

When a story in our Torah is unexpectedly interrupted by an entirely new topic, it is usually highly significant. A little over a month ago, the story of Judah and Tamar abruptly bisects the Joseph narrative just as Joseph has been sold to Potiphar. Years later, we see that Judah, having repented of his misguided behavior toward Joseph and toward Tamar, has earned the kingship for his family. Shortly after the beginning, our parashah abruptly launches into a genealogical account of the descendants of Jakob's three oldest sons: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, concluding with the lineage of Moses and Aaron laid out in greater detail than the others. (6:14-25) The story then resumes with a strange repetition: "That is Aaron and Moses, to whom the Lord said, 'Take the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions.' They are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of Egypt; they are Moses and Aaron." (6:26-27) Repetitions in the Torah are also usually significant, and this is a prime example, especially since the names have also been reversed, which of course, is significant in itself. Midrash Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:1 teaches: "Both are equal. Similarly, (Genesis 1:1) 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' I might think that what takes precedence in the verse took precedence in creation. It is therefore written, (Genesis 2:4), 'on the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven' They were both created together. ... to teach that all are of equal importance." Rashi elaborates that the Torah alternately places each brother first in order to demonstrate that they are equal in greatness. Each plays a unique and integral role in freeing the Israelites from Egypt and establishing them as an independent people with a functioning infrastructure for the future. Their individual strengths and weaknesses are perfectly balanced, which makes them eminently able to carry out their extremely difficult mission. It is noteworthy that their genealogy is introduced at a critical juncture. Unsuccessful in persuading the Israelites to listen to him, Moses doubts that he will be able to gain Pharaoh's attention, once again calling attention to his perceived inability to communicate. "So the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He commanded them concerning the children of Israel and concerning Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to let the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." (6:13) HaShem longer merely *speaks*; HaShem now *commands*. Immediately the scene changes to the genealogical outlines, and when the narrative is taken up again HaShem introduces a concrete plan of action with a promise of assistance. There are many messages to unpack here. The most obvious is, of course, to fully introduce and legitimize the pedigree of Moses and Aaron, including their spouses. For example, Aaron's wife Elisheva is the sister of Nahshon. Rashi, citing Midrash Shemot Rabbah teaches that one who contemplates taking a wife must first investigate her brothers. In Midrash and Talmud, Nahshon, from the tribe of Judah through Peretz, is the brave soul who dares to jump into the Sea of Reeds when the others, more afraid of the sea than of the approaching Egyptians, hesitate – including Moses, who stands and prays until HaShem tells him to lift his staff and spread his hand to cause the sea to split. More about Nacshon later perhaps, when he reappears in a somewhat larger role. Another message is that until the mission to free the Israelites was on a path to success, it would have been unnecessary to go into detail about the background of Moses and Aaron. Now that their leadership functions have been established, their lineage becomes important. A third message is to emphasize their humanity. While in the pagan world, human heroes are deified and deities consort with humans and exhibit the entire panoply of human weakness, the Torah draws a clear line of demarcation between human and divine. Our heroes and heroines are completely human, to be admired and emulated, but never to be worshiped. Inserting a detailed genealogy of Moses and Aaron firmly establishes their humanity, and its position here, after Moses' and Aaron's initial failure and Moses' reiterated misgivings about his suitability, makes it clear that failure and frailty are a part of every human life. But the most important message is that imperfect as we all are, change is possible and people who make grave mistakes can learn from them and do better in the future. Moses and Aaron are descendants of the zealous, impetuous Levi. Jakob's final words to Simeon and Levi curse their anger, which had brought grief to so many people. Levi is later able to channel his emotions and present a good example for his descendants to emulate, but Simeon is not, as we will later see in the story of Pinchas, from the tribe of Levi, and Zimri, from the tribe of Simeon. Zealousness and impetuosity are not necessarily bad, but they must be tempered with strength of character. The tribe of Levi inherits the priesthood, while Simeon, obviously lacking positive examples, simply disappears. Moses' final words to the tribe of Levi honor its ability to use these potent attributes for good: "They shall teach Your ordinances to Jakob, and Your Torah to Israel; they shall place incense before You, and burnt offerings upon Your altar." (Deuteronomy 33:10) Levi's impetuous zealousness filtered through Aaron's compassion for his people and Moses' humility gave both brothers the ability to stand up to Pharaoh and lead our people from slavery to freedom.

Shabbat shalom!