. But even there, flawed as his judgment was in the moment, he was obviously trying to make *sh’lom bayit*, to make peace, to foster domestic tranquility, to keep the people together and demonstrate his love for them – a love which overshadowed his good parental guidance.

As with any good *hesped*, our Mishnah takes the person’s life as a starting point for a larger message we are all supposed to come away with. In other words, whether or not you think of the actual Aaron per se as the exemplar of *rodef shalom*, the pursuer of peace, nonetheless you the listener yourself should strive to be a pursuer of peace. You should not only “love” peace but do something to make peace come about. You should not only “love” your fellow human beings, but you should actively work to bring them closer to the core message of Torah. “Love” is the necessary starting point, but it cannot be the endpoint.

Be a pursuer of peace, a *rodef shalom*. Do it not only on principle. Do it because you love peace and your fellow humans. But because you love them, do not stop there. Partner with them to transform the world into a place of peace and Torah.