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בס"ד

Parashat Va'era Part II The Abbreviated Genealogy

1. General Remarks

The second half of Exodus 6 contains a truncated genealogical table (apparently culled from a large national genealogical table) that furnishes details regarding the descendants of Reuben, Simeon and Levi, the three eldest sons of Jacob. In a departure from standard genealogical tables it provides information about its individuals in a most uneven manner. Of course Exodus 6, in the midst of a narrative, was not a natural location for a family tree. The primary interest at this point was in Moses and Aaron, central protagonists of the narrative, and once their lineage and several relevant details were registered there was no purpose in continuing. Since more family background for Moses and Aaron was called for, more particulars were provided about their tribe (Levi), their direct forbears, and important personages of their tribe than about the others.

By beginning with Reuben, Levi was placed in perspective (once again pointing to the reversal of primogeniture). With the information provided the lineage of Moses and Aaron is more fully appreciated and legitimated (a critical concern as we shall discuss).

Although the genealogy's primary purpose may have been achieved with the details of Aaron and Moses, with the benefit of hindsight at the time of its writing, knowing who later played significant roles in national affairs, the narrative provides pedigree details about other Levite individuals. Thus, it includes information about Aaron's four sons, his grandson Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, as well as the sons of Korah (who do not die with their father [Num. 26:11]). Foreshadowing Phinehas' important accomplishment and ascension to priestly prominence, his pedigree is more fully elaborated with details regarding his maternal grandfather and his paternal grandmother's father.

No mention is made of Moses' sons, whose births are recorded elsewhere in the book of Exodus. One may wonder: since his sons did not become prominent, did the Torah here pass over them to make the historic point that a man's greatness did not secure a position of eminence for his sons?*

The need to provide the pedigree of Moses and Aaron explains the structure of the genealogy, but there remains a question. Why was it placed in chapter 6, after Moses and Aaron had already been interacting with Israel and Pharaoh, and not at the time when they presented themselves to Israel or to Pharaoh (towards the end of chapter 4 or the beginning of chapter 5)? And why, in the two verses attached to the end of the genealogical table (Exod. 6:26-27), is there so much clustered repetition in different ways emphasizing the identities of Moses and Aaron, a unique phenomenon in Scripture: הוא אהרן ומשה אשר אמר ה' להם ("It is the same Aaron and Moses that Hashem said to them"); הם המדברים אל פרעה ("It is they who spoke to Pharaoh"); הוא משה ואהרן ("It is the same Moses and Aaron")? It is written as if there is keen interest in assuring that these details, more than others, never be forgotten and that, more than with other data, there should be no possibility that anyone would ever make a mistake.

2. Rabbi S. R. Hirsch's Explanation

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Commentary on *Shemot*) pointed out that the genealogical table is set exactly at the spot that the account of the supernatural wonders and feats begin. In ancient times an awed and amazed public often attributed divinity to human beings who seemed to have dominion over nature, and there would have been a great temptation to deify Moses and Aaron, if not during their lifetime then after death. This would be a great violation of a fundamental principle of the Torah. It is precisely at

this juncture that there was a critical need to assert and reassert in various ways the fact that Moses and Aaron were mortal human beings. Thus, with the genealogical table the point was made that Moses and Aaron were part of a family tree, born of father and mother, with uncles, aunts and cousins, relations who were known to the contemporary public. Their ancestors also were born, lived a certain number of years and died, and they likewise were part of a larger population group.

The two verses that emphasize the identity of Moses and Aaron were attached to the genealogical details. There must be no doubt on these matters: The Moses and Aaron whom G-d delegated to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and who dealt with Pharaoh to bring the Israelites forth from Egypt, are the Moses and Aaron of the genealogical table.

We may support this view with what otherwise appears to be an anomalous feature of the text. The genealogical table interrupts the narrative after the brief accounts in which G-d instructs Moses to go to Pharaoh, Moses expresses reluctance, and then G-d speaks to Moses and Aaron when He formally “commands them to the children of Israel and to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to take the children of Israel out of Egypt” (Exod. 6:10-13). These particulars are repeated immediately after the genealogical table (in vv. 29-30), with slight, albeit significant, variations in both G-d’s opening statement and Moses’ reply, but also with a detailed response from G-d attached. Despite the variations, in peshat, the second account “is exactly the one mentioned earlier...but because the subject was interrupted to provide their pedigree, the text repeated it to begin again with it...as a man would say to his friend, ‘Let us return to the subject’” (Rashi, on 6:29-30; also see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra). The text indicates the repetition by introducing the later formulation with, “And it was on the day that Hashem spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt” (v. 28), referring back to the dialogue of vv. 10-13.

Regarding variations, as Ibn Ezra on occasion states, G-d’s prophecy should be thought of as communicated in conceptual terms, not limited to a particular literary formulation; it contains more than can be compressed into finite words. The prophet, as recipient or narrator formulating the conceptual

message into words, in his prophetic capacity, may one time highlight one aspect, the next time another, varying the word usage. Going beyond Ibn Ezra, based on compelling research, we assume that there are subtle reasons, part of the prophetic process, that explain why the literary formulations are different even when referring to the identical experience.

In the resumptive account there are several significant additions that had awaited the genealogical table (and the function it served) before being incorporated into the text. G-d now introduces His instructions for Moses to speak to Pharaoh with *Ani Hashem* (6:29), a detail that has no parallel in the first formulation. It is a statement that refers to His supremacy and His intent to reveal His wondrous power, as will be explicitly elaborated in the continuation of His response (7:5).**

After the text repeats that Moses expressed his reservations, it provides G-d’s response at length, a matter not known from the earlier formulation to which it corresponds. There, His response was not quoted or paraphrased at all; it had merely been described in the third person narrative informing us in a general way that וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאַל אַהֲרֹן (“Hashem spoke to Moses and Aaron”) וַיְצַו אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל פַּרְעֹה (“and commanded them to the children of Israel and to Pharaoh” [6:13]). Those two back-to-back clauses constitute a most unusual construction. We are surprised that we are not told the words G-d spoke, as is the standard in the many other cases in the Torah when we read “Hashem spoke to Moses.” It is as if there was a reluctance to record the details of G-d’s response and so His words were intentionally omitted at that point.

In the resumption it is very different. G-d says to Moses וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֲנִי הָאֱלֹהִים לְפָרְעֹה וְאַהֲרֹן אֲחִיךָ יִהְיֶה לְךָ לְאֱלֹהִים (“See, I have appointed you as a god for Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet” [7:1]). G-d goes on to speak about the numerous great wonders He is imminently going to perform in Egypt in order that the Egyptians will know that *Ani Hashem*. It is this response to Moses (just before the plagues begin) that prompted insertion of the genealogy and explains its location exactly at the spot where it is, an insertion designed to counter the fear that Moses might be deified. The passage depicts Moses as a god to Pharaoh, who was himself perceived as a god! With

the many coming wonders that are alluded to, Moses would surely be seen as Pharaoh's superior and might accordingly be thought of as a god.

Thus, although the readers of the previous chapters of Exodus are aware of Moses' human birth, the structure of the present narrative segment reflects (and transmits to us) the concern that then existed with deification. Until the genealogy was recorded and Moses' humanness firmly established for all time, the fullness of G-d's response to Moses was withheld in the text, reflecting the lesson that was being transmitted.

3. Number Symbolism Based on Rabbi Sassoon's Insights

In Exodus 6 and 7, a central objective of the message to Israel as well as of the goal for Egypt is to get to know *Ani Hashem* ("I am Y-H-V-H"), each nation in its distinctive manner. Israel's enlightenment is associated with its covenant with G-d, while Egypt's is to reject idolatry and promote religious truth. In our previous study we have demonstrated a patterned presence of the *gematria* of Hashem's Tetragrammaton, the number twenty-six, within the structure of the celebratory passage in which He reveals His name to Moses and instructs him to transmit it to Israel. We also pointed out that Moses' generation was the twenty-sixth from Creation. It is also the case that the number twenty-six, through its multiples, is incorporated in the genealogy at the end of Exodus 6, as we shall soon see.

The symbolism of seven and its multiples, especially its decimal multiple of seventy, is also present in the genealogy. It is well established that in the ancient Near East seven and its multiples were markers of completion and perfection and to some extent the Torah adopted that convention. Here, they apparently represent religious attainment of the highest rank in the "old order," that which preceded the covenant, symbolized by eight and its multiples. In addition, the symbolism of thirteen (one numeral higher than the second prominent numeral of the ancient Near East, twelve) and its multiple 130 is also extensively attested in this passage. Rabbi S. D. Sassoon demonstrated the association of thirteen with matters related to the concept of *Hashem Ehad* (one G-d), since thirteen is the *gematria* of $\aleph-\beth-\aleph$, the word that

means "one." Such usage seems to fit the context throughout the Torah. (See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.)

The three patriarchs are not included in this genealogy. Their immense achievements were as individuals, and although they had established a potential for the future, they were now viewed as part of history. This genealogy is concerned with their offspring and represents the transition of what had been occurring through recent generations from the sons of Jacob onward. The forebears of Moses beginning with Levi, as indicated by the number of years they lived, were men of stature, preparing the path for him. Nonetheless, they were within the realm marked by the number seven, not having entered the new national covenant symbolized by eight and eighty.

Most of the following is from Ronald Benun's applications of Rabbi Sassoon's guidelines. Critics may object that numbers may be manipulated to yield arbitrary results, but these applications must be seen as part of a much larger context. And in any event the numbers appear to be presented as symbolic of a deeper meaning.

The total number of words in the genealogical passage, from paragraph break to paragraph break (*setumah* to *setumah*, Exod. 6:14-28) is 182, 7×26 . The number of words in the two verses of the Reuben and Simeon portion is twenty-eight, 7×4 , while from the introduction of Levi to the end of the passage (which is all within the realm of Levi) is 154, 7×22 . The number of individuals mentioned in the genealogy is twenty-eight. The total number of years of Levi is 137, or $130 + 7$. Moses' father Amram's years are also 137, while those of his grandfather, Kohath, are 133, 7×19 .

Aaron, instrumental in the transition from the old order marked by seven to the new covenantal category symbolized by eight, marries Elisheba, or "My G-d is seven." This seems to indicate that Aaron's connection to the old order was stronger than that of Moses, whose wife was the daughter of the priest of Midian, "who had seven daughters." Elisheba's father is Amminadab, while the first two sons she and Aaron had were Nadab and Abihu, both obviously named

after her father. Eventually, the two of them offer in the sanctuary “strange fire that they were not commanded” on the “eighth day” of the dedication and die. It was the day that the covenant was to reach the pinnacle of acceptance. Perhaps they could not separate themselves from the old order when the new order replaced it, a particularly grievous matter in the case of the priests.

Aaron’s name appears as word number 80 and word number 130 in the genealogy. In the passage that follows the resumption of the narrative (at the beginning of chapter 7), in which he is designated as Moses’ “prophet,” his name appears as word number 77 (v. 6) and word number 88 (v. 7).

The opposition to Moses through the years comes in great part from those who insisted on remaining committed to the “old” system after the nation had been bidden to accept the lawgiving and the covenant, symbolized by eight and eighty. The leader of the major rebellion against Moses was Korah, obviously a distinguished individual. The number of deaths associated with the aftereffects of his rebellion – that is, aside from the deaths of the rebels themselves – was 14,700 (Num. 17:14), a distinctive multiple of seven. In our genealogy, Korah’s name and that of his father, Izhar, are in extremely eminent positions (Exod. 6:21). They are exactly the two center words of the passage, Izhar being word number 91 (7 x 13) counting from the beginning and Korah word number 91 counting from the end (a methodology Rabbi Sassoon demonstrated to be widely used in Scripture). This indicates their status and leadership positions within the tribe of Levi, a discussion for another occasion.

G-d’s response to Moses (Exod. 7:1-5), instructing him concerning the upcoming interaction with Pharaoh and His goals for the Egyptians, that “Egypt shall know that *Ani Hashem*” (v. 5), comprises exactly seventy words (counting only G-d’s words, excluding the four-word superscription at the beginning of 7:1). This aspect of G-d’s revelation is articulated strictly from the standpoint of His forthcoming wondrous

input toward Egypt, independent of His covenant with Israel. It symbolizes religious stature and completion for Egypt.

The attached verses (7:6-7) provide a statement of Moses and Aaron’s faithful fulfillment of their charge together with information concerning their ages when they were speaking to Pharaoh. Moses was eighty years of age (symbolizing the covenant in its fullness) while Aaron, the intermediary to Egypt, was eighty-three years of age, not quite up to Moses (within the sphere of “eighty,” but possibly to be understood as seventy plus thirteen).

This barely touches the tip of the iceberg. As Rabbi Sassoon often points out, enormous work must be done to comprehend what the prophecy of the Torah connotes beneath the surface.

Endnotes

* The genealogy informs that Amram, son of Kohath, son of Levi, married Jochebed, his paternal aunt, who bore him Aaron and Moses. Such a relationship is later forbidden by the Torah, included with the incest laws (Lev. 18:12; 20:19), but before the lawgiving it was permitted. This is similar to the cases with Abraham, who stated he married his sister from his father (Gen. 20:12) and Jacob who married two sisters. It is important to note that there is no inhering blemish or shortcoming that is associated with a prohibition that might exist independently of the law. Relationships, actions or items that are prohibited are prohibited only to the extent that the law so declares them.

** We must again point out that those who established the chapter divisions widely used in our printed Bibles did not always grasp the subject matter well. In our case they did not recognize the cohesiveness between the end of chapter 6 (the resumption) and the beginning of chapter 7 (Hashem’s expanded response).