

Korach - Rabbi Lerner - June 19, 2011

The Story of Korach - Aftermath of the Rebellion - Perek 17

In the final confrontation between Moshe and the Korach group, Moshe tells them *with this sign you will know that everything I have done is from God - if you die a wondrous way, you will know it is from God - the earth will open up its mouth and swallow you*. This then happened, swallowing many of the rebels. However, the 250 men offering incense did not fall into the earth - they were burned alive - they suffered a very different punishment. The ones who were swallowed were the families of Dasan, Aviram, and Korach - everyone else distanced themselves from them when Moshe confronted them at the end of the rebellion.

17:2-3: Hashem commands Moshe to take the fire-pans from those who were incinerated and to discard the flames because they were holy; the fire-pans should be made into an embroidered covering for the outer, copper mizbeach, the one used for korbanos, to remain as a sign, a permanent reminder to the nation of what happened in this story.

Oznayim LaTorah: what does it mean when the Torah says that they sinned *Benafshosam*, with their souls? There were clearly two different groups here, where Korach, Dasan, and Aviram were swallowed up, while others were burned. The **Meshech Chachmah** says that the Dasan faction was like an Ir Nidachas, a city that challenges Hashem, and is totally destroyed with all of their possessions because they were completely evil - all of their property was also swallowed, as happens to an Ir Nidachas - that type of city is totally laid waste. However, the fire-pans are only from the other 250 rebels. Their motive was more pure - they were not just interested in power - they were mostly bechorim who wanted to do the avodah in the Mishkan, and had intent to do holy work; but since they went about it the wrong way, they were killed. They died in a non-disfiguring way, similar to Nadav and Avihu, where the fire entered their nostrils without burning their bodies.

Why are the fire-pans holy? **Rashi**: these bechorim wanted to serve Hashem with incense - the pans were like a kli shareis, a vessel used for avodah. **Ramban**: They cannot have become holy as a kli-shares, because it was strange fire - aish zarah - that ultimately was not accepted by God. They became holy because Moshe told them to do it, and their motives were pure. But a better reason is that Hashem made these fire-pans holy to serve as a sign, a warning to the nation, for the future. **Abarbanel**: The sign is that no one should ever challenge Moshe as to who is the chosen person to serve Hashem in the mishkan - it is only Aharon and his sons doing the avodah, and only the Leviyim helping them. This sign will forever remind everyone not to start up again - they are an everlasting sign of the holy selection of these people.

Rabbeinu Bachya: Why does the Torah say *benafshosam*? There is an issue here of gilgul neshamos, reincarnation of a person's soul - a person who had not completed his mission in an earlier life. There is a source from Koheles (*a generation goes, a generation comes*) - Rabbi Akiva says this is an allusion to a generation which had previously existed. The reincarnation here of this group of 250 dates back to the generation of the dispersion (from the tower of Bavel) who wanted to make a name for themselves - they were evil and God scattered them; they were sent back to do Teshuvah. They were the people of Sedom - it says there *Ve'anshei Ha'ir, Anshei Sedom* - that the people of the city were the people of sedom - these people were the reincarnation of those same earlier sinners. In our parsha it says that they rose up *Lifnei Moshe* instead of against Moshe - these are the same people who rose once again, in a final opportunity to do the right thing - this was their third and final failure to rectify their sins.

17:5: What does this sign of the fire-pans stand for? That only the kohanim can offer incense - no one else should usurp the role assigned to them; others cannot come into the mishkan to offer ketores. People should not be like Korach and his group (*Adaso*). **Rabbeinu Bachya**: the gemorrah in Sanhedrin says that whoever perpetuates machlokes, who likes to fight and keep arguments going, violates a lav from the Torah - this is the source for a negative commandment against continuing machlokes instead of pursuing peace. **Meshech Chachmah**: the **Rambam** didn't learn like this - he said that this pasuk, which has a negative statement, is not necessary a lav from the Torah. Hashem is telling this to Moshe, to make an embroidery to the Mizbeach so the people will not to be like Korach - it is an explanation of why he should do it, but not to serve as a lav; it is a statement not to be like Korach who challenged Moshe; it is a negative commandment specifically about not challenging Kohanim, not a general lav against being a ba'al machlokes. If anything it would only be a lav against rebelling against Kohanim.

17:6: The people are not done - they continue to murmur and complain the next morning against Moshe and Aharon, saying that they are causing Jews to die, that they *killed the nation of God*. They specifically meant the 250 who were not evil; they could go along with the deaths of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram who were singled out with an exceptional death by the hand of God; however, these other 250 sought to come close to God - they had a spiritual hunger to do the Avoda. In the minds of the people, they could understand the deaths of the evil Dasan and Aviram who had a long history of being evil; it was also obvious that Korach had an evil intent; but they could not understand the deaths of these 250, and the people were very upset at the deaths of these righteous ones; they blamed Moshe and Aharon. **Ramban**: Quotes **Unkelus** who says that they claimed that Moshe caused their deaths - they died during a test of the ketores, to see whose incense was accepted; it was Moshe's suggestion to come up with this lethal test; they claim that Moshe set them up to die - it was literally playing with fire, with death if you are wrong; it did not come from God - it was Moshe's idea; the people asked why didn't he use a less potent way of testing who was right and wrong? The **Ibn Ezra** says that they had another complaint - what proof was there that the Leviyim were chosen and Aharon was selected? It was a result of Moshe's manipulation that resulted in their being selected. **Ramban**: the best explanation of their actions was that the nation acknowledged that Aharon and his sons were selected as kohanim - his ketores was accepted; their complaint was that while Aharon and his sons were selected to be the Kohanim, why cannot the bechorim be the assistants to the Kohanim - why only the Leviyim? Why cannot the bechorim of every tribe be involved with serving Hashem in the mishkan at some level - that would be a more ideal, egalitarian system. Moshe set them up to die by having them bring ketores - they didn't want to be kohanim, just assistants; they claim Moshe was setting up the system with nepotism, that only his tribe of the Leviyim should be the assistants in the Mishkan.

17:7-8: Moshe and Aharon did not know what to do, and Hashem's shechinah appeared to help and save them.

17:9: Hashem first tells Moshe and Aharon to separate themselves from these people and He will destroy this *edah*. **Abarbanel**: it was not the entire nation, because otherwise Moshe would have prayed for them, as he did after the sins of the Egel and Meraglim.

Oznayim LaTorah: what does when Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon to separate themselves from them? It means don't pray for them. These people were trying to shake the credibility of Torah. Hashem doesn't want Moshe to protect them.

A plague breaks out. Aharon uses incense to stop the epidemic, and he stood between the living and the dead. Fourteen thousand seven hundred Jews died.

Oznayim LaTorah: Aharon is the third person in the Torah to stand between the living and dead, putting his life in danger in the face of a plague. The first was Moshe at the Egel - he risked his life by standing between the condemned and the rest. The second was Pinchas, who also stood up to a lethal plague. This is the third time where someone stood up to stop a plague that was killing the Jews. It was a tremendous kiddush Hashem that Aharon did this.

17:16: Each tribe's staff is to be inscribed with their names; one of the staff is from Levi; on that staff, Aharon's name is inscribed. Aharon is considered the nasi of the tribe of Levi; although a Kohen, he is also a Levi. This might also be the reason that when there is no Levi in shul for an aliyah, the same Kohen gets the aliyah again because every Kohen is also a Levi and is more entitled to the aliyah than a yisrael. **Ramban**: In this count there is only one staff for the descendants of Yosef - there is no staff for both Efraim and Menashe. There can never be more than 12 tribes in any reckoning; by kaballa there are always only 12 tribes - that number can never change.

Meshech Chachmah: what was at the root of this argument? They didn't believe that there was something intrinsic to the tribe of Levi - that it was not birthright, but ability that should be the determinant of this job - that could make it something that could be challenged by people of ability. But in fact, it was an issue of yichus and not ability; this was shown by taking the 12 staffs - they were all exactly the same - pieces of dead wood from the same type of tree; one will be brought to life to bear fruit - there was something intrinsic to that staff that Hashem sees that makes it into a special branch; likewise, the tribe of Levi had a special intrinsic value that no one else can see, and they should not try to challenge God's selection.