

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Korach rebellion was the single most dangerous challenge to Moses' leadership during the forty years that he led the people through the wilderness. The precise outline of events is difficult to follow, probably because the events themselves were tumultuous and disorderly. The narrative makes it clear, however, that the rebels came from different groups, each of whom had different reasons for resentment: Now Korach, son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth – descendants of Reuben – to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above the Lord's congregation?" (Num. 16:1-3)

Disentangling the various factions, Rashi suggests that Korach, prime mover of the uprising, was aggrieved that Moses had appointed Aaron as High Priest. Moses was the child of Amram, Kohath's eldest son. Korach was the firstborn of Kohath's second son, Yizhar, and felt that he should have been made High Priest. The fact that Moses had appointed his own brother to the role struck Korach as unacceptable favoritism.

The Reubenites, suggests Ibn Ezra, felt that as descendants of Jacob's firstborn, they were entitled to leadership positions. Ibn Ezra adds that the final straw may have been Moses' appointment of Joshua as his successor. Joshua came from the tribe of Ephraim, the son of Joseph. This may have revived memories of the old conflict between the children of Leah (of whom Reuben was the firstborn) and those of Rachel, whose first child was Joseph.

The 250 other rebels, Ibn Ezra conjectures, were firstborns, still unreconciled to the fact that after the sin of the golden calf, the role of special service to God passed from the firstborn to the tribe of Levi.

Each faction had grounds for feeling that they had been passed over in the allocation of leadership positions. The irony of their challenge is unmistakable. They pose as democrats, egalitarians: "All the community are holy, all of them . . . Why then do you

raise yourself above the Lord's congregation?" What they say is that everyone should be a leader. What they mean is: I should be a leader.

As for the timing of the revolt, Ramban is surely right in dating it to the period immediately following the debacle of the spies, and the ensuing decree that the people would not enter the land until the next generation. As long as the Israelites, despite their complaints, felt that they were moving toward their destination, Korach and the other malcontents had no realistic chance of rousing the people in revolt. Once they realised that they would not live to cross the Jordan, Korach knew that rebellion was possible. The people were disillusioned, and they had nothing to lose.

Thus far, the story of Korach is intensely realistic. A leader is able to mobilise a people by articulating a vision. But the journey from the real to the ideal, from starting point to destination, is fraught with setbacks and disappointments. That is when leaders are in danger of being deposed or assassinated. Korach is the eternal symbol of a perennial type: the coldly calculating man of ambition who foments discontent against a leader, accusing him of being a self-seeking tyrant. He opposes him in the name of freedom, but what he really wants is to become a tyrant himself.

What is exceptionally unusual is how the story ends. Moses had initially proposed a simple test. The rebels, and Aaron, were to prepare incense the next day. God would then signal whose offering He chose. Before this could happen, however, Moses found himself unbearably provoked by the contemptuous attitude of Dathan and Abiram. Sensing that the situation might be getting out of control, he sought an immediate and dramatic resolution:

Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the Lord who sent me. But if the Lord brings about something unheard of, so that the ground opens its



Take Control of
YOUR MONEY!
tinyurl.com/ffitness5

...probably the best personal
finance training course I've seen! - CPA

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL
AND THE WEB AT WWW.AISHDAS.ORG/TA.
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

The material presented in this publication was collected from email subscriptions, computer archives and various websites. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any synagogue or organization.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
(973) 277-9062 OR EMAIL YITZW1@GMAIL.COM**

mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord.” (Num. 16:28-30)

No sooner had he finished speaking, than the ground opened up and swallowed the rebels. The miracle Moses had counted on, happened. By any narrative convention we would expect that this would end the rebellion and vindicate Moses. Heaven had answered his call in the most dramatic way. He had been proved right. End of revolt. End of story.

This is precisely what does not happen – a powerful example of what makes the Torah so challenging, its message so unexpected. Instead of quelling the revolt, we read the following: The next day, the whole Israelites community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. “You have killed the Lord’s people,” they said.

This time, it is God himself who intervenes. He tells Moses to take twelve staffs, one for each tribe, and deposit them overnight in the Tent of Meeting. The next morning, the staff bearing the name of Aaron and the tribe of Levi had sprouted, budded, blossomed and borne almonds. Only then did the rebellion end.

This is an astonishing denouement – and what it tells us is profound. The use of force never ends a conflict. It merely adds grievance to injury. Even the miracle of the ground opening up and swallowing his opponents did not secure for Moses the vindication he sought.

What ended the conflict was something else altogether: the visible symbol that Aaron was the chosen vehicle of the God of life. The gentle miracle of the dead wood that came to life again, flowering and bearing fruit, anticipates the famous words of the book of Proverbs about the Torah: It is a tree of life to those who embrace her; Those who lay hold of her will be blessed. (Proverbs 3:18)

Moses and Aaron stood accused of failing in their mission. They had brought the people out of Egypt to bring them to the land of Israel. After the debacle of the spies, that hope had died. The stick that came to life again (like Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones) symbolised that hope was not dead, merely deferred. The next generation would live and reach the

destination. God is a God of life. What He touches does not die.

The episode of Korach teaches us that there are two ways of resolving conflict: by force and by persuasion. The first negates your opponent. The second enlists your opponent, taking his / her challenge seriously and addressing it. Force never ends conflict – not even in the case of Moses, not even when the force is miraculous. There never was a more decisive intervention than the miracle that swallowed up Korach and his fellow rebels. Yet it did not end the conflict. It deepened it. After it had taken place, the whole Israelite community – the ones that had not been part of the rebellion – complained, “You have killed the Lord’s people.” What ended it was the quiet, gentle miracle that showed that Aaron was the true emissary of the God of life. Not by accident is the verse that calls Torah a “tree of life” preceded by these words: Its ways are ways of pleasantness, And all its paths are peace. (Prov. 3:17)

That is conflict resolution in Judaism – not by force, but by pleasantness and peace. *Covenant and Conversation 5777 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z”l ©2017 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"For the entire congregation are all holy, and God is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above God’s assembly?” [Num. 16:3] Where did Korach err in his rebellion against Moses and Aaron? On the surface, his argument appears to be both logical and just: “You [Moses and Aaron] have gone too far. The entire congregation is holy, and God is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above God’s assembly?” Indeed, did not the Torah command the nation, “You shall be holy” (Lev. 19:2)?

According to Korach, if, in fact, everyone is equally holy, leadership becomes a mere function of opportunity. The era of the old guard rule (Moses’ family) must come to an end; Korach’s family must be given its chance to express its inherent holiness!

Granted, so goes this argument, God revealed Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush, and spoke directly only to him; but perhaps, if Korach had been raised in the palace of the pharaohs, and if he had had the opportunity as a free man of princely background to slay the Egyptian taskmasters, undoubtedly God would have spoken to him, as well. After all, we are all holy! It’s just that some have received more special opportunities than others! On the surface, Korach’s words contain a glib truth.

In reality, however, Korach and Moses represent two different philosophies of life. At Mount

Sinai, God did not declare everyone to be holy. Rather, He placed into the world the possibility of achieving holiness. "You shall be holy" is a command, not a promise or a declaration of an existing fact. It represents a potential, attainable by means of the commitment to a lifestyle of 613 commandments.

When Korach argues that everyone is holy, that he, too, could have achieved what Moses achieved had he only had the proper opportunity, he is, in fact, uprooting holiness, not defending it. After all, if everyone and everything is holy, then the word "holy" loses its meaning. By arguing for holiness in the way that he does, Korach actually argues against holiness. In his view, we need not strive to achieve holiness. We are already holy!

Perhaps this is why the Midrash pictures Korach as taunting Moses about the commandments of tzitzit (ritual fringes) and mezuzah. Does a garment which is wholly tekhelet still require a thread of tekhelet in its ritual fringes? Does a house filled with Torah scrolls still require a mezuzah (which holds only a small portion of a Torah scroll) on its doorpost? And when Moses replies in the affirmative, Korach laughs at the apparent lack of logic in Moses' teaching!

But Korach misses the point. Moses teaches that the human being must constantly strive to improve, to become more holy than he was before. Humans must never dare rest on their laurels, because evil is always lying in wait to ensnare, even at the mouth of the grave. Hence, even a house filled with Torah scrolls still requires a mezuzah at the front door, and even a garment that is wholly tekhelet still requires ritual fringes. Never be complacent. There is never sufficient holiness; we must always strive for more!

In contrast, Korach maintains that the status quo is holy – because nothing need change, grow, or develop. This is, in fact, the meaning of Korach's name: the Hebrew root k-r-ch can either mean "bald" – no hair grows on a bald head – or "ice" – no vegetation developed during the Ice Age. "As is his name, so is he." Korach rejects the command to become holy, the command of meritocracy, because he is cynically scornful of one's ability to grow and develop and change and inspire. This mistaken worldview is the core flaw of Korach's rebellion.

Moses' (and God's) approach is fundamentally different. When Moses announces to the rebels the means by which God will determine who is holy to Him, he orders Korach and his men bring fire in the fire pans and offer incense. Why?

At its best, fire symbolizes the possibility of change. By means of extreme heat, the hardest materials can be made to bend and melt, can be transformed from solid to liquid and to many states in between. Likewise, incense improves its surroundings: the sweet-smelling fragrance can remove the rancid odor of death and decay, and can transform the

slaughtered carcasses of the animal sacrifices into an experience of commitment to God that can perfect the world.

Moses' vision is one of optimistic faith, the rising flames that draw forth the fragrance of the incense and soar heavenward. Material objects, humanity, the very world can be changed, elevated, and sanctified. All that is required is our merit, commitment, and achievement. ©2017 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is always astounding to see and realize how ego, turf and ambition can blind even great people who are otherwise wise and even pious personalities. Human society suffers greatly from this phenomenon and religious society is not exempt from its erroneous consequences. In fact, religious society is more susceptible to these ills simply because character failings can be wrapped in piety with the excuse that one is doing God's will.

A holy cause that is contaminated by human weaknesses, political ambition, monetary gain and smug self-righteousness is no longer a holy cause. The problem with so-called holy causes is that those who support them feel justified to use any means whatsoever to attempt to gain their ends. Forgery, violence and all sorts of zealotry are all permissible in order to advance the cause being espoused.

And the irony and tragedy of the situation is that those who resort to these means cannot in any way see the desecration of the very holiness that they are attempting to represent, that their behavior and tactics always engender. While allegedly speaking in the name of God, their actions and behavior blacken his holy name, so to speak, in the eyes and minds of the general population.

Korach is convinced that God is on his side and therefore his behavior towards Moshe, reprehensible as it may be, is justified and even necessary. In his hubris of imagined holiness he mistakes in his own personal ambition for somehow being the will of God. This leads to his eventual destruction and demise.

One of the inner plagues of religious Jewish society today, as in the past, is that religious zealotry knows no limits. It can defame Moshe with impunity, undermine legitimate religious and halachic authority, and justify any and all behavior no matter how tawdry and even illegitimate it may be. Unfortunately there are many examples of this attitude exhibited daily in our broader community.

There are issues and policies that are clearly outside the realm of Jewish law that are elevated immediately into being regarded as pillars of faith and issues of halacha. And once so elevated, then there is no room for rational reasoning or the wisdom of

compromise and harmony. In a Jewish world that faces so many vital issues of overwhelming importance, most of the controversies that spark so much divisiveness in today's religious Jewish society are not those upon which the eternity of Torah and Israel depend.

This was also one of the failings of Korach, who took a personal and certainly secondary issue of station and leadership and elevated it into a dispute that involved all of the Jewish people wrongly and unnecessarily. These types of troublemakers amongst us should be shunned and ignored. Even arguing with them feeds their egos and in their eyes, advances their cause.

Perhaps that is the reason that Korach and his crew were swallowed up by the earth so that no martyrdom or memorial would remain for others to emulate or imitate. ©2017 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

I've often heard people say, "if only God would reveal Himself miraculously, Jews would believe today much like they did when God performed wonders in Egypt and in the desert."

But, surprisingly enough, from a Torah perspective, miracles have limited impact. If one claims to be a prophet by virtue of miracles he performs, the Torah states that it is not enough. Miracles do not authenticate one's prophetic mission. (Deuteronomy 13:2-6)

Our portion expands on this idea. As the earth opened up to swallow those rebelling against Moshe (Moses), the Jews seemed duly impressed. In the words of the Torah, "All Israel that were roundabout fled at the cry of them." (Numbers 16:34) Surely faith would follow such an impressive feat.

By the next day, however, the impact of the miracle had waned. The Jews complained to Moshe and Aharon (Aaron) saying, "you have killed the people of the Lord." (Numbers 17:6)

In fact, miracles in the Torah usually do not have lasting effects. Consider the following: Even after the miracles of the ten plagues in Egypt, the Midrash insists that most Jews still refused to leave. Not long after the splitting of the sea, the Jews complained to God that they didn't have enough to eat and drink. Finally, while revelation is considered by many to be the most powerful intervention of God in the world, in the end, the Jews rejected the Ten Declarations, building the golden calf just forty days later.

True, many people who believe pray for miracles to reoccur and believe that our Torah

reinforces the idea that miracles are the essential conduits to faith. From the Torah a reverse lesson emerges —miracles are in fact, not enough to precipitate lasting belief.

Herein lies a fundamental difference between other faiths and ours. Christianity, for example, is based on miracles performed by their man-god. In our Torah miracles play a far less important role.

Our portion reinforces this idea. In the words of Nehama Leibowitz "miracles cannot change men's minds and hearts. They can always be explained away....Our sidra...teaches that miracles convince only those who can and are prepared to see them. Lack of faith points to a lack of will."

As has been noted—for the non-believers, miracles won't help; for believers, miracles are unnecessary. ©2017 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Korach relates the story of Korach, Datan, Aviram and 250 members of the shevet (tribe) of Reuven challenging Moshe's choice for Kohen Gadol (high priest). The end result was that the 250 members were burned by a heavenly fire, and the three leaders were miraculously swallowed by the earth. From a motive perspective, Korach's actions makes the most sense because he felt slighted for not having been chosen himself, and had something to potentially gain by complaining. But why would 250 people follow him to their certain death, with apparently little to gain?

The answer can be found in Rashi, the great medieval commentator, who writes that just as Korach's family camped on the southern side of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), so did the tribe of Reuven. Rashi quotes the words of Chapters of the Fathers, "woe to an evil person, and woe to their neighbor." The 250 people met their demise simply because they were influenced by their neighbors. This points to the awesome influence that friends, neighbors and associates have on us. Who we surround ourselves with is a matter of life and death. Do we have positive friends and neighbors? And just as importantly, are WE positive friends and neighbors to others? ©2017 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

I do not recall, at least in my lifetime, the United States of America being so divided. Though people tell me that it is President Trump's fault, the truth is that it goes back to the Obama Presidency. It was just that unlike the Left today, the Right then was more civil and restrained in its objection to President Obama's

policies.

If anything, Trump just caused the division to become more pronounced, and faster. In fact, he is in response to it, and he wouldn't have even been elected had the division not already existed. The political schism put him into office.

The question is, is there are a right and wrong here, or just a right and a left? People who believe in relative morality and not in God would argue against the latter. God-believers would say just the opposite, that the side that advocates the highest level of Divine morality would have God's vote.

Another question would be, assuming that there is a wrong, how responsible are all the members of the respective parties guilty because of it? Surely each party has its extremists AND mildly involved contingents. Will God take only the extremists to task, and overlook the "sins" of the more innocent?

One might have thought so, until this week's parsha. Embedded in the argument between Korach and his followers and Moshe Rabbeinu is one of the scariest and most important lessons of life, as Rashi quotes:

"So they withdrew from around the dwelling of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram. Dasan and Aviram went out standing upright at the entrance of their tents together with their wives, their children, and their infants." (Bamidbar 16:27)

"Come and see the severity of dispute. The earthly courts do not punish until [an accused] has two [pubic] hairs, and the Heavenly court does not punish until one reaches the age of 20. Here even nursing babies were punished." (Rashi)

The fact that the wives of Korach and his followers were included in their punishments is not surprising. As the Talmud points out, it is the role of the wife to at least try and encourage her husband to do the right thing, or to dissuade him from doing the wrong thing. If she doesn't try, then she is guilty by association.

But the children, and especially the babies? What culpability could they possibly share with their parents, who have become part of a machlokes -- a disagreement? Why should their innocence be ignored and they be treated as guilty just by association with the perpetrators? Rashi, quoting the Midrash, points out that machlokes is powerfully incriminating, but he doesn't say why.

Even Korach's sons, who actually do teshuvah before God lowers the boom, are included in the punishment, albeit to a lesser extent. Usually sincere teshuvah is enough to spare a person punishment if done on time, but that was not the case here. It shows once again the negative power of machlokes.

Of course, not all machlokes is bad. The rabbis in Pirkei Avos make this distinction quite clearly:

"Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven

will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? This is a debate between Hillel and Shammai. What is a dispute not for the sake of Heaven? This is the dispute of Korach and his assembly." (Pirkei Avos 5:20)

This is clear from the Talmud which is FILLED with disagreements. All of them however are for the sake of Heaven, that is, in order to establish the law as God commanded it. No one is arguing for their own sake or for personal benefit.

The only problem with this explanation is that the sons of Korach, and certainly the younger children and babies, did not argue for personal benefit. Nevertheless, they went down with their families which apparently, had argued for personal gain. The question remains.

Perhaps the answer has to do with a different halachah. The law is that once every last Amaleki is killed, all of their property must be destroyed as well. There is no such thing as booty from an existential war against Amalek, and the question is, why not?

The answer given is that no reminder of Amalek's existence can exist after he is completely gone. If victory over Amalek is only partial, then the survivors themselves are the reminder of Amalek. If there are no survivors, then we don't want someone to be able to say, "That belt belonged to an Amaleki," or "That was an Amaleki cow."

Perhaps the same answer can be used here. Machlokes NOT FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN, which is easy to be a part of if you don't know what Heaven wants, is EVIL. It's not just bad from God's point of view, but REALLY bad. It reverses the good of Creation to such an extent that it must, like Amalek himself, be completely obliterated.

This means that every last trace of such machlokes must be removed from future history. You can't change the Past, but you can protect the future. This means removing all reminders of evil, even the "innocent" ones, including the children who were not yet old enough to choose sides.

Like it or hate it, it is an important message to keep in mind when choosing sides in any argument. Your intentions may be pure, but you must come to the same conclusion, BASED UPON TORAH, about the main proponents of your side. Your innocence will NOT be enough to protect you if theirs is lacking. ©2017 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Guarding the Temple

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit

by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

In this week's portion the Torah States "And you and your brothers with you before the tent of meeting" ("V'atah uvanecha Itcha lefnei Ohel Moed") which we

derive that the Kohanim and the Leviim were commanded to guard the Temple. This was done not to necessarily actually guard the Temple, but rather as an act of respect and honor ("Kavod"). In fact the Kohanim and Leviim when carrying out this task wore their priestly garments (kohanim and Leviim were not permitted to wear their priestly clothes when sleeping). Children were not allowed to accomplish this task, only a Kohen or Levi that was above the age of twenty, even though they are forbidden to carry out any other assignment in the Temple at this age.

Because this was classified as a task ("Avodah") one must theoretically, out of respect, stand while performing it. However our sages, because of the great strain on the individual, allowed one to sit while carrying out this task, (though in all cases one was not permitted to sit in the courtyard of the Temple) because sitting was a pre-requisite to guarding the Temple properly.

Our sages differ as to the time that this "guarding" took place. The Rambam (Maimonides) states that it was only applicable in the evenings, however according to the explanation of the sages of the Mishna in Tamid, it would seem that this was prevalent all the time.

Additionally, there is controversy as to whether in all places designated, the Temple was guarded during all hours of the day and night, or there were certain areas that were only guarded during the day but not a night. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After Korach organized his rebellion and he- along with all those who joined him- was killed, the Children of Israel were still not convinced that Moshe was not playing favorites. Despite the miraculous way that the rebels had died (Korach and the 250 leaders that brought an incense offering being burned by a fire sent forth by G-d, and Dasan, Avirum, their families, Korach's family and all of their belongings being swallowed by the earth), and despite the plague that killed close to 15,000 people as a result of their accusing Moshe of wrongly causing their deaths (or at least the deaths of the 250 leaders), G-d still felt the need to "prove" that the choice(s) were His and not Moshe's. He told Moshe to take a piece of wood from each of the 12 Tribes, and by making one of them flower, blossom, and bring forth fruit, there could be no more complaints (Bamidbar 17:20)

However, if such obvious miracles as a G-d-sent fire, the earth opening its "mouth," and a plague that was only stopped by Aharon bringing an incense offering were not enough to convince the nation that Moshe was doing only what G-d had commanded him, how could a nut-producing staff do so? The Da'as

Zekaynim says that the people actually asked for this test, and therefore G-d commanded Moshe to do it. Why would this test prove more than what had already occurred?

Additionally, the rebellion had several facets: questioning the choice of Aharon and his descendants as Kohanim (priests), questioning the replacement of the first-born with the Tribe of Levi, and questioning the replacement of (the Tribe of) Reuvain as "first-born" with (the Tribes of) Yosef and/or (the Tribe of) Yehudah. How would the "test" of the staffs answer these issues? There seems to be no relevance to Reuvain not being the "first-born," as the staff that flowered (et al) signified which Tribe would perform the service in the Mishkan (and eventually the Temple), not which was considered the "bechor." The staff representing the Tribe of Levi represented the descendants of Aharon too, so it being "chosen" could not show that one family of Levi'im were chosen to be Kohanim over any other family. And since Korach, who was a Levi, complained that Aharon was chosen over him (and other Levi'im complained that they were not given "Kohain" status), Levi's staff flowering should have no bearing on that issue either. Even the choice of the entire Tribe of Levi over the first-born of the entire nation would seem to not have been dealt with in this "test." After all, having one staff flower (et al) would only show the preference of one Tribe over any of the other individual Tribes. But the question was not one Tribe over each of the others, but that all the Tribes should be represented (through their first-born) in the Temple service. Why was the test "which" Tribe was chosen- rather than a test to see if only one was chosen (and if so, then which one it is)?

The complaint that the nation had prior to the plague was that Moshe had caused the death of the 250 leaders involved in the "incense showdown" with Aharon. The commentators say that their accusation was that the choice of the incense offering was what caused the death, not that the others were not worthy of being Kohanim. After all, Nadav and Avihu- who were Kohanim themselves- died bringing incense. Had Moshe chosen another kind of offering, they thought, perhaps the others would have been found worthy as well. Since it was only the choice of the type of offering that led to these complaints, the issues raised by Dasan and Avirum (that Reuvain should still be, or should once again be, the "bechor") and by Korach (that he should be the Kohain Gadol) had already been resolved. The earth swallowing them (or their families) was proof enough that their complaints were baseless. The commandment to use the fire-pans from the "incense showdown" as an outer layer for the outer altar as a reminder of the consequences of a non-Aharon descendant doing things reserved for Kohanim may have been enough to convince the rest of the Tribe of Levi that Aharon and his family being Kohanim

was G-d's choice, not Moshe's. However, the issue of the first-born not being able to do the service was, in their minds, still unresolved.

The Ralbag (lessons learned from Shemos 28) says that since the purpose of the Mishkan was to bring people closer to G-d, His wisdom dictated that there be one family set aside from the rest of the nation whose entire day can be spent attaining spiritual completeness (without being distracted by things such as having to support the family- see also Rambam's Laws of Shmitah and Yovel 13:12). By allowing them to reach the highest spiritual level, they can then bring the rest of the nation closer to G-d (which, according to the Ralbag, is one of the main reasons for bringing offerings- especially sin offerings- as it causes there to be some contact with the Kohain bringing the offering). If the first-born of every family would try fulfilling this role, its purpose would be defeated. They would still be concerned with the family's property, the success of its crops, etc., and would not be able to focus all thoughts on spiritual growth. It is only if the entire Tribe has no inheritance, but is supported by others, that each individual member of that Tribe has the real opportunity for this growth. Also, having every member of the same family concentrating on the same things fosters the reaching of levels that individuals will have a harder time reaching on their own.

Therefore, the change from the service being done by the first-born was not because of the sin of the "golden calf" (although it was a symptom of the issue), as G-d had intended to have the Tribe of Levi do it no matter what. (See Netziv and Meshech Chochmeh, who also point this out. See also Zevachim 115b, where one opinion says that the Kohanim took over from the first born at Sinai- before the "golden calf"- and the other says the changeover occurred with the completion of the Mishkan, i.e. not immediately after the "golden calf." This concept- that the first-born would have been replaced anyway- also explains how G-d could have commanded Moshe about the role of the Kohanim in the Mishkan even before the sin of the "golden calf" had occurred.)

Just as Moshe had tried to reason with Korach (and Dasan and Aviram), it is more than likely that he tried to reason with the nation when they accused him of causing the deaths of the 250 leaders. He may have tried to explain to them why G-d had (from the very beginning) wanted to have the entire Tribe of Levi perform the Temple services, instead of the first-born. In the context of this conversation, we can understand why the test with the staff of each of the Tribes was used: If Moshe was right, that G-d wanted just one Tribe to serve in the Mishkan/Temple, something unique would happen to the staff of that Tribe. If, however, the Tribes were all equal, then nothing would happen to any of them (or something would happen to all of them).

This would explain why G-d tells Moshe (Bamidbar 17:17) to first speak to the nation and then take their staffs (rather than just telling him to take their staffs), as he must first have the conversation with them as to why it is preferable to have one Tribe do all of the service in order for the test to have any meaning. It would also explain why G-d told Moshe to "take" their sticks (rather than having them give them to him, as they actually did- see 17:21), as Moshe was unsure of whether to do the test they had requested. G-d therefore told him that he should take them up on their offer, by taking their sticks. (See 7:5 and the commentators there, where Moshe was hesitant to accept the gifts of the Tribal heads (Nesi'im) brought on the first day of the Mishkan until G-d told him to take them.)

When the staff with Aharon's name on it, representing the entire Tribe of Levi, was the only one to flower (et al), the nation knew that Moshe was only fulfilling G-d's will that there be one Tribe that sets the standard for all others to aspire to. Once that standard is set, all are welcome to try to attain it as well (see Rambam, Laws of Shmitah and Yovel 13:13), but the mechanism must be in place for the standard to be set in the first place. © 2003 Rabbi D. Kramer

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA SICHAN OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN

Translated by Kaeren Fish

"**A**nd they rose up before Moshe, with men of Bnei Yisrael -- two hundred and fifty princes of the assembly, regularly summoned to the congregation, men of renown. And they gathered themselves together against Moshe and against Aharon, and said to them, 'You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation -- they are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst; why then do you raise yourselves up above the congregation of the Lord?'" (Bamidbar 16:2-3)

This group, headed by Korach, does not deny God's existence or the chosenness of Israel. On the contrary, their argument is that the entire congregation is holy and that God is in their midst. Their protest concerns the "family appointments" supposedly made by Moshe and Aharon.

But there is another faction, headed by Datan and Aviram, that is also part of the dispute. Their protest is a completely different one: "Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you also make yourself a prince over us?" (Bamidbar 16:13)

This is both a rejection of the Divine plan behind the Exodus from Egypt and a claim that Moshe invented it in order to achieve his leadership position.

How could two such fundamentally different

groups join forces in a single protest?

The answer lies in the role of Korach, who managed to incite the people and unify them around a single purpose, without getting stuck in details of ideology and motivation. Ramban offers an explanation of how Korach was able to do this. He writes that as long as Bnei Yisrael were in the wilderness of Sinai, things were good for them and no one stood any chance of inciting them against their leaders, Moshe and Aharon. However, as the journey progressed, there was accumulating frustration and bitterness among various elements. Korach was resentful that Elitzafan was chosen as nasi and that Aharon was the Kohen Gadol; Datan and Aviram were bitter about leaving Egypt; the firstborn sons were upset over losing their special role in Divine service following the sin of the golden calf. As long as conditions were good, these complaints did not surface. But the moment God decreed that the entire generation would die out after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, a mood of despair settled over the people and all the grievances burst forth in a torrent of protest. Korach, the coordinator and activist, managed to direct it all in a single direction -- against Moshe and Aharon.

(A similar situation repeated itself in the time of King Shelomo. He laid extensive taxes on the people, but since they lived well under his rule, no one led a protest. At the end of his life -- and especially after his death, when the situation deteriorated -- the people came clamoring to his son, Rechavam, demanding a reduction of taxes.)

While this explanation makes sense, a review of the continuation of the text raises some difficulties. First of all, the affair of Datan and Aviram is swiftly concluded; there is a warning, and immediately afterwards they are punished. However, when it comes to the two hundred and fifty men who offer incense, not only is there no mention of any warning, but the matter of Datan and Aviram interrupts the narrative about them, and their punishment is mentioned only after that of Datan and Aviram.

To understand the reason for this, let us reconsider the chain of events. After Korach and the two hundred and fifty men who are with him declare their rebellion, Moshe proposes the test of the incense. This proposal is a warning of sorts, since everyone is well aware, in light of the fate of Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, that an offering of incense that is not willed by God has catastrophic consequences. Nevertheless, they prepare for the test: "And they took every man his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense of them, and stood in the door of the Tent of Meeting with Moshe and Aharon." (Bamidbar 16:18)

Now, suddenly, there is a twist in the plot: Korach rises up from among the two hundred and fifty rebels and calls for the entire congregation to join in the rebellion: "And Korach gathered all the congregation

against them to the door of the Tent of Meeting..." (Bamidbar 16:19).

He tries to incite the nation as a whole to rebel. At this point, the text shifts its focus to Datan and Aviram: "And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: 'Speak to the congregation, saying: Get up from about the dwelling of Korach, Datan, and Aviram.'" (Bamidbar 16:23-24)

The reason for the sudden change in focus is clear: Korach is now positioned with this faction ("the dwelling of Korach, Datan and Aviram"). Korach, the facilitator and coordinator, runs from one group to the other, fanning the flames of conflict and hatred.

(Chazal debate the question of whether Korach was among those punished by fire or among those swallowed by the earth. According to some opinions, he suffered both punishments, and in light of this image of him going about from one faction to the other, the reason for this is clear.)

Still, we are left wondering how Korach -- who had originally argued that the entire congregation was holy, with God in their midst -- could align himself with Datan and Aviram, who deny the most fundamental principles of faith and purpose.

Our discussion above helps to solve this puzzle. The events occurred in close succession: the two hundred and fifty men stand ready, their censers in their hands; Korach suddenly makes an appeal to the general public, and gives even the heretical Datan and Aviram a voice in the protest. Korach's strategy is based on his assumption that the incense, which has "proved" itself in the past as having the power to halt a plague that was running rampant throughout the nation, will be able to atone even for Datan and Aviram. He fails to realize that the incense can atone for and save only those who are worthy of such deliverance; for those who are undeserving, the incense is a "strange fire."

Now we see that the seeming delay, or interruption, between the scene of the two hundred and fifty men with their censers and the consuming fire that punishes them, does not exist. It is all part of their own actions -- their attempt to atone for Datan and Aviram through use of incense. After this attempt fails and Datan and Aviram meet their deaths, their own punishment follows. (*This sicha was delivered on leil Shabbat Parashat Korach 5752 [1992]*) © 1992-1997 by Yeshivat Har Etzion

