**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**From Slavery to Redemption**

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**Shiur #25: Aaron’s Genealogy**

The unit we have been examining (6:2–7:7) centers on the objectives of Israel’s liberation. It unfolds initially as a dialogue between God and Moses, aiming to prepare Moses for the dual task of rallying Israel and confronting Pharaoh. In response to Moses’ reluctance, God subtly integrates Aaron into the narrative, addressing both Moses and Aaron in verse 13. From this moment on, Aaron takes on a central role in the unfolding drama.

To grasp Aaron’s role in the story, we must first explore the broader structure of this narrative unit, which unfolds in a chiastic pattern:

**A**. God outlines His plan to Moses, declaring that Israel will be freed from Egypt through mighty judgments. (6:2-9)

**B**. Dialogue between God and Moses: Moses’ uncircumcised lips (6:10-12)

**C**. God’s command to Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh (6:13)

**D**. Genealogy (6:14-25)

**C**. God’s command to Moses and Aaron to go to Pharaoh (6:26-28)

**B**. Dialogue between God and Moses: Moses’ uncircumcised lips (6:29-30)

**A**. God outlines His plan to Moses, declaring that Israel will be freed from Egypt through mighty judgments. (7:1-7)

At the heart of this section lies a genealogy, around which the entire narrative revolves. But what does a genealogical list have to do with the theme of liberation from slavery and oppression? Plunked down in the middle of God’s discussion with Moses, the narrative seems to veer off briefly in an unexpected direction, tracing the lineage of Jacob’s descendants. Yet after this apparent detour, the text circles back to the original dialogue, where Moses has a nearly identical conversation with God, citing his uncircumcised lips as grounds to refuse the divine mission. The placement of the genealogy feels abrupt, almost as if it has been artificially wedged into the story.

The peculiarity of this genealogy is compounded by its abbreviated content. It begins with the descendants of Jacob’s two eldest – Reuben and Simeon, but rather than presenting a full lineage of Jacob’s sons,[[1]](#footnote-1) the list comes to an abrupt halt after delineating the family line of Levi, the third son.[[2]](#footnote-2) The focus then narrows exclusively to Levi’s line, tracing it through five consecutive generations. The genealogy ends without mentioning the remaining sons of Jacob, suggesting that its purpose is fulfilled with the listing of Levi’s family and leaving the rest of the tribal lineage conspicuously absent.

What is the purpose of this genealogy? Abravanel suggests that it reflects a search for leadership – Reuben and Simeon are both passed over, while the third tribe, Levi, is deemed suitable for the role.[[3]](#footnote-3) Alternatively, the genealogy may serve to bolster Moses’ confidence, affirming that his noble Levite lineage makes him worthy of God’s mission.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rashi and Ibn Ezra explain that the primary function of the genealogy here is to establish the pedigree of both Moses and Aaron, who are presented as the chosen leaders in *Shemot* 6:13.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is reinforced by the literary frame of the verses that immediately follow the genealogy:

**This is Aaron and Moses** to whom God said, “Take the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt according to their hosts. They are the ones who speak to Pharaoh the king of Egypt to bring the children of Israel out from the land of Egypt. **This is Aaron and Moses.** (*Shemot* 6:26-27)

These verses indicate that the genealogy aims to present the lineage of Moses and Aaron in order to affirm their status as the divinely appointed leaders.

**Genealogy of Levi: Aaron’s Line**

The genealogy provides a detailed account of the tribe of Levi, listing Levi’s three sons – Gershon, Kehat, and Merari – along with Levi’s age at his death. Unlike Reuben and Simeon, whose lineages stop at the second generation, Levi’s family list names each of his grandsons. The passage draws particular attention to Kehat’s branch of the family by recording his age at death (verse18), a detail omitted for Gershon and Merari. Among Kehat’s four sons – Amram, Yitzhar, Hevron, and Uziel – three have named children, forming the genealogy’s fourth generation.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The passage make it quite clear that its primary focus in the third generation is Amram. Like Kehat, Amram is the only one of his generation whose age at death is recorded (verse 20). He is also the first in this genealogy whose wife in mentioned; she is both named (Yocheved, notably the first theophoric name in Tanakh to contain an element of the Tetragrammaton) and identified as his aunt.[[7]](#footnote-7) Their sons, Moses and Aaron, are listed as the fourth generation, reinforcing the genealogy’s ultimate purpose: establishing their lineage and leadership.

As the genealogy narrows its focus, it appears headed toward Moses, illustrating for Israel and for Pharaoh (and perhaps for Moses himself, as noted above) the illustrious lineage of the destined Israelite savior. Unexpectedly, it then swerves away from Moses, highlighting Aaron instead. In this genealogy, only two figures from the fourth generation – Aaron, son of Amram, and Korah, son of Yitzhar – are listed with descendants in the fifth generation.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moses’ sons are conspicuously absent.

Like his father’s, Aaron’s marriage is given special attention. His wife, Elisheva, is not only named but also identified by her lineage (daughter of Aminadav) and family connections (sister of Nachshon). Similarly, Aaron’s son Elazar’s marriage is noted, though his wife remains unnamed, referred to only as a daughter of Putiel. Remarkably, the account of Aaron’s lineage extends to the sixth generation, reinforcing the enduring prominence of Aaron’s line. Pinchas, the son of Elazar, stands out as the sole representative of this sixth generation.

Surprisingly, Moses does not figure prominently in this genealogy and lacks any mention of genealogical continuity. Instead, the focus is squarely on Aaron’s lineage, while Moses’ line fades from view. Netziv (6:14) explains that Moses requires no further introduction at this stage. His initial portrayal in *Shemot* 2 was sufficient, emphasizing his character over his lineage and highlighting the qualities that define his leadership. In contrast, this genealogy spotlights Aaron, allowing his distinguished lineage to take center stage in preparation for his emerging leadership role.

To understand the reason for this intense focus on Aaron, we must consider the narrative’s flow. It appears that the genealogy (verses 14-25) serves as God’s response to Moses’ question in verse 12: “Behold, the children of Israel did not heed me; how then will Pharaoh heed me?” In verse 13, without explanation, God includes Aaron alongside Moses, commanding them both to confront Pharaoh. God’s solution to Moses’ self-doubt is to provide him with Aaron as a partner in his mission.[[9]](#footnote-9) Ostensibly, this arrangement is meant to strengthen Moses, offering a practical response to his hesitations.

One wonders, however, if in discounting Moses’ descendants, the genealogy actually serves as a form of critique or even punishment. Just as some *midrashim* regard God’s earlier mention of appointing Aaron alongside Moses as a punitive measure, here we find a similar approach:

At first, God’s speech was meant to be exclusively for [Moses], but because he said (4:13), “Send whomever You will send,” [God] said to him (4:14), “Is not your brother Aaron a Levite?” **Here too** [Moses says] (6:12): “Behold, Israel did not listen to me.” Originally, he was worthy to have performed all the miracles on his own, but because of this, [divine] speech came upon him **and** upon Aaron, as it says (6:13): “And God spoke to Moses and to Aaron.” (*Shemot* *Rabba* 7:1)

This interpretation suggests that Moses’ hesitation cost him exclusive leadership, a consequence reflected both in the fact of his partnership with Aaron and in the genealogy’s pointed emphasis on Aaron’s lineage.

Moses could have – perhaps should have – led alone. His partnership with Aaron dilutes his singular leadership. Some *midrashim* suggest that had Moses fully embraced his role, he would have been granted the priesthood, securing dynastic spiritual leadership for his descendants.[[10]](#footnote-10) Ultimately, Aaron’s presence may even hinder Moses’ effectiveness. Notably, Aaron plays a central role in two of Moses’ greatest setbacks – the sin of the Golden Calf and the incident at Mei Meriva (*Bamidbar* 20:7–13), the latter of which sealed Moses’ fate and barring him from entering the Promised Land.

One final possibility deserves consideration: Moses’ children may be absent from this genealogy because his leadership was never meant to be dynastic. His role was singular – essential for his generation but neither replicable nor necessary for future ones. Moreover, passing on Moses’ leadership could easily lead to a tyrannical or autocratic rule. The deep reverence accorded Moses might have been dangerous if transferred to a less-worthy descendant. This omission in the genealogy subtly reinforces that his role would not extend beyond him. In contrast, Aaron’s priesthood was designed as a hereditary institution – transmitted steadily from father to son – a continuity reflected in the genealogy’s inclusion of his children and grandson.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**A Dialogue Resumed**

And God spoke to Moses, saying: “I am the Lord. Speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, all that I speak to you.” And Moses said before God, “Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips; how will Pharaoh heed me?” (*Shemot* 6:29-30)

Following the genealogy (6:14-25), the narrative appears to reiterate the earlier exchange between God and Moses in 6:10-12, where Moses said: “Behold, the children of Israel did not listen to me, and how will Pharaoh listen to me? And I am uncircumcised of lips.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Reiterating their prior dialogue accentuates a sense that the genealogy is intentionally disruptive.[[13]](#footnote-13) Rashi and Ibn Ezra (as well as others) adopt this approach, explaining, as we saw above, that the genealogy interrupts the liberation story in order to establish the pedigree of Moses and Aaron, underscoring their legitimacy and divine endorsement.

Alternatively, verses 29-30 may not simply resume the previous narrative, but instead continue the ongoing dialogue between Moses and God. Moses repeats his refusal nearly verbatim, illustrating his refusal to back down and conveying his unwavering conviction that he is unfit for the task regardless of lineage or his partnership with Aaron.[[14]](#footnote-14) This could also explain the narrative’s next development, where God explicitly appoints Aaron as Moses’ spokesman (7:1–2). This appointment may serve as a solution to Moses’ persistent self-doubt, a punitive consequence of his resistance, or perhaps a combination of both.

Nachmanides (on 6:13) explains that Moses' repetition of his concerns is not due to obstinacy but rather a misunderstanding of God's instructions in 6:29: “And God spoke to Moses saying, ‘I am the Lord. Speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, all that I speak to you.’” Following the genealogy, Moses assumed that Aaron would serve as the primary spokesman before Pharaoh. However, in 6:29, God appears to contradict this, commanding Moses to convey His words directly to Pharaoh without any mention of Aaron. This prompts Moses’ renewed objection: he once again raises the matter of his *“*uncircumcised lips*.”* In the next verses (7:1–2), God will clarify the precise dynamic between Moses and Aaron, explicitly defining their respective roles.

Possibly, however, the placement of the genealogy marks a turning point for Moses, subtly shifting his self-perception and understanding of his role. By paying careful attention to a slight difference between his two dialogues with God, we can detect a quiet transformation in him following the genealogy.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The key distinction is that while Moses still believes Pharaoh will not heed him, he no longer cites Israel’s refusal to listen as supporting evidence. This suggests that he no longer views himself as separate from the nation. The genealogical list, which situates him within an illustrious lineage, has integrated him into the collective identity of Israel. This shift does not eliminate his reservations – he still requires Aaron at his side – but it signals an important change. Moses, who has grappled with his identity since birth, has now, almost inadvertently, found his place within the people. With this newfound connection, Moses is finally positioned to be an effective advocate for Israel.

1. Opening with the sons of Reuben, the genealogy does not link back to Jacob; instead, the generation of Jacob’s sons is its starting point. In this way, the narrative shifts its attention from the Patriarchs of past history to the next generations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rashi cites a *midrash* explaining that since Jacob rebuked his three eldest sons on his deathbed (*Bereishit* 49:3–7), their lineage is recorded here to emphasize that, despite the reprimand, their legacy and role within the tribes of Israel are not diminished. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 4:15 also interprets the genealogy as related to leadership but offers an alternative explanation for its abbreviated list. According to this *midrash*, the text highlights that these three tribes – Reuben, Simeon, and Levi – held leadership roles among the brothers in Egypt. Unlike the expected succession, Levi did not pass leadership to Judah but instead to his own descendants. The *midrash* recounts: "Reuben died, and leadership was given to Simeon. Simeon died, and leadership was given to Levi. When Levi died, they sought to grant leadership to Judah. A heavenly voice proclaimed, ‘Leave [Judah] until the time is ripe.’ And when does the time become ripe? After the death of Joshua.” The suggestion that Judah’s leadership was divinely postponed reinforces the unique role of Levi’s lineage in this period. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Moses may have been especially concerned with his lineage, as he was raised in the Egyptian palace and spent many years in Midian, detached from his people. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Greenberg (*Shemot*, p. 143) suggests that the text seeks to establish Moses and Aaron’s pedigree specifically before their pivotal encounter with Pharaoh, reinforcing their legitimacy and authority as leaders of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Only Hevron’s children are not named. Rashbam rejects the possibility that Hevron did not have children, citing *Bamidbar* 26:58 as evidence. Instead, he explains that Hevron’s descendants play no role in later narratives, unlike his brothers’ descendants. Ibn Ezra (6:22) advances a similar explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Sanhedrin* 58b grapples with the difficulty of Amram marrying his aunt, a union later explicitly prohibited (*Vayikra* 18:12–13). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This offers a new perspective on Korach’s later rebellion, suggesting that it may have been fueled by expectations surrounding him from birth. However, the list of his line extends only one more generation (to the fifth), whereas Aaron’s continues even further, reaching a sixth generation – hinting at the enduring legitimacy of Aaron’s leadership over Korach’s aspirations. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is, of course identical to the solution that God offers to Moses’ hesitation at the burning bush (4:14-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Zevachim* 102a; *Vayikra* *Rabba* 11:6. Alternatively, *Shemot Rabba* 2:7 (also cited in an earlier *shiur*) suggests that God's first words to Moses – “Do not draw near” (*Shemot* 3:5) – imply that he would never receive the priesthood or kingship. This interpretation indicates that Moses did not forfeit the priesthood due to his actions; rather, dynastic leadership was never intended for him from the outset. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A similar phenomenon appears in *Bamidbar* 3:1–4, where the text introduces the lineage *(toldot)* of both Aaron and Moses but proceeds to list only Aaron’s children, omitting Moses’ descendants entirely. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. God’s opening words (“I am the Lord”) may be a synopsis of His speech in 6:2-8, where that introduction appears four times. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This technique of interruption and reiteration demonstrates that the narrative deliberately disrupts a seamless progression. A similar example appears in the depiction of Joseph’s sale to Potiphar at the end of *Bereishit* 37: rather than continuing Joseph’s story, *Bereishit* 38 shifts focus to the account of Judah and Tamar, creating a narrative break. The Joseph story then resumes in *Bereishit* 39:1 with a verse that essentially repeats *Bereishit* 37:36, reinforcing the intentional interruption. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is similar to Elijah’s encounter with God on Mount Horeb (*I Melakhim* 19:9–14), where God challenges him: Why is he here, on a remote desert mountain, instead of fulfilling his prophetic mission among the people? Elijah responds harshly that he alone remains zealous for God, while Israel has abandoned the covenant, destroyed God’s altars, and killed His prophets. In response, God grants Elijah a theophany, seemingly intended to temper the prophet’s severity. Yet, after this profound experience, God repeats the question and Elijah, unwavering, repeats his answer verbatim. It thus becomes clear that Elijah will remain Elijah and will not temper his strict sense of justice toward the children of Israel. Seeing this, God instructs Elijah to anoint Elisha as his successor. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rabbi Yair Kahn notes several differences between the two dialogues and uses them to build a compelling theory regarding Moses’ two separate roles, as both a political and a religious leader. See https://torah.etzion.org.il/en/kings-and-prophets. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)