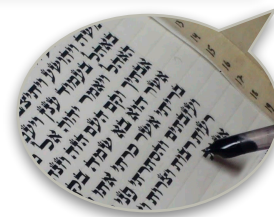




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Korach

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The Mighty Almond

By Jeff Kapelus

The infamous *Korach* rebellion headlines our *parsha*. *Parshat Korach* is chock full of deception, demagoguery, death by unusual means, power struggles, politics, plague, and even incense. The entire episode provides excellent fodder for a movie or miniseries, let alone a *dvar Torah*.

Instead of focusing on the dramatically riveting rebellion — about which there are many commentaries — let's focus on the little ole almond. Not since "Almond Joy's got nuts, Mounds don't" has the almond attracted this much attention. (See the 1989 commercial [here](#).)

You might be thinking, "Huh, almonds?"

Following the suppression of the revolt, the death of *Korach* and his followers, and the halt of the plague, *Hashem* commanded *Moshe* to prove once-and-for-all that it was He, and not *Moshe*, who chose who would serve Him. *Hashem* told *Moshe* to take from each tribe one staff that had the name of the leader of inscribed on it. The staff of the tribe of *Levi* had *Aaron's* name on it. The staffs were gathered and placed in the *Ohel Moed* (Tent of Meeting), *And it shall be that the man whom I shall choose, his staff will blossom.* (*Bamidbar* 17:20)

When *Moshe* entered the *Ohel Moed* the next day, he found that *the staff of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, had blossomed. It brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud, and had grown ripened almonds.* (17:23). *Moshe* took the staffs and showed them to the nation, thus proving unequivocally that it was *Hashem* Who had chosen *Aaron* as *Kohen Gadol*.

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The question begs: Why was an almond of all things used to symbolize this miracle? Why not a plumper, prettier fruit like a pomegranate?

Rashi posits that the almond is a metaphor for haste, and that's why it is the fruit that appears on *Aaron's* staff. Of all fruit-bearing trees prevalent in that region, the almond is the first to bloom; it develops quickly. When the *Tanach* references the almond, it typically implies a swift or imminent event. The almond as a metaphor for speed is a tribute to *Aaron* and his unique character. *Hashem* could have made *Aaron's* staff blossom using any other fruit tree. But that would have only shown that *Aaron* has a special role; the almond also vividly illustrates his unique character.

Kohanim have the character trait of זריזות — alacrity. *Kohanim* are energetic. (*Chullin* 123b). They do things with the proper and necessary speed, care, and energy. The *Kli Yakar* wrote that when *Hashem* wanted to show *Aaron's* uniqueness, He used almonds to indicate his unique character.

Aaron didn't grudgingly perform his duties and services; he had a hop in his step and responded with haste and בְּשִׂמְחָה — with joy. This approach is a lesson to us all. When we engage in acts of *chesed*,

mitzvahs, or favors for others, we should follow *Aaron's* example and approach these acts with similar alacrity, enthusiasm, and joy.

There is another commentary that suggests that the choice of almonds is a symbolic guide for the rules of engagement when handling disputes and debates.

Rabbi *Menachem Sacks* finds a deep symbolism that the staff produced almonds, not another fruit. Within the context of the laws of tithing, the *Mishnah* informs us that there are two types of almonds; those that are bitter when they are small and sweet when they develop; and those that are sweet when they are small and bitter when they grow bigger. (*Chullin* 1:6)

And so it is with *machlochet* (debates/disputes). According to *Rav Kook*, a disagreements that ends amicably is like the almond that starts bitter but becomes sweet. It starts bitter because one or both parties become entrenched in deep-rooted positions. But when they are dealt with respectfully in an earnest pursuit of truth, it is resolved amicably or with an agreement to disagree — the dispute ends peacefully and sweet.

Conversely, disputes often feel sweet in the moment but lead to bitterness and regrets in the long run, especially when they stray from the issue and turn personal. These often become springboards for long-term animosity and *loshon hara* when they could have become forums for understanding and cooperation.

Clearly it is preferable to start bitter and end sweet rather than the reverse.

Korach's dispute began sweet and ended bitter. He took advantage of the people's discontent and told them what they wanted to hear (sweet). His arguments turned into personal attacks and malicious slander, leading to destruction and tragedy (bitter).

According to Rav Kook, a disagreement that ends amicably is like the almond that starts bitter but becomes sweet.

The sages referenced this in a famous statement: *Any dispute for the sake of heaven ("l'shem shamayim") will have enduring value, but every dispute not for the sake of heaven ("lo l'shem shamayim") will not have enduring value. What is an example of a dispute for the sake of heaven? The disputes between [the sages] Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of one not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and his assembly. (Pirkei Avot 5:17).*

The Torah gives us a mitzvah *v'lo tihyeh k'Korach v'hadato* — one should not be like Korach and his assembly.

Another lesson from the mighty almond.

Jeff and Phyllis and son Max moved to the YIS community a quarter of a century ago. Here their twins Madelyn and Jason were born and were proud recipients of local Jewish day school education. Jeff has been very active in the greater Jewish community, including leadership roles in security and teaching life lessons thru youth sports. We are STILL waiting for a local Kosher sport bar.

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