

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT KORACH

Two Complaints of the Nation, and the Re-Appointment of Aharon

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There's an old joke about a Rabbi who could only give derashot about parashat Korach, and so when it came time to give his derasha on the weekly parasha he would find weird and wonderful ways of connecting any parasha in the Torah to the story of Korach. Indeed, some of Chazal's teachings on this parasha are quite curious, and among later commentators, too, there are some particularly interesting ideas which arise in the context of our parasha – particularly with regard to Korach's words, "the entire congregation is holy." However, even a simple and literal rendition of the text presents difficulties.

In this shiur we shall concentrate on two central complaints which appear in this week's parasha, one after the other, both aimed against Moshe and Aharon.

Let us first recall the story: First, Korach, Datan and Aviram, On ben Pelet and two-hundred and fifty other notables complained against Moshe and Aharon: "For the entire congregation is holy, and God is among them; why then do you lord it over God's congregation?" (16:3). In the wake of this questioning of Moshe and Aharon's leadership, it is decided to conduct a test to determine whom God has chosen. Anyone desiring to serve in the mishkan is required to offer incense (ketoret): "And Moshe said to Korach:

You and your whole congregation shall be before God, you and they and Aharon, tomorrow. And each person shall take his incense pan and shall place incense upon it, and shall offer it before God tomorrow, each person and his incense pan – two hundred and fifty incense pans – and you and Aharon, each with your incense pan.' And each person took his incense pan and put fire in it, and placed incense upon it ..." (Bamidbar 16:16-8).

The ketoret serves as a TEST to determine the person whom God has chosen to serve in the mishkan.

Parallel to this test, Korach, Datan and Aviram receive a punishment - the earth swallows them up. This particular punishment would seem to be connected to an additional complaint: "Is it not sufficient that you took us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to make us die in the desert; you also make yourself a prince over us? Nor have you brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey..." (16:13-14). While challenging Aharon's priesthood, they simultaneously raise a most serious accusation, reminiscent of the second complaint of Benei Yisrael in their journey from Egypt to Har Sinai (the complaint in the wilderness of Sin, Shemot 16) - but here the wording of the complaint is particularly strong. Using the phrase "a land flowing with milk and honey" to describe the land of Egypt is certainly a pointedly sarcastic reference to Moshe's

promise to take the nation to a land he described in the same way. Datan and Aviram deliberately and explicitly use the same language. Their words hence contain a harsh criticism of Moshe and Aharon's leadership – not only with regard to the priesthood, but in regard to the entire exodus of the nation into the desert.

It appears that this additional complaint is what justifies the special punishment which singled them out from amongst the group of complainers, those who offered up the ketoret. Only after the earth swallows them up do we read of the punishment of the others: "And a fire went out from before the Lord, and it devoured the two hundred and fifty men who had offered incense" (16:35).

But even after the "incense test" indicated that Aharon was chosen for the priesthood, the nation was not appeased. They now accuse Moshe and Aharon of responsibility for the death of the 250 who had offered incense. This was a most serious accusation, with the implication that in order to hold onto their high office they had put 250 people to death.

In order to deal with this complaint a further test is proposed (the twelve staffs placed before God). Again Aharon is clearly chosen. This time the test is acceptable to the nation, and their reaction is the complete opposite of their original claim - they no longer wish to be among those who serve in the mishkan; now they fear approaching the mishkan at all:

"And Benei Yisrael said to Moshe saying, 'Behold, we shall perish and die; all of us shall die. Anyone who approaches – who approaches God's sanctuary will die; shall we perish altogether?' (17:27-8).

The style of the description of this cry is distinctly lyrical in character (the translation does not do justice to the poetical qualities of the Torah's language here). The lyrical motifs reflect the nation's fear, giving us the impression that their great terror leads them to stuttering ("who approaches – who approaches") and confusion. The solution to the problem raised by the nation is, "And God said to Aharon, 'You and your children and your father's house with you will bear the responsibility of the mikdash" – and thus the Torah returns to the beginning of the story and closes the cycle. In the beginning the nation (or a part thereof) complained about the selection of Aharon for the priesthood, in the end this very situation is presented as the solution to the problem raised by the nation and in response to their fears.

However, this reading gives rise to a number of problems concerning the development of the story. Let us focus on three of them:

Firstly, what is the result of the first test, the offering of the incense? We see no evidence of God choosing one incense pan in preference over the others.

Secondly, the nation's second complaint revolves around the accusation that "you have put God's nation to death." The reaction to this should include a proof that it was God Who put

those who offered incense to death, and not Moshe and Aharon. Instead, all we find is yet another test related to the original complaint – the selection of God's chosen.

Thirdly, why does the nation's fear of approaching the mishkan appear following the selection of Aharon's staff? This test involved no punishment or death; their terror would have seemed more appropriate after the devouring of the 250 men by fire!

Let us deal with the first question. What is the result of the first test? How does the offering of the ketoret clarify who is worthy of the priesthood? The basic assumption underlying this test is that "one who is not of the seed of Aharon the priest" (16:5), who comes to offer ketoret, will die – because only the kohen chosen by God is permitted to offer ketoret. In other words, this test arranged by Moshe does not merely indicate the chosen priest, it is based on that choice itself. Only the person who is chosen may offer ketoret, and obviously he will live on after this sacrifice, but if you were not chosen by God and you still chose to offer ketoret, your penalty is death. And so, the results of the test are to be discerned in the fire which "went out from before God and devoured the two hundred and fifty men who offered ketoret" (16:35). This is not merely the punishment for the complaint, but rather a genuine clarification of the claim. Anyone who came to offer incense "in competition" with Aharon endangered himself, for if he was not truly worthy of priesthood then he would pay for this attempt with his life. This wording – "and a fire went out from before God and devoured..." – recalls the punishment of Nadav and Avihu on the eighth day of the consecration of the mishkan: "And a fire went out from before God and devoured them, and they died before God" (Vayikra 10:2). The connection between the two events is clear; in both cases those who offer foreign incense without being so commanded are burned. This is not necessarily a punishment for something that they have done, but rather a direct consequence of the actual offering of the incense.

When the nation complains to Moshe and Aharon that they have put God's nation to death, this is not merely another complaint, but rather a rejection of the cenproof of God's choice. The fundamental assumption of the test of the ketoret was that anyone not worthy of offering it would die by God's hand. If it was Moshe and Aharon who had put the 250 men to death, however, then nothing had been proven, and Aharon was not shown to have been chosen. Therefore – and this answers our second question – further clarification is brought for the original complaint. The additional test comes not to respond directly to the claim that Moshe and Aharon had put the 250 men to death, but rather to prove once again Aharon's selection, since the nation refused to accept the result of the first test.

The way in which the Torah emphasizes that we are returning here to the original test, and that this did not represent proof of anything new, is to draw a clear parallel between the first complaint – "the entire congregation is holy" – and the second – "you have put God's nation to death". All the motifs of the first complaint appear in the second one, too. Let us briefly compare them:

a. The complaint: "And they GATHERED to Moshe and to Aharon and said to them, 'It is too much for you; for the entire congregation – all are holy and God is among them; why then do you elevate yourselves over GOD'S CONGREGATION'" (16:3);

"And all the congregation of Benei Yisrael complained the next morning to Moshe and to Aharon saying, 'you have put GOD'S CONGREGATION to death. And it was, when the congregation GATHERED to Moshe and Aharon ...'" (17:6-7).

b. Moshe's response: "And Moshe heard and fell upon his face" (16:4);

"And they fell upon their faces" (17:10).

c. Revelation of God's glory in the Ohel Mo'ed: "And Korach GATHERED the whole congregation to them to the entrance of the OHEL MO'ED. And God's glory appeared to the whole congregation";

"And it was, when the congregation GATHERED to Moshe and Aharon and they turned to the OHEL MO'ED, and behold – a cloud covered it, and the glory of God was visible" (17:7).

d. God's words: "'Separate yourselves from this congregation and I shall devour them in an instant' – and they fell upon their faces" (16:21);

"Rise up from amongst this congregation and I shall devour them in an instant' – and they fell upon their faces" (17:10).

In both instances Moshe and Aharon attempt to cancel the evil decree – the first time by prayer, and the second time by Aharon's atonement for the people by means of the ketoret.

e. The test for the chosen one: As already discussed, in both instances there is a test in which Aharon prevails over his adversaries and it is proved that he is the one worthy and chosen for priesthood.

f. Memorial of the test: "And he lifted the incense pan from the midst of the burning and scatter the fire outwards...' and it was A SIGN TO BENEI YISRAEL... a memorial to Benei Yisrael" (17:2-5);

"Place Aharon's staff before the ark of testimony as a keepsake, AS A SIGN TO THE REBELLIOUS PEOPLE."

[g. In fact, if we take this comparison further we see that corresponding to the nation's complaint following the taking of the incense pans as a memorial, "You have put God's nation to death", we later find "See, we shall perish, we shall die; all of us shall die." The death which serves as the topic of the complaint against Moshe and Aharon now serves as the reason for the great fear on the part of the nation to approach the kodesh.]

Now we are able to answer the third question. Why was it only after the second test – the blossoming of Aharon's staff, involving no death – that the people fear to approach the mishkan? As mentioned, this fear would have seemed more appropriate following the first test, when more than 250 people lost their lives. But in light of our discussion, it is only in the wake of the second test that it becomes clear to the nation that the 250 indeed lost their lives because they offered incense without being permitted to do so. At first, the nation suspected Moshe and Aharon of having put "God's nation" to death, and so they had no reason to fear approaching the kodesh. It was only after Aharon's selection was clearly and openly displayed that they understood that their second claim simply had no substance, and that the kodesh itself consumed those who entered without authorization. Now the nation experiences the full awe and fear of approaching the kodesh, which brings death to those who are not permitted to be there.