

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

ד"ס

Parashat Korah Part II

1. On the Death of Korah

The passage that relates the deaths of Dathan and Abiram and their circle contains an ambiguity concerning the fate of Korah. G-d told Moses to caution the assembly to keep their distance from the “*mishkan* of Korah, Dathan and Abiram” (the dissidents’ religious headquarters). When Moses and the elders of Israel arrive at that site the text mentions that Dathan and Abiram came forth standing defiantly by their tents, but no mention is made of Korah. In describing the miraculous event that occurred, the text also speaks specifically about Dathan and Abiram, that “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, their households and all the men who belonged to Korah...and they perished from the midst of the assembly” (Num. 16:32-33). “All the men who belonged to Korah” implies that Korah himself was not one of those swallowed; he obviously was not present. Had he been present we may assume that as the ringleader he would have been explicitly mentioned. Based on this text we assume he was with the 250 chieftains who were presenting incense at the Tent of Meeting.

The Torah immediately turns to the fate of those chieftains: “A fire came forth from Hashem and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense” (v. 35). Here too, Korah’s fate is ambiguous – the 250 chieftains died, but there is no mention of Korah. The 250 had constituted a distinct group exclusive of Korah, as the text previously spoke of them in addition to him (vv. 2, 17). Thus, our narrative does not state what became of Korah, a matter the reader must ponder.

In the fortieth year census, upon mention of Dathan and Abiram, the Torah elaborates: “They are Dathan and Abiram, chosen of the ‘*edah*’ (‘assembly’), who incited against Moses and Aaron within the ‘*edah*’ of Korah, when they incited against Hashem; and the

earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korah □ with the death of the ‘*edah*, when the fire consumed the 250 men” (Num. 26:9-10). There is some ambiguity here. Verse 9 states that Dathan and Abiram’s insurgency against Moses and Aaron was incorporated in the insurgency of Korah’s ‘*edah*’ against Hashem. Verse 10 begins with the statement that the earth swallowed “them” – that is, Dathan and Abiram – but the next phrase, “and Korah,” is not clear. It may be continuing the clause, “swallowed them and Korah,” which would be a straightforward reading if the verse concluded at that point. But what follows would then be a bit difficult to interpret: “with the death of the ‘*edah*’” (which surely refers to the ‘*edah*’ of Korah □, not the circle of Dathan and Abiram) would not connect smoothly. Thus, the words from “and Korah” forward might be rendered “when Korah died with the death of the ‘*edah*’ when the fire consumed the 250 men.”

Many have wondered whether the ambiguity in the biblical text is intentional given that Korah was the coordinating force promoting both groups and thus deserved the fate of both. In our Numbers 16 context it surely appears to be intentionally ambiguous.

Citing the key verses, the sages proffered differing interpretations and disagreed on the matter of Korah’s death. Thus we read (*b. Sanh.* 110a): “Rabbi Johanan stated: Korah died neither by being swallowed up nor by incineration; in a *baraita* it was taught: he was both incinerated and swallowed up.” (Of course the latter statement was not intended to be literal. It metaphorically expressed the idea that a leader of two evil groups will suffer the retributive consequences of both.)

Ibn Ezra considered Korah to be one of the incinerated. His primary proof is from the Torah’s explanation of G-d’s command that the fire pans of the incinerated men were to be beaten and plated

around the sacrificial altar to serve as a reminder to Israel. The reminder was that whosoever is not a descendant of Aaron is not to offer incense before Hashem, “that he should not be [end up] like Korah and his assembly” (Num. 17:5). Hence, he concludes that Korah□ died with his *‘edah* in connection with presenting incense. But given that Korah□ was the leader of the assembly, indeed, it was called “his assembly,” even had he died separately from the 250 men, it would still be justified to refer to him in this verse. He led the men of his assembly to accept the incense challenge and was a cause of their death, regardless of how he died.

Perhaps there is an indication in Psalm 106:16-18, which refers to these insurrections, that Korah was among the incinerated:

16. They were envious of Moses in the camp, of Aaron holy of Hashem.
17. The earth opened, swallowing Dathan, covering the assembly of Abiram.
18. Fire blazed in their assembly, a flame incinerating the wicked.

Verse 16a may refer to Dathan and Abiram whose arguments were against Moses. The second colon may refer to Korah, since Dathan and Abiram did not express any grievance against Aaron while Moses did accuse Korah of seeking the priesthood and complaining against Aaron. (It may also be that all of verse 16 refers to Korah.) Verse 17 elaborates on Dathan and Abiram. (Separation of their names into two clauses is a poetic device, the whole verse applying to both.) Verse 18 refers to 16b as an elaboration on Korah and his assembly, implying he was incinerated.

The absence of Korah’s name in this psalm requires an explanation. It has traditionally been explained (see Rashi) as a result of the fact that “the sons of Korah□ did not die” (Num. 26:11) and eventually became prestigious temple servitors. They were present when the psalms were sung. The *bene Korah*□ appellation appears in the superscription of eleven psalms (42; 44–49, 84; 85; 87; 88) and they are referred to as temple guards (1 Chr. 9:19). The Torah’s account of Korah is a narrative and the details must be related, but to explicitly celebrate his destruction in the presence of his progeny would be in poor taste.

After all is said and done, harmonization of the various sources on this matter is extremely difficult.

2. Numbers 17

Despite the fact that the chieftains had grievously sinned, G-d informed Moses that the fire pans they had used for the incense test had become holy. (After all, the test had been authorized.) Accordingly, He instructed Moses to have Eleazar – whose responsibilities included “the Tabernacle and all that was in it” (Num. 4:16) – remove them and have them hammered into plating for the sacrificial altar. The plating would serve as a permanent reminder that an unauthorized person may not come forth to offer incense lest he end up as Korah and his assembly (Num. 17:1-5).

Since the sacrificial altar was bronze-plated and the fire pans were made of bronze, they were suitable to be used for an additional coating; perhaps the additional layer was made in a distinctive manner that served as a sign. People would learn the story behind the unusual plating; perhaps there was an inscription. Located in the courtyard before the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, within which the incense altar was located, a visible reminder of the fate of Korah and his assembly would serve as a potent warning to a potential encroacher.

The following morning “the whole assembly of Israelites” (כָּל עֵדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) complained to Moses and Aaron: “You killed Hashem’s people!” (Num. 17:6). In casting this accusation against Moses and Aaron and referring to the dead insurgents so respectfully, the people reveal that they were far removed from understanding the profundity of what had actually transpired. The two wondrous episodes of the destruction of those who challenged the legitimacy of Moses and Aaron’s authority did not succeed in convincing the people that Moses and Aaron were not ultimately responsible for the many deaths. After all, Moses’ suggestion of the incense test – knowing well the deadly potential of offering incense in the Tabernacle – could be viewed as causative to the death of the chieftains; his introductory remarks regarding the coming event before the earth swallowed Dathan and Abiram and their group brought about those deaths.

Obviously, many harbored a suspicion that Moses and Aaron had misrepresented G-d's choices for Israelite leadership (a suspicion that will be addressed shortly thereafter with the tribal staffs) and somehow manipulated the situation. An aspect of Korah's underlying challenge continued. The people had not yet internalized a basic and critical point of theology, that G-d was not manipulatable. The old notions of religion were deeply entrenched and not easily eradicated.

Once again, Hashem instructed Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the *'edah* for He intended to destroy it. Once again the faithful servants "fall on their faces," connoting prayer and the request for divine guidance as to how to proceed (vv. 9-10). But there was no preventing widespread retribution – Hashem saw fit that retribution was necessary.

Moses instructed Aaron to take the fire-pan, set on it fire (glowing coals) from the altar, place incense, hurry to the people and make expiation for them, as the plague had begun. Aaron immediately complied. His "running" to the people reflected his concern for them and added to the impact of the procedure. With the incense "he stood between the dead and the living" and the plague was terminated (vv. 11-13).

There is no mention that G-d instructed Moses to employ this measure, although some commentators assume it. However, since on this occasion G-d did not enter into any dialogue with Moses as He did in the cases of the golden calf and the scouts, perhaps He left it up to Moses to act. Moses quickly devised an emergency measure that would suit the occasion, bring forth an important lesson to the people and inspire them to recommit themselves to the covenant so that G-d might relent from His anger. Moses may have been praying but it is not mentioned. He chose the incense procedure since the incense service in the Tabernacle was designed for repentance and atonement and atonement was needed at this time. An effective incense procedure in Aaron's hands would dramatically demonstrate that he was G-d's authentic choice for the priesthood. And it would teach a relevant lesson about the incense.

The accusation against Moses and Aaron that "You killed Hashem's people!" was probably connected to their allowing the chieftains to offer incense in the

sanctuary. Now, the people saw that the incense in the hands of Aaron even outside the sanctuary, contributed to saving their lives. The incense can kill and it can give life, depending on G-d's will.

The number of people that died in the plague was 14,700, undoubtedly an allegorical number. As a conspicuous multiple of the number seven, a number associated with completion and perfection in the ancient Near East, in our context it seems to connote individuals of prominence associated with the "old guard," those who were unwilling to abandon cherished ways of thought and practice. The number eight (and its decimal multiples) was the signifier of the covenant with G-d, as we have often pointed out.* The way of life advocated by G-d's revelation and His lawgiving was revolutionary; it necessitated giving up stale ways of thinking and abiding by the dynamic order of the Torah, represented in our narrative by the prophecy of Moses. Many refused to change. Those who died as a consequence of complaining against Moses after G-d supported him against the challenges to his prophetic authority represent those who would not accept the new system G-d put into operation for Israel. (In some form or other the "old" continued to coexist with the "new" for a long time.)

Subsequent to the plague, the need remained to strengthen the people's acceptance of the divine selection of the tribe of Levi and of Aaron as head of the tribe. G-d instructed Moses to have each tribal head submit his staff (the sign of his authority), with his individual name inscribed upon it, to be placed in the Tent of Meeting, with Aaron's staff representing the tribe of Levi among them. All complied. The next morning Aaron's staff had sprouted, bringing forth flowers, buds and ripened almonds. (Since the vegetative steps are out of botanical order, it appears that different parts of the staff were in various stages of development.) G-d instructed that Aaron's staff should be kept before the testimony (in the Tabernacle) as a sign to help prevent future complaints against his selection (vv. 16-25).**

With deathly retribution meted out through earthquake, fire and plague, despite the fact that each was in response to a serious transgression, the public had a deep feeling of apprehension concerning its relationship to the sanctuary. In this regard they subsequently exclaimed, "Whoever approaches

Hashem's Tabernacle will die" (Num. 17:28). A general feeling of unease with the sanctuary had set in.

3. Numbers 18

G-d responded sympathetically to the people's fears. He instructed Aaron that he, his sons and his father's house "shall bear the guilt associated with the sanctuary" (תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת עֹון הַמִּקְדָּשׁ) and that he and his sons "shall bear the guilt associated with your priesthood" (תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת עֹון כֹּהֲנֵיכֶם) [18:1]. In the following verses He adds that the Levites are to assist in this responsibility. A major demand is here being made from priests and Levites. This passage increases the charge that was placed on these sanctuary servitors in Numbers 3 and 4 to protect sanctuary and sancta from encroachment by an unauthorized individual. Henceforth, priests and Levites will be required to be extra-diligent to prevent any trespass in the realm of the holy, for if they are negligent they will bear the punishment for any violation (Ibn Ezra). This relieves the people from their fears since there is provision to guard against the members of the public who might get carried away and approach the sanctuary.

Rashi articulates his interpretation of תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת עֹון הַמִּקְדָּשׁ in an absolutist manner. He states: "Upon you I place the punishment for unauthorized individuals who may sin in matters pertaining to the holy which are under your stewardship; you [therefore] should 'sit and caution' [an expression used in the sense of 'be constantly vigilant' to protect yourself] against any possible trespass of anybody." If somebody trespasses, the punishment is meted out to the priests or the Levites, whoever was negligent in his stewardship. By transferring the punishment of encroachment to the guardians, protection of the sanctity of sanctuary and sancta is maximized and the public is completely assured.

In his commentary on Isaiah 53:11, a verse that is part of a passage that speaks of the "suffering servant," Rashi cites our verse to illustrate the case being described there. On the clause "and their punishment he shall bear" (וְעֹונָתָם הוּא יִסְבֵּל), he states: "in the manner of the righteous, as is written in Numbers 18:1, 'you shall bear the guilt associated with the sanctuary.'" Rashi understands the view expressed in that Isaiah verse to be thus: just as the priest is

responsible for the maintenance of the sanctuary's holiness, the righteous individual is responsible for the maintenance of society's proper standards. An aspect of the responsibility of the righteous individual is to ensure that there is no violation of social justice; to maximize his efforts in this task, he bears the punishment of those who violate the standards.***

As a result of the complaints and seriousness of the subject, in Numbers 18 G-d grants Aaron a review and clarification of the laws designed to strengthen priestly and Levitical assignments concerning the sanctuary. Attached is the primary statement in the Torah of details concerning priestly and Levitical prerequisites and associated regulations.

It is noteworthy that except for one other passage, the only instances in the Torah of divine instructions addressed solely to Aaron are in our Numbers 18 chapter. In verses 1, 8 and 20, he is mentioned as the sole recipient of Hashem's communication. The other case of such a communication is the passage prohibiting priests from drinking wine or intoxicants before sanctuary service (Lev. 10:8), a statement of law located within the account of the aftermath of the Nadab and Abihu tragedy. Although the passages of our chapter are relevant to the priesthood in general, their placement where they are fosters the impression that Aaron's vindication is being celebrated.

4. The Doings of the Fathers Are a Sign for the Sons (מַעֲשֵׂי אֲבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים)

The scriptural narrative that deals with the leading military figure who remained on the home front after the Babylonians vanquished and exiled Judah, Johanan son of Kareah, contains remarkable associations with the account of Korah of our *parasha*. Besides the similarity of names (Korah and Kareah are both spelled with the same three root letters קרה, which has the root meaning of "baldness," or perhaps "ice"), there is a significant resemblance of events. There also are several striking literary correspondences between the account of Johanan son of Kareah in Jeremiah (chs. 40–43) and the account of Korah in our *parasha*.

Johanan son of Kareah□ headed a group that at a most critical juncture for the nation openly repudiated Hashem's prophecy through Jeremiah and led the

group in rebellion. Hashem instructed Jeremiah that the remnant that had not been exiled to Babylonia should remain in Judah; the repudiation culminated in descending (returning) to Egypt. That uprising was back-to-back with the treacherous political insurrection of Ishmael son of Nethaniah of the royal family stemming from King David. Evidently a contender for the throne, Ishmael was filled with resentment and hatred at being passed over for the leadership of the nation. With a group of cohorts and with backing from the king of Ammon, he assassinated Gedaliah, the recently appointed governor of Judah, preventing the reestablishment of the nation in the land of Israel.

- The words of Korah and his associates to Moses, although not explicit, are equivalent to what Johanan son of Kareah□ and his cohorts said to Jeremiah: “You speak falsely! Hashem our G-d did not send you to say...” (Jer. 43:2).

It is difficult to interpret the meaning of all this but the linkage surely appears to be there.

Endnotes

* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

** One wonders if the first prophecy of Jeremiah (who is also a priest), which involved an almond branch (Jer. 1:11), is associated with Aaron’s almond-generating staff.

*** How did the spokesman of society – who is represented to be making the appreciative statement on behalf of the public in the passage of G-d’s suffering servant – understand the underlying theology of the case? How can G-d allow his servant to bear the pain of others? The suffering servant is a most righteous individual who deeply cares for G-d’s creation and strives with all his might to improve society. We may assume he has a program to encourage people to improve their ways. G-d is merciful and just, but in His judgment, the wicked at some point would have exceeded their right to continue living. The servant feels that if they could live longer he might succeed in accomplishing his task. Perhaps the spokesman of society assumed that if the servant sincerely requested it G-d would allow him to bear the punishment of the sinful for a period of time to provide him (the servant) the opportunity to continue his work. To some degree this is reminiscent of Moses’ arguments on behalf of Israel, asking G-d to allow the sinful to live longer than His judgment would allow. But of course G-d does not employ vicarious punishment.

Note the following literary correspondences:

- וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח...וַיִּדְתֵּן וְאַבְיָרָם וַיִּקַּח (“Korah took...and Dathan and Abiram” [Num. 16:1]) and וַיִּקַּח יוֹחָנָן בֶּן קָרֵחַ וְכָל שָׂרֵי הַחַיִּלִּים (“Johanan son of Kareah took and all the captains of the soldiers” [Jer. 41:16; 43:5])
- Moses said that ה' שְׁלַחַנִי (“Hashem sent me”), and because the rebels rejected that point they were going to die (Num. 16:28, 29). Jeremiah said regarding G-d, אֲשֶׁר שְׁלַחַנִי אֵלֵיכֶם (“who sent me to you”), and because the rebels refused to submit to His word they would die (Jer. 42:21)
- Moses was accused of taking the Israelites out of Egypt לְהַמִּיתנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר (“to kill us in the wilderness”) and not bring us to the land (Num. 16:13-14). Jeremiah was charged with leading them to the same consequence albeit in reverse, trying to prevent them from leaving the land to go to Egypt לְהַמִּית אֶתְנוּ (“to kill us” [Jer. 43:3]).
- The clause narrating of Moses concluding his words to Dathan and Abiram states: וַיְהִי כִּכְּתוֹב (“And it was, as he finished speaking all these words” [Num. 16:31]). This is similar to the words referring to Jeremiah concluding his prophecy: וַיְהִי כִּכְלֹת וַיְרַמְּהוּ לְדַבֵּר...אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (“And it was, as Jeremiah finished speaking...all these words” [Jer. 43:1]).