

Emor

Delivered by Rabbi Krupnick May 9, 2015

What do Walter Brennan, Michael Caine, Anthony Quinn and Jason Robards all have in common? All have won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar more than once. However, I think that if a Best Supporting Actor Oscar was given to a Torah hero, it would have to go to Aaron, whose role as a leader is spelled out in detail in this week's Torah reading. In the portion we see Aaron in his royal finery, leading the community in worship as his brother, Moses looks on. But what we don't see is the backstory leading up to this moment in his life.

I've been reflecting on the life and career of my biblical namesake in ways I never have before. I'll leave it to psychoanalysts to figure out why that is, but I think the arc of Aaron's life is a fascinating one. Think about it: Aaron is an adolescent when he looks on, likely in horror, as his baby brother is put in a basket to float aimlessly down the Nile River. Years go by. Are the brothers in contact as Moses grows up in the palace? Aaron, presumably, is still living the life of a slave while his brother has a silver spoon in his mouth. Then Moses leaves for 40 years to be a shepherd. That's 40 more years that Aaron is a slave, living amongst other slaves. Then, many years after that, he comes into the supporting role as interpreter as his brother comes back to take on Pharaoh. Aaron is thrust into the limelight as he administers some of the plagues. And he is a half-step behind Moses, again in the supporting role, as they cross the Red Sea. Finally, Aaron takes center stage as the High Priest. He becomes, briefly, a leading man. He looks on as the most talented artisans build the Mishkan that will be his domain. The finest weavers and tailors make custom-made robes just for him. He has special jewelry made for him as well. Finally the big day comes. He's ready to go to work in the Temple. He puts on his robes, he walks to the altar with his four sons, and then unspeakable tragedy befalls him as a fire (from the very altar at which he is set to worship Gd) a fire comes out and kills two of his sons on the spot. Va Yidom Aharon, "And Aaron is silent" says the text. And yet, scarcely a month or two later, here Aaron is in our parsha, going about his job, ministering to the people. How does he feel inside? How does he feel about having this supporting role? How does he feel knowing that when he DID step into the limelight the results were tragic?

The Rabbis of our Tradition point out that this portion, Emor, begins with a literary redundancy. The text says, "EMOR EL HA KOHANIM, B'NAI AHARON, V'AMARTA ALAYHEM" - "Speak to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and speak with them." It's strange verbiage for a text where every word is precious. I take this to mean, "Remind Aaron that he has something worth saying, that he has something UNIQUE to say." "Remind Aaron, who is so used to playing only a SUPPORTING role, that his own experiences, so different that your own, Moses, give his a unique voice."

You know, it was until a decade after the first Oscars were give out that the Academy decided to give an Academy Award for Supporting Actor and Actress, and even then it was at first only a plaque, not a statue. But within a short time, the Academy realized that Supporting Roles are vitally important in the telling of the story. Moses played the leading role as liberator of the Jews from the slavery of Egypt, as lawgiver at Sinai, and as head of his people for the 40 years they wandered in the desert until they reached the Promised Land. But he could not do it all on his own. The Jews needed Aaron as well. Aaron loved and pursued peace. Aaron was the "people person" who was desperately needed as High Priest. He was the one who, based on his own life experience, kept things in perspective. He knew that life would have its ups and downs - he had most certainly experienced both! And when Aaron died, the people mourned him greatly for 30 days. That's where we get the Jewish tradition from, not from the death of Moses. Like his brother, Aaron too deserved a divine Oscar for his part in a supporting role.

All of us have supporting roles to play, and in the end, they are likely the most noble and important. But too often our own ego gets in the way. We crave the attention, the limelight, the respect we deserve. But true respect can be found in offering it to others, in supporting others, in bringing out the best in them. And it is through supporting others that we truly bring out the best in ourselves as well.