



Supporting the Prophet's Lone Stand Against Confrontation

Moshe's staff is used in several settings. And, of course, Aaron is given the role of speaking and performing in Moshe's stead, so it's also called the "staff of Aaron." This staff also represents the "tribe" (which is designated by the same term for "staff") of Levi, led by both Moshe as Levite and Aaron as Priest. It's also called "the staff of God."

In God's first instructions (Ex.4:2), the staff is to be used to "convince" his own brethren to "believe" in Moshe's mission. Conventionally we are taught that the main purpose of the staff was to threaten the **Egyptians** into belief in God's power, or at least to show the Israelites that God could and would **threaten the Egyptians**, but the text first mentions the staff as a means of putting the "fear of God" **in Israel**, through the "threat" of the staff, which would "convince" them to join the ranks of the slave revolt. Only the first of the three "signs," turning the staff into a snake and then back into a staff, actually involves taking the staff in-hand. The second "sign" involves putting one's hand in his bosom (inside his clothing and touching his chest), then taking it out and finding it infected with leprosy. Then the leprous hand is put back into his bosom and taken out once more, thereby curing the leprosy. God tells Moshe that should his people not be "convinced" (i.e., scared to death) by the "snake" sign, they will be "convinced" by the second, the "leprosy" disease and its healing. But should Israel still not be terrified enough, Nile waters should be taken and spilled out onto the dry land, whereby the waters will turn into blood. Now all such wonders are signs of God's power, which does demonstrate that God can defeat Egypt. But in doing them **before Israel first**, these signs share this element of a chilling, blood-curdling threat **to Israel**: the snake, the leprosy infection, and the blood of death in place of lifegiving water. In the first two instances the threat is removed and reversed. Moshe is to give Israel three chances to "believe or else!" Hopefully the people will follow God at the first "hint" that evil would befall those who fail to join Moshe's slave revolt. If they joined the cause post haste, evil would be turned back, before it bit them. If this creepy, hideous snake, conjured out of a lifeless rod and then miraculously turned back just in time, didn't put enough fear of God in them, the second not-so-subtle "hint" escalates the threat. The second "sign" involves being directly affected by evil, part of the body becoming actually sickened. Moshe puts his healthy hand into his bosom, and it emerges with a ghastly, putrid infection coming out of nowhere, turning the skin as white as a ghost. Yet this horrid sickness is only partial, affecting the hand. And this grim plague too can be suddenly and just as eerily cleared up and turned back, if Israel "takes the hint," fearing God and following Moshe. The third "sign," however, is non-reversible, although here too it is but partial, only affecting the water spilled out onto the land, not the entire water supply. But it is ominous in its non-reversibility, and categorical in changing lifegiving water into bloody death.

Further on, in 4:20-21, Moshe is charged with performing before Pharaoh the "wonders" which God has "placed in his hand" by means of the "staff of God" (which could also be understood as the staff of judgment, retribution, or punishment). Moshe is instructed to threaten Pharaoh directly, saying in God's name that: "If Pharaoh will not free my firstborn son (Israel), I will kill his firstborn son." God tells Moshe in advance that He will harden Pharaoh's heart, and that many such similar attempts to scare Pharaoh into submission will fail, up until God Himself finally and summarily deals the death blow to the power of Pharaoh and his forces. Then Moshe meets Aaron, shows him the signs, and Aaron performs them for the people, gaining Israel's following and adherence. The two of them then confront Pharaoh together, continuing on in the next Parasha to perform a very different version of the signs.

We can better understand Moshe's hesitation in assuming God's charge against this background. His protestations are not per se about being a good speaker, nor do they stem from humility or reticence to assert power. Rather he is daunted by knowing that he will have to stand alone to face confrontation upon confrontation. Moshe realizes he will have to stand against Pharaoh and threaten him unsuccessfully time and time again. And Moshe will first have to strike fear in the heart of his own people and terrorize them to follow, dauntlessly facing treachery, mutiny and rebellion. Moses knows only too well from his having gone into hiding after having been snatched on by his fellow Israelites that the people will have to be tyrannized and browbeaten into following his leadership. The Sephardic haftarah for this Parashah is the beginning of Jeremiah, which reinforces the message that a prophet must stand alone, against the people's enemies and even more so against his own people, as Jeremiah was most famous for having done. Moshe doubts whether he has the temerity and endurance to persevere through such a level of confrontation. Moshe, after all, is later the one who wished that all Israel could become prophets, and yet practically and politically here Moshe must be intrepid, "harden his face as a flint" and not flinch from becoming a tyrant himself. Why Aaron might help in facing such confrontation is not clear. Aaron is perhaps more removed from God's direct orders. Aaron is more even-tempered, has been around his people more, and hence knows how to be more politic and less of a "loner." He is doubtless more connected to the tribal leadership, particularly the tribe of Levi. He may be better suited to keeping the people's trust. Aaron's happiness to see Moshe and welcome him back into the tribe will offer Moshe critical and loyal familial support. We could say that using this "staff" will give Moshe support. That support will mean that Moshe need not face these confrontations completely alone.

Shabbat Shemoth

January 17-18, 2025 | 18 Tebet, 5785

SCHEDULE

Hertz: p. 206 | Haftarah: p. 229 / Kaplan: p. 258 | Haftarah: p. 1212

Candle Lighting | 4:38 pm

Evening Services | 4:45 pm | Main Sanctuary

Friday Night Lights | Rabbi Soloveichik | following services | *5785 Season sponsored by the Julis Romo Rabinowitz family*

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

Tot Shabbat | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Youth Groups & Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Rabbi Soloveichik's Special Morning Shiur | following services | Main Sanctuary

Kiddush Luncheon | following the shiur | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by the Solomon family, in honor of the aufruf of Yosef Solomon*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 3:50 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 3:50 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman | **Fidanque Room**

Evening Services | 4:35 pm

Habdala | 5:25 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday & Monday (MLK Day): 8:05 am

Tuesday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday (Minha & Arbit): 4:45 pm

Monday-Thursday (Arbit only): 6:30 pm

*Our offices will be **closed** on Monday for the legal holiday.*

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Community Shabbat Shira Dinner: Magevet Returns!

Yale's premier Jewish a capella group

Friday Night, Shabbat Shira, February 7

Following Friday Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

Following our Friday evening services – always musically exquisite – registered guests will enjoy a festive Shabbat dinner enhanced by a musical performance by Magevet, Yale University's Jewish a capella group. A co-ed ensemble, comprised of talented undergraduate students at Yale University, Magevet is known for its sweet blend of voices, unique arrangements, and lighthearted sense of humor, and is one of the nation's premiere Jewish a capella singing groups.

(Virtual) Sunday Matinee with Sisterhood

All proceeds will be donated to help families of Israeli soldiers

FINAL FILM DISCUSSION:

Sunday, January 26 | 4:00 pm | Walk on Water (2004)

A link is sent to registrants to watch the film a week before the appointed date, together with a second link to join the Sunday discussion on Zoom.

Tu B'Shebat Seder

“Letters in Bloom: Isaac Luria and the First Tu B'Shebat Seder”

Wednesday, February 12 | 7:00 pm | with Baruch-Lev Kelman

After last year's successful Seder, gourmand Baruch-Lev will again lead this tasty banquet of fruity delights native to the land of Israel. Join for a night of flavors, mysteries, and histories!

Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner

Friday Night, January 31

For ages 21-35 | Early Bird Pricing through January 23

Following Evening Services & Friday Night Lights

YP Twofer Pricing: Register for BOTH this dinner and the February 7

Community Shabbat Dinner with Magevet, and get a special discount!

Stitch & Fix

Presented by the Sisterhood

Alternating Wednesdays in the Fidanque Room

Upcoming Sessions: January 29, February 12 & 26

RSVP to Rose Edinger at rgedinger@gmail.com.

COMING UP

Sign up at shearithisrael.org

Parent-Child Learning

Next session: Motzei Shabbat, February 8 | 7:00 pm

Led by Dr. Pesha Kletenik, Head of School, MDS

Final Session:

March 8 | 7:30 pm | Ellin Cooper, Yoetzet Halakha

HESED OPPORTUNITIES

LA Wildfire Relief

Our hearts are with those who have been devastated by the wildfires in Los Angeles, CA. To show our support as a community, Shearith Israel is collecting donations through the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund that will be given directly to the Jewish Federation Los Angeles' Wildfire Relief Fund.

To contribute, visit shearithisrael.org/rdf and select “JFLA Wildfire Relief Fund.”

UWS Young Professionals in their 20s & 30s

Volunteer for Masbia Soup Kitchen

while enjoying a night of sushi and wine!

Thursday, January 23 | 7:00 pm

At West Side Institutional Synagogue (120 W 76th St)

Register at <https://bit.ly/400SNUu>

DOROT Winter Package Delivery

Sunday, January 26

Warm the hearts of older adult neighbors by delivering a package of seasonal treats and enjoying a friendly visit or call.

For more information, visit dorotusa.org/packagedelivery.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to Yosef Solomon, upon his upcoming marriage to Leah Harris. Congratulations as well to parents Beth Goldman & Louis Solomon (Parnas) and the entire Solomon family. The family invites the entire Congregation to a festive kiddush luncheon following morning services and Rabbi Soloveichik's special Morning Shiur.