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From: Phyllostac@aol.com
To: JoshHoff@aol.com
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Team Teaching

By Rabbi Joshua (cooperatively known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

Parshas Tetzaveh deals primarily with the making of the priestly vestments to be used in the divine service of the mishkan, or the tabernacle. However, the parsha begins with God's command to Moshe to tell the people to provide pure olive oil to be used by his brother Aharon in the daily lighting of the menorah, whose construction was described in last week's parsha, Terumah. This command concerning the menorah, in fact, seems to be out of place in this parsha, and should, one would think, have been included either in a later parsha that deals with the actual service done by the kohanim in the mishkan, or in the previous parsha, which presented us with the details of the construction of the menorah. Why, then, is it placed here, immediately before the section on the priestly garments? Apparently there is some connection between these two sections which the Torah wants us to notice and understand. What, then, is that connection?

Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the Netziv, in his commentary Ha'amek Davar, posits an interesting duality between Moshe and Aharon that can help answer the questions we have presented. He notes that the menorah is used by the rabbis as a symbol for Torah. Why, however, was such a symbol necessary? The aron, which is called the ark of testimony, contained the tablets with the Torah engraved upon it, which is seemingly the strongest allusion to Torah conceivable. Why, then, was there a need for the menorah to symbolize Torah as well? The Netziv says that there are two aspects of Torah learning - that of analysis, plumbing into the depths of Torah and presenting innovative explanations of it, and that of reaching halachic conclusions through comparing various matters to each other. Moshe and Aharon, says the Netziv, were endowed with different strengths in their Torah learning. Moshe had a special expertise in understanding the depths of Torah, or its 'pilpul,' as the Netziv puts it. Aharon's strength, on the other hand, was in being able to decide the halacha, a skill that, the rabbis say, requires special divine aid. Although Moshe also able to decide halacha, as witness his judging of the people as recorded in parshas Yisro, Aharon surpassed him in this area. The rabbis in fact tell us, in Avos d'Rabbi Nasan, that Moshe and Aharon were the two heads of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of Jewish law, and the halacha issued from the two of them working together. The dual symbolism for Torah of the aron and the menorah, then, represent the two strengths within Torah that Moshe and Aharon possessed.

The Netziv writes, based on a Talmudic passage, that the menorah symbolizes the intensity of in-depth Torah study. For this reason, Moshe is commanded, in the beginning of our parsha, to direct Aharon in lighting the menorah, since Moshe had a special role to play in the deeper meaning of the menorah. The menorah, then, according to the Netziv, symbolizes Moshe's area of expertise within Torah, while the aron symbolizes Aharon's strength. Perhaps, as a variation on the Netziv, we can explain the symbolism in a different way, and say that the aron symbolizes the fixed content of the

Torah, as contained in the tablets, and its theoretical exposition, which was Moshe's strength. The Torah in this sense remains within the aron, a subject of study. Through the vehicle of halachic decision making, the Torah illuminates the world, as its precepts are carried out in daily life. Moshe and Aharon thus had separate roles within Torah, and therefore there were two different vessels in the mishkan to symbolize these two roles. Moshe was commanded to direct Aharon in lighting the menorah to symbolize the two of them working together, as the heads of the Sanhedrin, to teach Torah to the nation.

Based on our variation of the Netziv's exposition, we can understand why the section on the lighting of the menorah is placed before the section on the priestly garments. The Talmud in tractate Yoma tells us that the various different priestly garments served as an atonement for different transgressions, a number of which stem from bad character traits. This theme is elaborated upon by the Malbim in his commentary to this parsha. Rabbi Ephraim of Lunshitz, the author of the commentary Keli Yakar, pointed out in his first work, Ir Gibborim, that the core problem underlying all character flaws and the root of all these flaws is arrogance. Moshe and Aharon, in their roles as the teachers of Torah to the Jewish people, represented the opposite of arrogance. Each had his separate strength, and yet the two worked together in order to present the nation with the full spectrum of the Torah's content. Anyone familiar with the history of yeshivos, the schools of higher Jewish learning, knows that it is rare for yeshiva heads with different orientations in their learning to avoid conflict at all times. In some cases, one of the rabbis leaves and forms his own separate yeshiva. The fact that Moshe and Aharon were able to work together as well as they did was therefore noteworthy. (Interestingly, the Netziv himself was an involved party in a difference of opinion over the issue of who would succeed to the leadership of the famed Volozhin yeshiva. The other candidate was Rabbi Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveichik, known as the Beis HaLevi. These two figures had radically different approaches to learning, and different students favored one or the other as rosh yeshiva. In the end, the Netziv was given the position. Still, the two rabbis shared the function of delivering the main Talmud lecture in the yeshiva, each one teaching three of the six weekdays. It is interesting to speculate whether this experience was on the Netziv's mind when he wrote of the different learning strengths of Moshe and Aharon). Learning from both mentors, the nation could, through the Torah it learned, serve its function of illuminating the world, as a light to the nations. The living example of these two brothers working together in this way served as the best example of good character traits, and therefore is a fitting introduction to the section on the priestly garments, whose underlying theme is the development of such traits.

Note-Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) to JoshHoff @ AOL.com.
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