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The Death of Aaron

20: 22-29

The death of Aaron DIG: What problem might Aaron's death cause for Isra'el? Why do you think God kept all three siblings from entering the Land? Why was he singled out with his brother Moses? How would Eleazar's presence lessen the impact of Aaron's death? How would Eleazar help both Moses and Joshua?

REFLECT: What turning point does Chapter 20 signal in Isra'el's wilderness wanderings? What tearful "passing of the old guard" have you witnessed at work, home, school, or the congregations of God. What new thing emerged from that transition? Who are you mentoring to take over your ministry if needed?

With Aaron's death, the judgment of the Exodus Generation would soon be over; and the promise of the Wilderness Generation would soon be realized.

On **the first day of the fifth month, Aaron died**. The Torah tells us that **his death** was at the command of YHVH. Wearing **the high priestly garments, Aaron ascended Mount Hor with Moses his brother and Eleazar his son**. Moshe removed **the priestly garments** from him and placed them on Eleazar. Then Aaron died. At ADONAI's order Aaron the priest went up on Mount Hor, and he died there on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the people of Isra'el had left the land of Egypt. Aaron was 123 years old when he died on Mount Hor (Numbers 33:38-39).⁴⁰⁴

At last **the people** were on the move north and east from **their** long stay **in the wilderness** near the oasis of **Kadesh-barnea; and the people of Isra'el, the whole community, arrived at Mount Hor. There, by the border of the land of Edom, ADONAI said to Moshe and Aaron, "Aaron is about to be gathered to his people."** This is the usual phrase to describe **the death** of a righteous man in a ripe old age. It is used by Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses (Genesis 25:8 and 17, 35:29, 49:33, Numbers 31:2). The reason for **his death** was because he was **not to enter the Land** that ADONAI had given to the people of Isra'el, inasmuch as he rebelled against what God said at the Meribah Spring (**to see link click Dd - The Sin of Moses and Aaron**). Yet, the grace of YHVH is still apparent here. The language is merciful, not vindictive. The interests of both

Moses and Aaron in the transfer of authority were also the interests of **God**. Even in **the death** of **His servant**, **the LORD** showed **His** continuing grace. **Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, bring them up to Mount Hor, remove the garments from Aaron and put them on Eleazar his son. Aaron will be gathered to his people - he will die there.**" The command of **Ha'Shem** was carried out. **Moshe did as ADONAI had ordered. They went up onto Mount Hor before the eyes of the whole community (20:22-27).** Before **Aaron died**, he was to see that **his son Eleazar** became **his** successor. This must have been a great comfort to **him**.⁴⁰⁵



However, **Aaron's death** would not interrupt the ministry of **the priesthood**. In a dramatic symbol of this transfer of power and authority, **Moshe removed the garments from Aaron**, the signs of **his** divine office, **and put them on Eleazar, his son**. As John Wesley used to say, "**God buries His workmen but His work goes on.**" We find, also, that **Elijah** threw **his garment** over **Elisha**, when, in obedience to **Divine** command, **God** called **him** to **the prophet's** work (see the commentary on **Elijah and Elisha Au - A New Companion Named Elisha**).⁴⁰⁶ **And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain.** This **mountaintop** scene was the somber outcome of **Aaron's** rebellion against **God's** command **at the waters of Meribah**. The public shame that **Aaron** experienced at the end of **his** life mirrored the shame of **Miryam**, who was banished from the camp for seven days because of **her** rebellion against **Moses**.⁴⁰⁷ The assumption was that **Aaron** was buried there by **his** **brother** and **his son**. When **Moshe** and **Eleazar** returned to the camp without **Aaron**, and **the people** saw **Eleazar** dressed in the robes of **the high priest**, **the entire community** knew **that Aaron was dead (20:29a)**.

The late midrashic collection **Yalkut Shimoni** tells a beautiful story of the death of **Aaron**. At the beginning, **Moses** is uncertain of how to best break the news to **Aaron**. He decides to raise the subject over Torah study. They took the book of **Genesis** and read from it. **Moses** said, "What shall I say about Adam, who brought death to the world?" "Moses, my brother, replied **Aaron**, "Shall we not accept God's decree in this matter?" **Moshe** replied, "And I, who ruled over the ministering angels, and you, who stopped the Angel of Death - will we not end thus?" As soon as **Moses** reminded his brother of the day of death, **Aaron's** bones felt weak. "Is this matter meant for me?" he asked. "Yes," replied **Moses**. Subsequently, all **Isra'el** saw that he was diminished in size. **Moshe** said to him, "Do you accept death?" "Yes," answered **Aaron**. "Then let us ascend to **Mount Hor**," said **Moshe**. When they ascended, a cave opened for them, where they found a bier [a moveable frame on which a corpse is placed before burial], which was the work of Heaven. **Aaron** took off one garment at a time, which **Eleazar** put on, then a fog enveloped **Aaron**. Immediately, the Divine Presence descended and kissed him. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to **Moses**, "Depart from here." When they left the cave was hidden. And **Moshe** and **Eleazar** descended (**Yalkut Shimoni, Matot 787**).⁴⁰⁸

Eleazar was the third son of **Aaron**, the first two, **Nadab** and **Abihu**, were slain by **Ha'Shem** for defiling the **Tabernacle** with strange fire (see the commentary on **Leviticus Bh - The Death of Nadab and Abihu**). Before becoming high priest, he was the chief leader of the **Levites** caring for the **Tabernacle** (**3:32** and **4:16**). He would assist **Moses** in taking the census of the new generation (**26:1-3**) as well as in commissioning **Joshua** to succeed **Moses** (**27:18-23**). When **Isra'el** had conquered the **Promised Land**, **Eleazar** helped **Joshua** assign each tribe its inheritance (**Numbers 34:17; Joshua 14:1** and **19:51**).⁴⁰⁹

From the top of **Mount Hor**, **Aaron** could look and see the **Land** to the northwest; this was as close as he would get to the **Promised Land**. Later, **Moses** would have a view of the **Land** from another mountain; and like his brother, he, too, would see the **Promised Land** only from a distance. Both brothers are associated with mountains at their deaths. Their sister, **Miryam**, was buried near the oasis of **Kadesh-barnea**.⁴¹⁰

Then **Moshe** and **Eleazar** came down the mountain and the whole house of **Isra'el** mourned for **Aaron** thirty days (**20:28-29b**). So, this chapter that began with the death of **Miryam**, ends with the death of **Aaron**. In Jewish tradition, the first seven days after mourning are the most intense days of mourning, but a person mourning is considered a mourner for thirty days. In Jewish tradition, the person does not cut

his or her hair during the thirty days, attend a wedding, festive event or place of entertainment, or begin a journey.⁴¹¹ Of the original three children of **Amram and Jochebed** (see the commentary on **Exodus Ak - A Man of the House of Levi Married a Levite Woman**), only **Moses** remained . . . but **his** time was short. This was merely a rehearsal in preparation for **his** own climb up another **mountain** and **his death** outside **the Promised Land** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Gj - The Death of Moses**).

*Dear Heavenly Father, Praise **You** that I do not need to fear **death**, for **You** have conquered it by **Your** resurrection. **Death** can be thought of as a door opener into a beautiful land! **Death** is how **You** bring me to live with **You** in **Your** eternal home of peace. There is such comfort in living with our eyes on pleasing **You** for all eternity. This world, no matter how good it may be at certain times, cannot compare with the fantastic joy and eternal pleasure of living with **You** in **Your** perfect heaven! Even retirement in this world will still be full of problems and body aches, but in heaven there will never be any aches nor pain. **Behold, the dwelling of God is among men, and He shall tabernacle among them. They shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them and be their God. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:3b-4).***

*Heaven will be so wonderful and it will never end! The words to the song of praise to you are so beautiful and true. "When we've been there 10,000 years, we've No less days to sing your praise!" **Death** can be thought of as a type of entrance gate leading to an eternal party of joy and peace. I seek to live focused on preparing gifts of love for **You** now while we live on earth for **Your** gift of heaven is so great that I desire to say thanks to **You** with my thoughts, my money, my finances and with all I have. Though often there is suffering now for being your follower, the suffering will soon be over and heaven's glory awaits! **For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).** Living for eternity is a very wise idea! In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*