

# DEVAR TORAH

## A name is unspoken, a bond is unbroken for two brothers

By NEHEMIA POLEN

It was first noticed six hundred years ago by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher in his *Perush Ba'al ha-Turim al ha-Torah* that the name of Moses is absent from *Parshat Tetzaveh*. The name of this central character of the Biblical narrative figures prominently in each Torah portion from the moment of his initial appearance at the beginning of the Book of Exodus, so its absence in this week's *parshah* is indeed conspicuous.

To explain this phenomenon, R. Jacob ben Asher calls attention to Exodus 32:32. The children of Israel have just worshipped the Golden Calf, and God threatens to destroy them, to choose Moses as the new patriarch of a "great nation." Moses insists that God must forgive their sin, "and if not, erase me, please, from your book which you have written." Moses, in offering to surrender his life and his very spiritual identity for his people, uttered a curse which left its impression, achieving at least partial realization in *Parshat Tetzaveh*, where his name is absent.

But this explanation appears to

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make the absence of Moses' name into a kind of punishment. Why should Moses have been punished for his breathtakingly courageous defense of the Children of Israel, at the risk of his own spiritual destiny? And why was *Parshat Tetzaveh* specifically chosen for the omission of Moses' name? Before we can answer that question, we must look at a trend in the narrative of Torah up to this point.

### Brothers

The Torah is, in large measure, the story of the rivalry of brothers: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. This pattern is broken by the relationship of Moses and Aaron. Aaron, the older brother, is overshadowed by Moses, the leader and teacher of the people. Yet they both worked together with a trace of rivalry or animosity. Indeed, the Midrash suggests, it is precisely because Aaron bore no jealousy in his heart toward Moses that Aaron was chosen to be the High Priest.

Now, why *Parshat Tetzaveh*? The theme of *Parshat Tetzaveh* is the selection of Aaron, together with a specification of the garments he was to wear as High Priest, and—most significantly—a description of the dedication ceremony installing Aaron and his sons as priests. The irony is that the officiant for this

dedication service was none other than Moses himself! While his name indeed does not appear in the *parshah*, he is the one being spoken to. He is the one charged with carrying out all the details of the service. He is the priest for this rite. The very first word of the *parshah*, "*Ve-atah*"—"And you"—is addressed to Moses. Thus we have the paradox that nowhere is he addressed more directly than in the *parshah* in which his name is absent.

The time when Moses rose to the defense of his people by asking God to remove his name from the Torah was a moment of supreme self-sacrifice, a surrender to martyrdom not of the body, but of the soul. At that moment Moses was rewarded with a kind of immortality which transcends the mere remembrance of his name. Moses was granted a *parshah* of the Torah in which his name would not be mentioned, but in which his presence would be most acutely felt, in which he alone would serve as a High Priest. Moses' wish that his name be erased was indeed fulfilled, but its fulfillment was transformed into a blessing. Here we encounter the silence not of absence and forgetfulness, but of presence and remembrance. Such is the reward of those who surrender themselves in service to God and God's people. □



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