



# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Korach

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## Kohanim And The Limits of Power

By Danny Essner

This week's *parsha*, *Korach*, tells the story of *Korach's* rebellion. *Korach* and his followers challenge, among other things, *Aaron's* authority and power as the *Kohen Gadol*. What's more, they question why *Aaron* was appointed to the leadership position instead of other members of the tribe of *Levi*.

*Korach* made many accusations against *Moshe*, including charging him with nepotism because he appointed his brother *Aaron* and his family to be the *Kohanim*. *Korach*, a member of the tribe of *Levi*, felt he was as deserving, if not more so than *Aaron*, to be appointed to this position of leadership and stature. *Korach* saw the role of *Kohanim*, and specifically *Aaron's* role as the *Kohen Gadol*, as one that conferred power and the opportunity to exert influence and control over others. And though he positioned himself as a spokesperson for the masses, *Korach* really sought authority and power for himself.

*Moshe* responded to the challenge to *Aaron's* leadership by commanding *Korach* and his followers to bring their firepans to the *Mishkan*. There they were to submit to a test: each would bring an offering to *Hashem*, and whoever's offering was accepted would be revealed to be the true leader. *Hashem* accepted *Aaron's* offering, and *Korach* and his followers are swallowed up by the earth.

There is much to learn from *Hashem's* acceptance of *Aaron's* offering and rejection of the offering brought by *Korach* and his followers. First, it is now clear that *Aaron* was chosen by *Hashem*, not by *Moshe*. This is a message to *B'nei Yisroel* that leadership and authority are bestowed upon us by *Hashem*, not by man. In addition, we learn that the role of a leader is to focus on service to *Hashem* and helping *B'nei Yisroel* get closer to *Hashem* — prestige and exerting power and influence is not what leadership is all about.

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*Nadav* and *Abihu's* deaths occurred on the eighth day of celebration marking the inauguration of the *Mishkan* (the temporary sanctuary the Jewish people used to serve *Hashem* while in the desert). For seven days, *Moshe* performed the priestly services. On the eighth day, *Aaron* and his sons assumed the priestly duties for the first time. But *Nadav* and *Abihu* brought a "strange fire" that *Hashem* did not command, and they died.

וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי־אֹהֶרֶן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אֵישׁ מִחֶמְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קְטֹרֶת  
וַיִּקְרְבוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֲתָם:

*And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. (Vayikra 10:1)*

There is a fundamental connection between the story of *Nadab* and *Abihu* and that of *Korach* that goes beyond the obvious parallels between the acceptance and rejection of offers and the consequences to those whose offer was rejected. Both of these episodes deal with the role of a leader and the responsibility of leadership.

There are many interpretations as to what underlying sin *Nadav* and *Abihu* committed and why it resulted in their immediate deaths. One interpretation, according to *Sifra*, is that they performed their offering inside the *Kodesh Kodashim*, the space reserved exclusively for the *Kohen Gadol* — *Aaron* — that may be entered only on *Yom Kippur*. Another explanation is that they were drunk. However, if we view this episode through the lens of leadership and power, the *pshat* — the plain meaning — makes the most sense: they brought an offering they were not commanded to bring. In other words, they exceeded their authority. As *Kohanim*, *Nadav* and *Abihu* had the honor and responsibility of leading *Bnei Yisroel's* service to *Hashem*, a role that came with great power. But by the consequence of their act, *Hashem* makes it clear that this power comes with limits that cannot be exceeded.

*There is a fundamental connection between the story of Nadab and Abihu and that of Korach beyond the obvious .... Both of these episodes deal with the role of a leader and the responsibility of leadership.*

These are essential lessons: from the story of *Korach*, we learn that leadership, the priesthood, and the power that comes with it, are derived from *Hashem*, not from man. From the deaths of *Nadav* and *Abihu*, we understand the gravity of the responsibility bestowed upon the *Kohanim*. They are imbued with power but cannot overstep their bounds. Putting these two stories together, we can understand the role of the *Kohanim* and the limits of power: power is not about ruling over or being above other members of the community. Leadership is about service; service to *Hashem*, service to *Bnei Yisroel*.

May we all harness the power and holiness *Hashem* has bestowed upon us to help bring our community closer to *Hashem*.

**Danny** and Nily Essner have lived in Scarsdale for the past twelve years. Their daughter, Noa, is graduating from WDS this year and is looking forward to attending Ramaz in the fall. Their son JJ is entering seventh grade at WDS. Danny and Nily are long-time YIS supporters, with Danny having grown up in the community.

*Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?*

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**The Collective Conversation** is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

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