

Notes for Parsha Korach: Numbers 16:1 – 18:32

The main narrative of this parsha is the rebellion of Korach, Dathan and Abiram. Scholars believe that there were originally two separate narratives – the first being the religious rebellion of Korach against the priesthood and the second being the civil uprising by Dathan and Abiram against Moses. Numbers 27:3 mentions only Korach as having rebelled while Deuteronomy 11:6 and Psalms 106:17 only Dathan and Abiram are mentioned. There is no date as to when these two narratives might have been merged together to form one narrative.

Korach's, of the Levites, main complaint was that if all the Israelite community was holy and the Lord was in their midst, then why did Moses and Aaron have the leadership of the community.

Moses fell on his face and prayed. Then he told Korach and all his band to bring fire pans and light incense on them before God. Aaron was to do the same and God would choose the holy one as the leader.

When Moses asked Dathan and Abiram to attend as well, they refused because they believed that Moses was "lording" it over the community.

The next day finds Korach, his followers and Aaron lighting their fire pans and laying incense on them. God appears at this moment and tells Moses and Aaron to move away from the community so he can annihilate them. The people drop to their knees and pray with the words, "אל אלהי הרוחת לכל בשר האיש" "God, God of breaths of all the man flesh."

God relents and tells the people to move away from the tents of Korach, Dathan and Abiram so they aren't wiped out with the three rebels for their sins.

God opens the earth at this point and the ground swallows Dathan and Abiram, their families and their possessions as well as all Korach's people and their possessions. The people cry out in fear and flee for fear they will be next. This is followed by a fire that comes from God and consumes the 250 men and their fire pans. God's next instructions are to remove the fire pans as they have now become sacred objects, discard the coals abroad and then hammer the fire pans into sheets for plating on the altar.

The day after this event, the people rail against Moses and Aaron believing it was they who brought death upon the community. Again, God appears and threatens to annihilate the community. This time, Moses has Aaron take the fire pan, fill it with fire from the altar, add incense and take it quickly into the community. Aaron does so, standing between the dead on one side and the living on the other. The plague halts and Aaron returned to Moses at the Tent of Meeting.

This story has generated much discussion over the centuries. The sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods saw themselves as the spiritual descendants of Moses and they interpreted Korach's punishment as a warning against their contemporaries who challenged their authority and the divine sanctity of their teachings.¹

Korach's question is one of great importance, particularly in our modern world. If we are all holy and God dwells among us, the people, then why do we need leaders – rabbis, cantors, i.e. to instruct us? We can also ask why we need so many laws to make us holy; if we are indeed, a holy people, then we shouldn't need commandments to make us holy.

According to Martin Buber, Korach's question is one that is insoluble contradiction because holiness can never be fully realized within history, yet the people are to act as if it can be or even as if it has been completely realized.²

The next occurrence in this parsha are instructions to Moses from God to take staffs from the chieftains and place them in the Tent of the Pact along with Aaron's staff. Nothing happened with any of the staffs but that of Aaron which sprouted, produced blossoms and then brought forth almonds. The staffs were returned to each of the tribal chieftains who had engraved their names on them and Aaron's was left in the Tent of the Pact where it would be a reminder to the rebels.

This narrative is followed by instructions to Aaron and his sons about their duties in relation to the Tabernacle and sanctuary. The instructions to the Levites about the discharge of their duties follows. The implication that we see is that Aaron and his sons are to care for the Holy of Holies – the inner most part of the sanctuary while the Levites care for the areas around the Holy of Holies.

Instructions for the offerings to the Levites and priesthood along with the instruction about how much goes to the Levites as opposed to the priests and how the offerings are to be prepared and eaten.

The parsha ends with the reminder that the Levites will have no territorial portion of the Land when the Israelites eventually arrive there.

¹ Plaut, Gunther, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Union of Hebrew Congregations, NY, 1981, p1132

² Buber, Martin, *Moses*, p.186