

Shmini - Aaron Blessed the People, and then Moses and Aaron Blessed the People
Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 11, 2026 24 Nisan 5786



We expect that when Aaron completes all of the rituals necessary for the inauguration of the sanctuary, that something extraordinary will happen. It is a great moment. There has been a great build-up to it and there is every expectation that God will miraculously appear. Having done everything up until now according to Moses' instructions, the Torah tells us that Aaron blesses the people (Lev. 9:22):

וַיִּשָּׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכְמָם וַיֵּרֶד מִעֲשֵׂת הַחֹטֵאת וְהָעֵלָה וְהַשְּׁלֵמִים.

And Aaron lifted his hands toward the people, and he blessed them; then he came down from making the hattat-offering, the offering-up and the shalom-offering.

NOTHING HAPPENED

But nothing happens. Crickets. But then, in the very next verse (9:23) Moses comes into the scene, the two

of them bless the people together and God does appear:

וַיָּבֵיאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּצְאוּ וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת הָעָם וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד ה' אֶל כָּל הָעָם.

Now Moses and Aaron had entered the Tent of Appointment; they came out and they blessed the people, and the Glory of God was seen by the entire people.

Why was it that when Aaron blessed the people nothing happened? What prompted Moses to come into the picture? Why did the two of them have to go into the Tent of Appointment together? Regardless, in the very next verse (9:23) something extraordinary happens:

וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי ה' וַתֹּאכַל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת הָעֵלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלֵבִים וַיֵּרָא כָּל הָעָם וַיִּרְגְּזוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם.

And fire went out from the presence of God and consumed, on the altar, the offering-up and the fat-parts; all the people saw, and they shouted and flung themselves on their faces.

Surprisingly, most commentators overlook the subtle details in this sequence of events. But as usual, these subtle details often reveal a more complicated story. Here is what Israeli commentator Amnon Bezek points out:

We never hear prior to this moment that Moses instructed Aaron to bless the people. When Aaron does bless the people, the Torah omits the words, as God commanded Moses. In other words, Aaron's blessing appears to have been a result of his own personal initiative. Davka, on a

*day during which there was a strict emphasis on everything going exactly according to what was commanded to Israel (Aaron took it upon himself to add a slight innovation)! He did not act according to plan. When Aaron blessed the people he apparently took the authority for prompting God to reveal himself upon himself! Because of that, God did not appear, that is, until Moses came along with him, and the two of them blessed Israel together. In this way, the two of them fixed the mistake and the rest of the procedures concerning the inauguration of the Tabernacle continued.*¹

That is a fascinating reading! Compelling and plausible, it does what audacious readings ought to do, which is to reveal a new way of looking at the text and discover what is quite possibly *a story within a story*. According to Bezek, the inauguration of the Tabernacle was a rigorous and precisely laid out sequence of rituals. It had to work exactly as per the instructions that God gave Moses and Moses gave Aaron. Like handling radioactive material, one slip up and it could end in catastrophe. There is a meticulous process here. And it is not that Aaron is interested in any kind of subterfuge. Aaron wants to follow the procedure according to plan. But in his mind, he is also now the lead actor in the sacred drama that is unfolding. *Indeed, while he is Moses' partner, he is also, in some way, Moses' rival.* And so, in this moment, like all great actors he wants to shine on the stage himself. He wants to give just one little extra element, one small nuance to his character so that he has an opportunity to stand out. *Despite the high stakes, he cannot resist the impulse*

to add his own contribution to the ceremony. And that is why, according to Bezek, he takes the initiative and blesses the people. But the blessing doesn't succeed

in eliciting the divine reaction. Instead, it creates uncertainty because it is completely off script. We don't know what transpires when Moses and Aaron go inside the Tent of Appointment, or for how long. Do they have a conversation? Do they figure out what to do? Unknown. But when they do finally come out, they have their act together. They stand in front of the people as a team and bless them. It works. The fire comes out of the Holy of Holies and elicits an ecstatic response from the people. That is what happened, according to Bezek.

A creative reading such as that inspires us to offer our own speculations as to what happened and why. To wit, the following:

SOMETHING HAPPENED

¹ Amnon Bezek, *Starting Point: A Short study of the P'shat of the Weekly Parasha*. Rishon LeZion: Yedioth Ahronot, 2018. p. 238.

1. The Rivalry of Domains. We ought to see this moment within the larger context of the story of the Tabernacle. We recall that the last third of the book of Exodus is all about the Tabernacle. At the very end when it describes how it was finally assembled we have this remarkable moment (Exod. 39:43):

וַיִּרְא מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל הַמְּלָאכָה וְהִנֵּה עָשׂוּ אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' בְּכָן עָשׂוּ וַיְבָרֵךְ אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה.
Now Moses saw all the work, and here, they had made it as God had commanded, thus had they made. Then Moses blessed them.

At that point, Moses was the CEO of the construction project. But at this point, Aaron was now being installed as the CEO of the priesthood. The inauguration of the Tabernacle service is the direct analog to the completion of its construction. Just as Moses blessed the people when the Tabernacle was completed, Aaron took it upon himself as chief officiant, to bless the people as the rituals of the inauguration were completed. Moses blessed the people then, and Aaron is blessing the people now. If this is the story, then it is easy to discern why Aaron's blessing fell short in eliciting God's response. *Aaron was more focused on elevating himself than he was about transmitting God's blessing to the people. Now as chief officiant, he wanted to establish his credibility through an act of blessing. The hint of self-service diminished the blessing.*

2. The Transition in the Partnership. The two brothers have effectively been leading the people from the first time they came together before Pharaoh. They play off of each other. Moses is the leader and Aaron is the spokesman. They each perform their share of plagues, they speak to the people together and they mediate God's word to the people together. While it is unquestionable that Moses is the ultimate authority, Aaron will emerge as the one who is more accessible and personable. When Aaron offers his blessing as the Tabernacle is being initiated, it is indeed a step to independence from Moses, but there was no real attempt to establish a transition. You need that in any leadership situation. In order to transition to their individual domains, they had to engage in the blessing together.

3. The Fallout From the Golden Calf Incident. As much as we want to present Moses and Aaron as an effective leadership team and as much as we want to present them as brothers who have very subtle but not insurmountable tensions, the Golden Calf incident does loom large in the background. Re-reading that story, we get the feeling that *the tension between the two brothers never gets resolved in the way that we would like* (Exod. 32:21-24):

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן מַה עָשִׂיתָ לָּךְ הֵעָם הָיָה כִּי הִבֵּאתָ עֲלֵינוּ חֲטָאָה גְדוֹלָה. וַיֹּאמֶר אַהֲרֹן אֵל יִחִיד אִי אֲדֹנָי אֲתָהּ יְדַעְתָּ אֵת הָעָם כִּי בָרַע הוּא. וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר יִלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה הָיָה לוֹ. וַאֲמַר לָהֶם לְמִי זֶהב הַתְּפִלָּה וַיִּתְּנוּ לִי וְאֲשַׁלְכֶהוּ בְּאֵשׁ וַיִּצַּא הַעֲגֹל הַזֶּה.

WHAT HAPPENED

Then Moses said to Aaron: What did this people do to you that you have brought upon it [such] a great sin! Aaron said: Let not my lord's anger flare up! You yourself know this people, how set-on-evil it is. They said to me: Make us a god who will go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him! So I said to them: Who has gold? They broke it off and gave it to me; I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.

The text does not tell us what Moses says to Aaron after that lame excuse. It doesn't have to. Aaron knows that he is guilty, and Moses also knows that Aaron is guilty, and that tension has to exist somewhere in the relationship between the two of them. One can imagine that even though Moses is so frustrated with Aaron, he will have to move beyond Aaron's terrible failure because in the end, he needs him. But how well will he be able to move beyond it? Take for example these moments prior to the inauguration of the Tabernacle (Lev. 8:6-7). Is there tension between the two of them there?

וַיִּקְרַב מֹשֶׁה אֶת אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת בָּנָיו וַיִּרְחֹץ אֹתָם בַּמַּיִם. וַיִּתֵּן עָלָיו אֶת הַכֹּהֵנֶת וַיַּחְגֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּאַבְנֵט וַיִּלְבַּשׁ אֹתוֹ אֶת הַמְּעִיל וַיִּתֵּן עָלָיו אֶת הָאֵפֹד וַיַּחְגֹּר אֹתוֹ בְּחֹשֶׁב הָאֵפֹד וַיַּאֲפֹד לוֹ בּו...
Moses brought near Aaron and his sons and washed them with water; he put on him the robe, he girded him with the sash, he clothed him in the tunic, he put on him the efod-vest, he girded him with the designed-band of the efod, and invested him in it...

Moses brought near Aaron and his sons and washed them with water; he put on him the robe, he girded him with the sash, he clothed him in the tunic, he put on him the efod-vest, he girded him with the designed-band of the efod, and invested him in it...

And on it goes. Just how do you think Aaron felt when Moses washed him with water? *And just how tightly did he gird him with the sash?* In other words, in all of these moments of proximity, the Golden Calf episode is looming. Reading the rest of the Torah, eventually the two brothers are able to mediate their rivalries and tensions. They act together and they act separately. And indeed, later on, after decades of wandering, they stand beside each other facing the people as they complain of thirst. When Moses smites the rock instead of speaking to it, both Aaron and Moses are reprimanded by God together, as a team, and both are prohibited from entering the land (Num. 20:7-14). And finally, what transpired between the two of them when Aaron died? Did they review their lives with one another? Were they at peace with one another?

וַיִּכְשַׁט מֹשֶׁה אֶת אַהֲרֹן אֶת בְּגָדָיו וַיִּלְבַּשׁ אֹתָם אֶת אֵלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ וַיִּמָּת אַהֲרֹן שֵׁם בְּרֵאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּרַד מֹשֶׁה וְאֵלְעָזָר מִן הָהָר. (בְּמִ' כ: כח)
And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and clothed El'azar his son in them. So Aaron died there on top of the hill. Moses and El'azar came down from the hill. (Num. 20:28):

Aaron and Moses' blessing is part of a larger story that includes everything before and everything after what takes place in our parasha. It is a story of brothers, accomplices, partners, rivals, and quite possibly friends as well.

Shabbat Shalom!