

What a perfect confluence of readings this week! Shabbat HaChodesh, the last of the four special Shabbatot leading from Purim to Pesach, is the Shabbat immediately before Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the first day of the Jewish liturgical year. As we read in the special maftir portion, “This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you [the first of the] months of the year.” (Exodus 12:2) It is springtime, a time of rejuvenation and new beginnings. The reading continues with preparations for HaShem’s final miracle and the commandment to perpetually commemorate this event. This is the culmination of Moses’ and Aaron’s work in Egypt and the beginning of a paradigm shift for them and for all the Israelites. Now, in our parashah Moses and Aaron complete the transition into their new leadership roles. Last week in Parashah Tzav, HaShem commands Moses to begin proceedings for the inauguration of the *mishkan* and the installation of Aaron and his sons into the priesthood. The rare cantillation sign *shalsholet* offers insight into Moses’ feelings in this final ritual. Weaving back and forth, up and down over the word **וְשִׁבַּח** – and he slaughtered (8:23), it exudes indecision. This “ram of completion,” with whose blood he invests Aaron and his sons, is Moses’ final act as High Priest. When he confers the priesthood upon Aaron’s family he will make his own family “mere” Levites. Moses must have felt a tinge of sorrow at not having been chosen by HaShem for this office, but his trajectory, determined by his unique relationship with HaShem, is vastly different. Now, on the eighth day of the inauguration ceremonies, Moses ushers Aaron into his new role: “And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Approach the altar and perform your sin offering and your burnt offering, atoning for yourself and for the people, and perform the people’s sacrifice, atoning for them, as the Lord has commanded.’” (9:7) A number of midrashim view Moses’s seven-day stint as High Priest as punishment for his having spent seven days refusing HaShem’s request to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. “The Holy One of Blessing said to him, ‘I say to you, ‘Go,’ and you say to me, ‘Please make someone else your agent?’ By your life, I am paying you back. Someday soon when that *mishkan* is being made, you will be thinking privately that you should serve in the high priesthood; but I am telling you, ‘Call Aaron to serve.’” (Midrash Tanchuma Shemini 3) But Talmud Tractate Zevachim 102a asserts, “The priesthood expired only for the descendants of Moses, ... as it is stated, ‘But for Moses the man of God, his sons are named among the tribe of Levi. [I Chronicles 23:14] ... and so too: ‘Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among them that call upon His name. [Psalm 99:6]’” But Midrash Tanchuma Shemini 3 also teaches that Aaron’s own reluctance to assume the priesthood equaled Moses’s reluctance to obey HaShem’s request. “Moses said to him [Aaron], ‘The Holy One of Blessing has told me to ordain you as high priest.’ Aaron said to him, ‘You have labored on the *mishkan*; so shall I be made high priest?’ He said to him, ‘By your life, even though you are being made high priest, it is as if it were I, for just as you were glad for me in my greatness, so I am glad for you in your greatness.’ ... Why [did Moses call] the elders of Israel? In order to promote him [Aaron] in the presence of the elders. The Holy One of Blessing said to him, ‘Call the elders and ordain him in their presence, lest they say that he became high priest on his own.’” Clearly our sages viewed both Moses and Aaron as reluctant leaders, not because they did not want the responsibility, but because they were keenly aware of its magnitude and of their own strengths and weaknesses. Getting the Israelites out of Egypt was easy compared to the many challenges of leading this frightened and contentious group of ex-slaves through unknown territory where anything might happen, and often does – as the tragic death of Aaron’s two eldest sons immediately teaches them. In the stunned silence that follows, Moses tries to make sense of what has happened, “This is what the Lord spoke [when He said] I will be sanctified through those near to Me, and before all the people I will be glorified.’ And Aaron was silent.” (10:3) Aaron, whom HaShem had appointed as Moses’ “mouthpiece,” intrinsically understands that sometimes, silence speaks louder than words. Indeed, proper etiquette for visiting mourners during a shiva week entails entering quietly, and saying nothing until addressed by the mourner. Here, the silence of the chief mourner, Aaron, gives people space to process this tragedy. Later, when Moses scolds his sons Eleazar and Ithamar for completely burning the sin offering goat rather than eating it (10:16-18), Aaron speaks up in their defense, saying correctly that he is not permitted to eat a sin offering while in the first stage of mourning (10:19). And Moses agrees. Thus, both have assumed their respective leadership roles in this new and challenging paradigm. Moses is at his best when leading the people as prophet, teacher, and defender, transmitting HaShem’s words to them as he receives them and arguing with HaShem on their behalf when they stray and incur HaShem’s wrath. As he has just demonstrated, Aaron, who has spent his entire life among the people, knows how to interpret the Torah’s commandments and precepts in ways the people can understand and follow. He is the ideal High Priest. As this pivotal and painful eighth day ends, Moses and Aaron, along with their sister Miriam, have become the leaders the people need. No one person can be all things to all people at all times, as the chaos created by the world’s autocrats has proven time and again. We lead best when we recognize our strengths and weaknesses and know how to work with others for the good of all – a timely lesson from our parashah for today’s troubled world.

Shabbat shalom!