YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

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Dedicated in memory of Elisa bat Tsirelé z”l

whose yahrtzeit is 1 Tammuz

By Family Rueff

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**PARASHAT KORACH**

**Korach’s Complaints**

*Parashat Korach* marks a breaking point in Moshe’s leadership and in Bnei Yisrael’s attitude towards him, and for the first time, Moshe does not pray for God to forgive the sinners. In fact, he does the opposite: he asks God to punish them.

In fact, Moshe’s entire approach in dealing with Korach and his company calls for closer study. When Korach first approaches Moshe, Moshe proposes a test that results in the deaths of all those who offer incense; Moshe knowingly led Korach’s company into this trap, thus he brought about their deaths (albeit indirectly). Indeed, this is exactly the accusation that Bnei Yisrael direct at Moshe and Aharon:

But the next day, all the congregation of Bnei Yisrael murmured against Moshe and Aharon, saying: You have killed the people of the Lord. (*Bamidbar* 17:6)

Moreover, if it is indeed forbidden for anyone other than Aharon to offer the incense, why were the censers of the two hundred and fifty rebels later gathered for the purpose of making a covering for the altar (17:3)? Is it not inappropriate for the covering of the altar to be made from items that were used for a forbidden act?

Close inspection of the text shows that the test of the censers actually appears twice. At the beginning of the *parasha*, we read Moshe’s instruction:

Do this: take yourselves censers, Korach and all his congregation, and put fire in them, and put incense upon them before the Lord tomorrow. And it shall be that the man whom the Lord chooses – he is the holy one… (16:6-7)

A few verses later, we read:

And Moshe said to Korach: You and all your congregation – be before the Lord, you and they and Aharon, tomorrow. And take each man his censer, and put incense upon them, and let each man bring before the Lord his censer – two hundred and fifty censers; and you, and Aharon, each his censer. (16:16-17)

Why does Moshe need to repeat the terms and instructions for the test?

Our final question here concerns Moshe’s words to God prior to the second presentation of the test:

And Moshe was exceedingly angry and said to the Lord: Do not turn to [accept] their offering... (16:15)

Moshe appeals to God and asks Him not to accede to or accept the offering of Korach and his company. This seems very strange: The whole conflict with Korach concerns the question of whether Moshe appointed himself and Aharon on his own initiative, or whether they were appointed by God. How can Moshe entertain the slightest suspicion that God would accept Korach’s offering? Is he unsure, for even the briefest moment, that God sent him?

**Korach’s Complaints**

The Torah sets forth four points regarding which Korach challenges Moshe’s leadership:

1. Why is it specifically Aharon who is chosen as *Kohen Gadol*? It is reasonable to assume that this claim comes against the background of Aharon’s part in the sin of the golden calf. Korach and his company argue that since Aharon sinned in that instance, he is not fit to be appointed *Kohen Gadol*. Indeed, if we didn’t know he was appointed by God, we might imagine that Moshe is guilty of nepotism.
2. Why is Moshe the leader? This claim similarly seems to have basis; it is backed up by the results of the spies’ mission to Eretz Yisrael. Since Moshe has not succeeded in bringing Bnei Yisrael into the land, he should be replaced.
3. Even if Aharon was chosen by God, why can other people not also be *kohanim*? Since “the entire congregation is holy and God is in their midst,” anyone who wishes to sanctify himself for priesthood should be able to do so. Once again, the claim seems to have a logical legal basis: later in *Sefer Bamidbar*, we find that Pinchas is appointed a *kohen* even though he is not initially counted as a *kohen* (since he was born before Elazar, his father, was appointed as a *kohen*, and he therefore cannot inherit the priesthood from him). This proves that it is possible, in principle, to induct people into the priesthood.
4. Why is it specifically the tribe of Levi that is chosen? Again, the selection of Moshe’s tribe gives rise to the sense that he is showing favoritism to his people. Prior to the selection of the *leviim*, the firstborns of all of Israel were to serve in the *Mishkan*, along with anyone else who dedicated himself to the *Mishkan* and its service. After the selection of the tribe of Levi, all the other tribes were excluded from service in the *Mishkan*, including the accompanying responsibilities (which were given to the *leviim*).

Overall, Korach’s four claims hinge on the suspicion that Moshe shows preference towards himself, his relatives, and his tribe. *Chazal* highlight this theme in the arguments they place in Korach’s mouth: Is a garment that is made entirely of *tekhelet* exempt from *tzitzit*? And is a house that is filled with holy books exempt from a *mezuza*? These questions are not just meant to ridicule Moshe, but contain a profound truth. The “garment that is entirely *tekhelet*” is the coat of the *Kohen Gadol*; it is made entirely of *tekhelet*, and it has four corners, but it is nevertheless exempt from *tzitzit*. A “house that is filled with holy books” is a *beit midrash* or a synagogue, and such buildings are indeed exempt from having a *mezuza* at their entrance. Korach and his company argue that Moshe and Aharon are heaping commandments onto the nation, while they themselves – like the coat of the *Kohen Gadol* and the *beit midrash* – enjoy special privileges.

**Moshe’s Response**

I have suggested in the past[[1]](#footnote-1) that Moshe would have been overjoyed if all of Israel were close to God, rendering his role redundant. For this reason, he is joyfully accepting of Eldad and Medad’s prophecy, and reject’s Yehoshua’s alarmed demand, “My master, Moshe – arrest them!” And for this reason, Moshe cannot oppose Korach’s argument. Like Korach and his company, Moshe wants the entire congregation to be holy and to function in the *Mishkan* on an equal basis. Korach – who *Chazal* describe as quite astute – presented Moshe with a request he couldn’t refuse.

At no point had God forbidden burning incense on a censer. It was known to be forbidden for an Israelite to approach the altar or to perform the service on it, and for this reason, Moshe does not suggest that the test involve offering incense on the altar (so as not to mislead them deliberately). Since there had never been a prohibition on burning incense on a censer, Moshe was able to propose this to Korach and his company as a test: whoever would have his offering of incense accepted would be shown to be worthy in God’s eyes and could join the priesthood. Even if God were to reject the incense of Korach and his company, there was no reason to think they would die. We know from the beginning of human history that Kayin’s offering was rejected but he lived. Perhaps there were some individuals among the two hundred and fifty members of the group who were righteous and sincere, who truly desired a part in the service of the *Mishkan* and had simply been utilized by Korach to further his own interests.

Therefore, Moshe accepts Korach’s arguments and proposes a test to see which of the company is worthy of priesthood.[[2]](#footnote-2) Obviously, there is no need to subject Aharon to this test, since we know he is authorized to offer incense in the *Mishkan*. And indeed, at the beginning of the *parasha*, there is no mention of Aharon’s involvement:

Do this: take yourselves censers, Korach and all his congregation, and put fire in them, and put incense upon them before the Lord tomorrow. And it shall be that the man whom the Lord chooses – he is the holy one. (*Bamidbar* 16:6-7)

**Two Tests**

Surprisingly, Moshe later proposes the test of the censers to Korach and his company all over again, and changes the terms. This time, Moshe declares that Aharon will also participate – meaning, he too will be tested as to whether his offering of incense is worthy in God’s eyes:

And Moshe said to Korach: You and all your congregation – be before the Lord, you and they and Aharon, tomorrow. And each man shall take his censer, and you shall put incense upon them, and let each man bring before the Lord his censer – two hundred and fifty censers; and you, and Aharon, each his censer. (*Bamidbar* 16:16-17)

Once we note this important change in the conditions of the test, we understand why Moshe sees fit to propose it again – but at the same time, it is clear that the significance of this second iteration of the test is completely different from the significance of the test as first proposed. Previously, the question was whether additional people could join the priesthood, but now the question focuses on Aharon. Here we are not trying to ascertain who and how many among the two hundred and fifty men are worthy of serving in the *Mishkan*, but which of them is worthy of being the *Kohen Gadol*.

Why does Moshe change the conditions of the test? It seems that the answer to this question must be in the unit that appears in between the two tests: the dispute between Moshe and Datan and Aviram. Somehow, this conflict changes Moshe’s view, causing him to change the nature of his proposed test.

Moshe understands from Korach’s words that he has no argument with him. Moshe, like Korach, is unfit for priesthood (since he is not a descendant of Aharon or his sons), and hence when Korach complains about the priesthood, Moshe regards himself as an observer. But after he hears what Datan and Aviram have to say, Moshe understands that the rebellion is not directed only against the priesthood but extends to his own leadership and to all the actions he has performed in God’s Name. This being the case, Moshe concludes that the argument over the priesthood is also not just a desire to include outsiders within the circle of the priesthood, but rather a radical undermining of Aharon’s appointment as *Kohen Gadol*. Perhaps some of the rebels are idealists, but Korach is using them to undermine Moshe’s leadership.

When Moshe realizes this, he immediately turns to God and asks Him not to accept their offering. As explained above, the test Moshe proposes is a legitimate one, and may not involve any transgression for the participants. Even if God accepts the offering of Korach and his company, this in no way negates Moshe’s leadership, nor Aharon’s High Priesthood. Moshe asks that God reject their offering because Korach and his company will interpret its acceptance as a rejection of Moshe’s leadership.

However, Moshe’s request comes with a price. Throughout the wandering in the wilderness, it was Moshe who fought for God forgive the people, and he must now go against his nature and demand that God punish them. It is quite clear that his leadership will suffer as a result of this demand. While *Am Yisrael* is willing to obey Moshe while he leads them in the wilderness and protects them from God’s anger, they will not be so eager to obey him after he asks God to punish them.

**The Punishment of Korach and His Company**

Datan and Aviram's sin is different from that of the two hundred and fifty men who offer incense, and they accordingly suffer a different punishment:

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their house[hold]s, and every person who was with Korach and all the property… and a fire emerged from before the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered incense. (*Bamidbar* 16:32-35)

The punishment meted out to Datan and Aviram includes their families, while the two hundred and fifty are punished alone. Clearly, the difference between the two forms of punishment reflects the difference between the two sins: Those who offered incense are punished as a deterrent. It is possible that some of them are good people who mean well, and their families are therefore not punished. Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, oppose Moshe directly and brazenly, and hence their families perish.[[3]](#footnote-3) Korach is party to both sins, hence he is given a double punishment: he himself is burned, while his family is swallowed up by the earth.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**After the Fire**

And the entire congregation of Bnei Yisrael murmured the next day against Moshe and against Aharon, saying: You have killed the Lord’s people. (*Bamidbar* 17:6)

After Korach, Datan, Aviram, and the two hundred and fifty men suffer their respective punishments, *Am Yisrael* rail against Moshe and Aharon for causing their deaths by proposing the test of the incense. The punishment that God imposes in response is a direct continuation of the punishment given to Korach, Datan, and Aviram; indeed, the Torah uses almost identical language in the two instances:

Separate yourselves from among this congregation, and I will consume them in an instant! … Withdraw from around the dwelling of Korach, Datan, and Aviram… And the land opened up its mouth… (16:21-32)

Rise up from among this congregation, and I will consume them in an instant! … the plague has begun. (17:10-11)

After the rebellion of Datan and Aviram, God wanted to destroy the entire nation. Moshe managed to save them, arguing, "Shall one man sin, and You become angry with the entire congregation?!" (16:22).[[5]](#footnote-5) Now that the entire nation is attacking Moshe, he can no longer use that argument – and thus the plague breaks out immediately.

The account of Korach's rebellion started with the offering of incense, and the plague is eventually halted by means of offering incense. Moshe sends Aharon to offer incense for two reasons: first, he wants to prove that incense itself is not dangerous, and in fact saves lives when offered by the right person in the right circumstances;[[6]](#footnote-6) second, it has not yet been demonstrated that Aharon is the chosen *Kohen* *Gadol*. The two hundred and fifty men who considered themselves candidates have been burned, but only after Aharon uses his censer to save Bnei Yisrael is it clear that he is worthy to serve as *Kohen Gadol*.

**The Sign of the Staff**

Korach's final argument, which has not yet been addressed, pertains to the choice of the tribe of Levi. Even if Aharon is the *Kohen Gadol* and Moshe is the chosen leader, this does not necessarily entail any special status for the entire tribe of Levi. It is this last issue that is the focus of the flowering staff. The head of each tribe lays a staff in the *Mishkan*, and the next morning, only the staff of Aharon has sprouted buds, blossoms, and almonds. In this context Aharon is not functioning as the *Kohen Gadol*, but rather as the head of the tribe of Levi – and it is thus proven that his tribe has been chosen to perform the service of the *Mishkan*.

However, it must be noted that the sign of the staff signifies a fundamental change in the status of the tribe of Levi. Previously, while the *leviim* were chosen to serve in the *Mishkan*, there was nothing preventing others from volunteering for such service in some capacity. The episode of Korach brings this situation to an end. Henceforth, no one can volunteer for Divine service if he does not belong to the tribe of Levi.

At the end of this narrative, the Torah lists the gifts that must be given to the *kohanim* and *leviim*, emphasizing the difference between the two: the *kohanim* have no inheritance because God is their inheritance (*Bamidbar* 18:20), and they receive gifts in exchange for their service. The *leviim*, on the other hand, *are* given an inheritance – which for them consists of tithes:

For the tithe of Bnei Yisrael, which they set apart as a gift to the Lord, I have given to the *leviim* for an inheritance… (*Bamidbar* 18:24)

The Levite is a paid functionary of Bnei Yisrael, serving as their representative in the *Beit Hamikdash*. And since the *leviim* have this as an inheritance, they are obligated to give a portion of it as a *teruma* to the *kohanim* (*terumat ma'aser*).

The exclusion of the *kohanim* from an inheritance in Eretz Yisrael is a matter of fundamental significance. So long as other people were able to join the circle of priesthood (through volunteerism, dedication [*cherem*], etc.), a connection was maintained between the *kohanim* and the nation. Once the *kohanim* (and perhaps the *leviim*, too) are given a separate status, there is a break between them and the nation, and hence they do not receive an inheritance in the land.[[7]](#footnote-7)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. In the *shiur* on *Parashat Behaalotekha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perhaps such a person would undergo some sort of “conversion” and become a *kohen*, or perhaps he personally would serve in the *Mishkan* but his descendants would not be *kohanim* (unlike *kohanim* from birth). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I have mentioned elsewhere that one belongs to *Am Yisrael* via one's family. The claims of Datan and Aviram pertain to *Am Yisrael* and undermine its leadership; thus, their families, too, suffer the consequences. Sanctity, on the other hand, relates to the individual, hence the families of the two hundred and fifty men are not affected. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The question of whether Korach's sons actually died will, God willing, be addressed in a future *shiur*.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For this reason, the Torah emphasizes, in the punishment of Datan and Aviram, the need for the rest of the people to separate from them. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The cloud of incense serves as a screen between the punishing angel and the people; hence, it is the offering of the incense that stops the plague. The same is true of the incense offered by the *Kohen* *Gadol* on Yom Kippur, and, in fact, the incense offered every day. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Gemara intensifies this gap by establishing a prohibition against an *am ha-aretz* marrying the daughter of a *kohen* – thus rendering the *kohanim* one of the groups who are "unfit for marrying," albeit in a positive sense. In practice, learned scholars are also separate from the general populace, and hence they are permitted to marry daughters of *kohanim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)