

Parashas Korach

Parsha Summary

Korach ben Yitzhar, with Dasan, Aviram, and On ben Pelet, complain that Moshe and Aharon made themselves the leaders. Moshe suggests that they all come to the Ohel Mo'ed to bring incense tomorrow, while Moshe unsuccessfully tried to appease the leaders of the rebellion. Moshe prays to God to punish them, but not be angry at the rest of the people. The next day, [Korach,] Dasan, and Aviram and their people are swallowed up by the earth with their families, and 250 people with incense fire-pans were burnt alive by God. God tells then Moshe that those fire-pans were sanctified, and he hammer them into a covering for the altar as a remembrance that people should not be like Korach.

The people then complain that Moshe and Aharon are causing Israelites to die, and so the people are punished with a plague. At Moshe's instruction, Aharon brought incense to stop the plague, and he was successful in doing so, but 14,700 people had already died. God tells Moshe to prove that Aharon was chosen by placing Aharon's staff in the Mishkan overnight together with sticks from the other twelve tribes, and the next day Aharon's staff was found to have sprouted flowers and almonds. God reminds Aharon that it is his and Leviim's responsibility to ensure that the people do not get too close to the Mishkan, lest they be killed. The Parsha ends with the gifts that should be given to the Kohanim: some sacrificial parts, Terumah, and firstborns. Leviim are to be given a tithe, and the Levi himself must give a tenth of that to the Kohen.

Classic Questions

What motivated Korach and his followers against Moshe and Aharon?

- **Chazal** (Yer. Sanhedrin 10:1): Korach was a heretic who did believe in the divinity of Moshe's teachings, because they don't make sense. A *tallis* entirely of *tekheiles* should not need tzitzis, and a room full of *seforim* should not need a *mezuzah*
 - **Meshech Chochmah**: really, Korach knew that Moshe was God's messenger, but nevertheless rebelled against the Torah that he was teaching them
- **Rashi**: As the son of Yitzhar ben Kehat, Korach was insulted that Elitzafan son of Uziel was named as the leader of the family of Kehat, since Yitzhar was older than Uziel
- **Ibn Ezra**: the people were angry that the sacrificial service was taken from the firstborns and given to the Kohanim (so this story actually occurred much earlier)
 - **Klei Chemdah**: they thought anyone anywhere should be allowed to bring a *korban* (as when *bamos*, personal altars were permitted)
- **Ramban**: they opposed Moshe's leadership, and knew they could stir up a rebellion when they heard that they would all be dying in the desert and not going to Canaan
- **Abarbanel/Chasam Sofer/Malbim**: several factions joined Korach, each with separate interests (combining the above complaints mentioned by different commentators)

Why did God say that the fire-pans were sanctified if they were used for a rebellion?

- **Rashi/Ibn Ezra/Abarbanel:** despite the sinful motivations of the people who brought them, at the end of the day these fire-pans were still meant to serve a sacrificial purpose
- **Ramban** (his 2nd answer): these would not have been holy automatically, but God wanted them sanctified in order to be a reminder for what happened to Korach's men
- **Akeidas Yitzchak:** the fire-pans were sacred because they were a vehicle through which the truth of God's choosing Aharon was expressed
- **Ha'amek Davar:** these people (but not Dasan and Aviram) sinned because of their deep desire to serve God, and even though their actions were inappropriate, their sacrificing their lives out of devotion to God is worth commemorating

What did the test of the flowering staff add to the previous miracles just done for Aharon?

- **Ramban:** so far, only Aharon's appointment was proven, not that he represented Levi
 - **Ramban:** they thought the service should still belong to the firstborns
 - **Bechor Shor:** they thought that the Leviim's service could be done by anyone
- **Ibn Ezra:** there was still room for the nation to think that some trick was at play
 - **Seforno/Rashbam:** perhaps anyone who brings incense inappropriately is killed
- **Ohr Hachayim:** people might think that miracles were performed on behalf of Moshe, a great prophet, but not specifically that Aharon was chosen by God as his Kohen Gadol

Important "Chazal"s or "Rashi"s

- What happened to On ben Pelet? His wife wanted to save him from the fate of Korach's followers, so she sat by the entrance to her tent and exposed herself, so no one would immodestly come near to call him to gather with the others (Sanhedrin 109b)
- R. Yochanan said, Korach was neither among the "burnt" or the "swallowed." A Braisa says that Korach was included in both the "burnt" and the "swallowed" (Sanhedrin 110a)
- Where did Moshe learn that Aharon's incense would stop the plague? This secret was taught to him by the Angel of Death, when Moshe was on Mt. Sinai (Shabbos 88a)
 - **Rashi (and others):** this showed that *ketores* itself is not the source of death, as the people thought (since Korach's followers died bringing *ketores*)
 - **Rakanti** (explained by R. Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim Mo'adim* 3 p. 132): the "secret" is that death comes through disconnecting from God, and *ketores*, which is Aramaic for "tying," strengthens the connection to God, the source of life

A Short Vort

After extremely dramatic demonstrations of the validity of Moshe and Aharon's leadership, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Israelites, why did God still want to perform the test of Aharon's staff? Beyond the reasons given by the commentators above, perhaps God wanted to make the same point, but through a different method--instead of teaching about Aharon's role through violence and destruction, God wanted to impart the same message by peaceful means. Aharon was chosen to teach with love, and provide Israel with life, symbolized by his flowering staff, which is the primary, positive aspect of his leadership, not the deaths of all the many who challenged it. (R. Jonathan Sacks)