

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT KORACH

The Election of the Tribe of Levi

by Rav Ezra Bick

Analysis of the arguments advanced in the Korach controversy is complicated. It seems evident that more than one simple complaint is present here, a fact underscored by the way that the Torah distinguishes between those who "took" (Korach, Datan, Aviram, and On ben Pelet) and those who joined (the 250 princes). Similarly, there is a clear distinction in punishment between those swallowed up in the ground, and those who, after bringing the incense to the Ohel Moed, were consumed by fire. (To which group did Korach belong? - See quest. 1, below.) Without going into too many specifics, it seems fair to conclude that there was a political rebellion directed against Moshe, clearly articulated by Datan and Aviram's refusal to appear before him and their retort, "Shall you then lord over us?" (16,13); and a rebellion against religious authority and religious restraint, directed against Aharon, as seen by Moshe's suggestion that the 250 princes bring incense, a priestly function, before God. (Again - to which group did Korach belong?) The relationship between the two, and the role Korach played in combining them, is a fascinating topic - which I shall not address! (See quest. 2, below.) Rather, I wish to discuss a third matter of dissension, one whose origin appears to be hidden in the original controversy, but which becomes evident at the end.

The story of Korach concludes with the blossoming of the staff of Aharon, representative of the tribe of Levi. Immediately thereafter the Torah records God's command to the Kohanim and Leviim. Clearly, the miracle of the staff points not only to Aharon (and the election of the Kohanim), but to the entire tribe of Levi, since his staff was one of twelve - one for each tribe. This point is emphasized in the wording of the command to take the staffs: "And you shall write Aharon's name on his staff; for [there shall be] one staff for the head of each family" (Bemidbar 17:18). Although Aharon is not really a regular Levi (insofar as the Kohanim are set aside from the tribe of Levi), nevertheless, since only one staff serves to represent the entire tribe of Levi, Aharon's name is inscribed on the staff of his tribe just as the name the prince of each of the other tribes is written on the tribal staff. (See Rashi ad loc.)

This is further reinforced by the Torah's description of the results of the test:

"And it came to pass the following day that Moshe came to the Tent of Meeting and behold, the staff of Aharon OF THE HOUSE OF LEVI had blossomed." (Bemidbar 17:23)

Hence it is clear why this episode is immediately followed by the command to Aharon with regard to the sanctified status of the Kohanim AND the Leviim: "And also your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, bring near to you...." (Bemidbar 18:7). The selection of Aharon's tribe is logically followed by the command with regard to the function of the Leviim in Ohel Moed.

There remain, however, a number of perplexing questions. Firstly, why does the Torah emphasize that the staff which blossoms is the "staff of Aharon," rather than the staff of the tribe of Levi? Even if we bear in mind that the staffs were brought by the princes of each of the tribes, the fact that the Torah refers to the staff as the "staff of Aharon" (17:21, and as "the staff of Aharon of the house of Levi" in 17:23) would seem to indicate some personal connection with Aharon HaKohen himself. The question is, in fact, really much deeper. Why were the princes,

Aharon included, required to inscribe their names on the staffs at all? The very inscription of the name indicates a personal relationship with the staff, which is inappropriate if the staff is nothing more than a symbol of the tribe. With regard to Aharon, who is not really a Levi at all (at least not in the full sense of the word - the halakhic question of whether a Kohen is a Levi is dealt with by the Achronim; see Chiddushei Rabbenu Chaim HaLevi, Hilkhot Issurei Bia 15,9), the requirement that the name of the prince of the tribe be inscribed on the tribal staff created a certain problem which required the Torah to provide a special explanation, as we have seen.

If the whole issue here is the question of which tribe is chosen for the Levite functions, it would have been simpler and more appropriate not to inscribe the names of the princes, and the Torah would have had no reason to call the blossoming staff "the staff of Aharon."

From a more general perspective, it is difficult to understand why there was any need for a reinforcement of the election of the tribe of Levi. Who out of Korach's company had any complaint about the election of the Leviim? Certainly not Korach himself, who was himself a Levi; as Moshe rebuked him: "And he has brought you close, AND ALL YOUR BRETHREN - THE SONS OF LEVI WITH YOU; do you also want priesthood?" (Bemidbar 15:10). Datan and Aviram display no hint of any aspiration to serve in the mishkan. Even the two hundred and fifty princes were tested through an offering of incense, which is part of the priestly (and not Levite) service. Their test pits them against Aharon personally, each one of them as an individual bringing an offering of incense. The 250 princes are not identified tribally, and the number is of course not divisible by 12.

All the details of the Korach's controversy point to an attack on Aharon's status, and consequently an attack on Moshe. Why then, after the death of the two hundred and fifty men, is the conflict finally silenced by the signaling of the appointment of the tribe of Levi? It would seem that what was really needed was some miraculous Divine approval of Aharon the Kohen, rather than of his tribe.

In order to answer these questions, we must compare the command regarding the status and duties of the Levites as recorded here with the earlier parallel commands in Parashat Bemidbar and Parashat Beha'alotkha. Surely, even if Bnei Yisrael required reinforcement regarding the appointment of the tribe of Levi, Aharon himself had no need for this. Why, then, does the Torah repeat the commandment regarding their special status and their duties in the Tent of Meeting at the conclusion of the story of Korach's rebellion, when all of this was already conveyed previously, immediately after the erection of the Mishkan?

Two parashot concerning the Leviim appear before Korach's rebellion, paralleled by two references immediately afterwards.

1. Parashat Bemidbar (3:5-9): "Bring the tribe of Levi near and stand them before Aharon the Kohen, and they shall serve him... And you shall give the Levites to Aharon and to his sons; they are given completely to him from the children of Israel."

2. Parashat Beha'alotkha (8:5-14): "Take the Leviim from among Bnei Yisrael and purify them... And you shall bring the Leviim close... and Aharon shall offer the Leviim before God... And you shall separate the Leviim from among Bnei Yisrael and they shall be Levites unto Me." And further on (16-19), "For they are completely given to Me from among Bnei Yisrael, instead of the first-born of every womb of all of Bnei Yisrael I have taken them for Myself... And I have taken the Leviim instead of all the firstborn from Bnei Yisrael. And I have given the Leviim over to Aharon and to his sons from among Bnei Yisrael to perform the service of Bnei Yisrael in the Tent of Meeting and to atone for Bnei Yisrael..."

In comparing the parasha of the appointment (1) and that of the purification (2), there is one clear difference and one common factor. The difference is that in the quote from parashat Bemidbar the Leviim are given directly to Aharon by Bnei Yisrael ("They are completely given to him FROM Bnei Yisrael"), whereas in the second parasha they are taken aside for God, and are given to Aharon by God FROM AMONG Bnei Yisrael. According to the second

description, the Levite status represents sefor a holy task - they are dedicated "to Me" - and only afterwards are they assigned to service in the Mikdash and to atone for Bnei Yisrael. In the earlier parasha, the Leviim are a gift from Bnei Yisrael to the Kohanim (3:6 - "And they will serve him"). Holiness itself is inherent in the Kohanim; hence the conclusion of the section: "And you shall appoint Aharon and his sons, and they shall keep the priestly office, and the STRANGER who approaches will be put to death" (3,10). The dual aspect of the Leviim is an interesting topic - but not for today.

There is, however, also a common thread uniting these two parashot. In neither place is there the slightest hint of any tribal connection between the Leviim and Aharon. The Kohanim (actually Aharon, at this stage) are presented as a completely independent group, to whom the Leviim are given over. There is no equal ground between these two groups - the one is completely under the control of the other. The status of the Kohanim appears to be something which was decided long ago, without any connection to the appointment of the tribe of Levi. At this point the Leviim are given over to Aharon not because they are his tribesmen, and not because his status extends to his relatives, but because they have been chosen from among Bnei Yisrael for this task.

Looking at our parasha, we see that the two previous sections repeat themselves, with one change:

1. (18:1-5): "And God said to Aharon, You and your sons and your father's house with you, will bear the iniquity of the Mikdash, and you and your sons with you will carry the iniquity of your priesthood. And also your brethren, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father - bring them near to you, and they shall join you and will serve you, you and your sons with you before the Tent of Meeting."

2. (18:6-7): "Behold I have taken your brothers, the Leviim, from among Bnei Yisrael; they are a gift to you given to God, to perform the service of the Tent of Meeting. And you and your sons with you will keep the priestly office for everything pertaining to the altar... and the stranger who approaches shall be put to death."

Here too, although less sharply, the two aspects of the Leviim are presented: On one hand, they are special, like the Kohanim (first part, parallel to Parashat Beha'alotkha); and on the other hand they are given to the Kohanim for service ("and you and your sons with you shall keep... and the stranger who approaches will be put to death"). What is common to both sections, though, in contradistinction to the earlier pre-Korach parashot, is the repeated reference to the Leviim as brethren of the Kohanim; they are members of Aharon's family and his tribesmen. This point is highlighted more in the first part, which revolves around the sanctity of the Leviim: Aharon and his sons (the Kohanim) and his father's house (the Leviim) WITH HIM, will bear the iniquity of the Mikdash. The "coming close" is also carried out "with you"; one approaching is divided into two. But even the second part, which depicts the Leviim as serving the Kohanim, still describes them as brethren of the Kohanim.

It now becomes clear that this perspective on the Kohanim and Leviim as belonging to a single continuum, and the view of the priesthood as an internal division within the tribe of Levi, expresses the true meaning of the test of the staffs. The blossoming of the "staff of Aharon of the tribe of Levi" symbolizes the choice of the tribe of Levi, which is Aharon's tribe - with Aharon among them. From a practical point of view, this means that what we have here is proof not only of the election of the tribe of Levi but also of the election of Aharon to the priesthood, but it must be emphasized that there aren't two simultaneous proofs for two separate things, but rather one proof for one dual phenomenon. And, since it is clear that the crux of the Korach conflict concerned Aharon, the answer must also be understood in this context - the election of Aharon is assured by means of the election of the tribe of Levi. The Levite status isn't an extension of the priesthood; rather, the priesthood represents the aristocracy of the tribe of Levi. Aharon's name appears on the staff because he is the prince of the tribe of Levi, in exactly the same way as the names of the other princes appeared on their respective staffs, implying that if anyone else were the rightful prince of the tribe of Levi, he would have been the Kohen by virtue of the blossoming of the Levite staff. The priesthood is the nobility of the tribe of Levi.

We are left with the question of what the whole argument over the election of Aharon has to do with the tribe of Levi. It would seem that what we have said above serves to answer this question: When the Leviim were perceived

as disconnected or disassociated from the Kohanim, the 250 princes wanted the priesthood for themselves. They aspired to offer the incense, to perform the priestly service of the Mishkan and to draw near to the Divine presence. (The Netziv at the beginning of the parasha explains that the sin of the 250 princes was an overly zealous pursuit of holiness, as opposed to Datan and Aviram, who sought glory for themselves and simply loved conflict for its own sake.) They perceived in the division between Kohanim and Leviim a sign that only those who approached the Divine ("the stranger who approaches shall be put to death") were termed "kadosh"; only those special individuals, like Aharon, had a direct connection with the Divine. The Leviim, as they saw it, were nothing more than servants, functionaries, rather than a chosen group with a special mission. If this was so, then kedusha does not pertain to the group as a whole, but rather only to the single, chosen, unique personality (Aharon, after all, was unique in his status, as is emphasized in the parashot at the beginning of Sefer Bemidbar - the Leviim were to serve AHARON). Korach's declaration that "the whole entire nation is holy and God is in their midst" burned like fire within the princes and gave them no rest. They were demanding kedusha on behalf of the nation - the holiness inherent in God's covenant requires no intermediaries, no matter how individually gifted.

Particular attention should be paid to the Torah's repeated use of the term "eida" (congregation) in reference to the entire party that accompanied Korach, and the juxtaposition to the same term used in reference to the entire nation of Israel. God instructs Moshe to separate himself from amongst the "eida" (the entire nation of Israel), and Moshe instructs the people to separate themselves from amongst the "eida" (Korach's congregation). The term "eida" does not refer to a random collection of people. The word refers to an organic unit; a group of people unified by a single task. (It is for this reason that the term is also used to signify the ten congregants who come together to form a minyan.)

The 250 princes joined together with the aim of demanding a holy status for the congregation; they wanted Aharon - the individual - to be replaced by the entire holy congregation. The Divine response, as demonstrated by the test of the staffs, was that the status of Aharon was derived from his position within the organic community. Aharon is first among the Leviim, who are a tribe within Israel. The Leviim are not chosen because each and every one of them individually is uniquely qualified more than each and every non-Levi. The connection with God is not based on the lofty qualities of the elevated individual. Even Aharon, who entered the Holy of Holies, acted as the representative of the entire holy congregation, and on their behalf. The Netziv explains the symbolism of the almonds and the flowers on the staff - almonds symbolizing the priesthood, and the blossoms symbolizing the Levites. We may add that almonds grow out of the blossoms. It is now clear that in fact all (the group as a whole, as an eida) are holy and that everyone has his place within the collective. The moment that the principle of the holiness of the entire congregation was clear, that Aharon grows out of the house of Levi, it was no longer difficult accept the difference in specific tasks and approaches to the Mishkan and the Divine presence. The moment that the focus of cleaving to God was turned to the nation, each individual could find his task and his place, without any need to force his way into areas not meant for him. If Aharon's role derives from that of the Leviim, their role derives from Israel as a whole. There is no longer any need for one to offer incense. In a collective, where the kedusha belongs properly to the group as a whole, each part will have a different task, a different contribution, a different spark.

Accordingly, we should see the repeated command to Moshe and Aharon to separate themselves from the eida as a command which demanded its own violation - not only from the point of view of these great shepherds who were concerned for the fate of the nation, but also by virtue of their own fate and status. If Moshe and Aharon separate themselves from among the nation, will they retain their status? It is specifically their devotion and closeness to their congregation which guards and maintains the framework of holiness for all of them, Moshe and Aharon included.

Despite the list of scandals that plagued the last few parashot, in which Aharon and Moshe fail to respond to the complaints of Bnei Yisrael and stand helplessly while watching events take place, it is specifically the command that they separate themselves from the nation which awakens them to action - once to pray (16:22 - "And they fell upon their faces and said, O God, Lord of the spirit of all flesh...") and once to save the people from destruction (17:11 - "And Moshe said to Aharon: Take the censur...").

Whatever the approach to Moshe's leadership may be in Sefer Bemidbar, he does not weaken for a moment in his striving for unity of the nation and his devotion to them as a source of personal achievement. While Sefer Shemot focuses on Moshe the person, the journeys recorded in Sefer Bemidbar serve as a thread joining the tales of this individual to the nation which is destined to enter the land, led by the successors and sons of Moshe and Aharon. Korach's message - that the entire nation is holy - does, after all, contain the seed of progress for the nation in their national spiritual striving.

Further study:

1. What was Korach's fate and punishment? Read carefully 17,19-35. Why does the Torah not clearly indicate what happened to Korach himself?
2. In the shiur, I tried to show the connection between Korach's original statement, "for all the entire eida is holy," and the motivation of the 250 princes. What is the connection between this statement and the role of Datan and Aviram? What exactly is Korach's own desire? Are there textual clues to understanding Korach's personality?
3. In Sefer Dvarim, the kohanim are regularly called "ha-kohanim ha-leviim" (Devarim 17,9; 17,18; 18,1; 21,5; 27,9; 31,9). This phrase does not appear in the earlier books of the Torah (though it is common in Nach). Looking forward to what will undoubtedly be a theme of the Devarim shiurim, what it is about Devarim that gives rise to the use of this appellation?
4. After the death of the 250 princes, the Jews complain, "You have killed am Hashem." What is the significance of this unusual term?
5. The ketoret (incense) is the means of entering into the service of God in the test of the 250. Later, it is the means of ending the plague. Aside from the obvious message that the Jews should not see the ketoret as an instrument of death, how are we to understand why Aharon with the ketoret stops a plague? If the ketoret is the special privilege of the Kohen, why does it (and specifically Aharon) cure plagues? I think this indicates the "other side" of today's topic - the special role of the unique individual and what he can do for the group.
6. The section immediately after the roles of Kohen and Levi describes the mitzva of teruma, and then of maaser. Aside from continuing laws of Kohen and Levi, how do these particular laws relate to the specific nature of leviya and kehuna described in the shiur?

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

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