



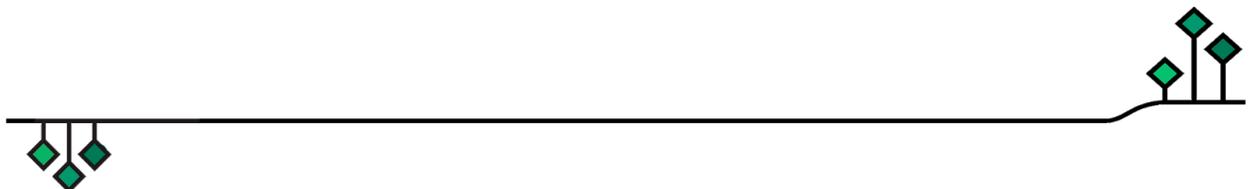
# The Truth About Power and Divine Service: What Korah Didn't Understand

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## Parashat Korah 5781

Believe it or not, a large number of Israelites did not get what Moses and Aaron's leadership was all about. It is hard to imagine hitting a lower point than last *parashah's* spy mission disaster, the decree that the Exodus generation will die in the desert, and followed by a trouncing by local tribes in the abortive invasion of Canaan. Yet for Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher, this *parashah's* Korah rebellion hits a personal low, precisely because the rebels degrade and trivialize what Moses has been doing. Our *parashah* tells the story that dramatizes Moses and Aaron versus Korah and his company as a core conflict about the nature of divine service.

Korah claims that it is all about the power and prestige of standing before God in the tabernacle. Everyone is holy and addressed by God, so anyone could be serving in the



tabernacle (Numbers 16:3). All Moses is doing is taking the glory for himself. Anyone can offer incense before God; therefore, in handing this task over to Aaron, Moses is just exercising nepotism, keeping the official standing and the income from priestly emoluments in the family. Not to put too fine a point on it, Dathan and Abiram, Korah's allies, say that Moses swindled the people, falsely promising to take them to a land of milk and honey (16:12-14). The whole system that he set up is corrupt. Moses' indignant denial that he ever took anything from people—not even the use of a donkey—is dismissed by them (16:15). They insist that he is a leader on the take.

Moses tries to persuade Korah that prophetic and priestly service is not about public display or social standing, nor is the incense offering a show gesture carrying social prestige and status (16:9). The leadership role is about connecting to God, while protecting the people lest the divine energy overflow and hurt or even kill them.<sup>1</sup> The incense offering too is a shield which makes encounter with the presence of the invisible God possible.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the increase in life, which makes the tabernacle a zone of holiness, is upheld.<sup>3</sup>

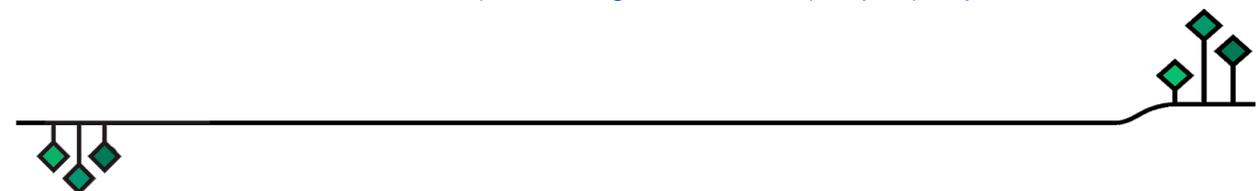
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<sup>1</sup> For these aspects of Moses' leadership, see my essay on Parashat Shelah, "Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophet's Other Central Role," available here:

<http://hadar.org/torah-resource/mediating-between-divine-and-human>.

<sup>2</sup> See Leviticus 16:2: "He (the high priest) will put the incense on the fire before God and the cloud of incense will cover the ark covering... and he will not die."

<sup>3</sup> See my earlier essays on Parashat Tetzaveh, "On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life," available here: <http://hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>; and on Parashat Tazria-Metzora, "Purity-Impurity: A Code of Life and Death," available here: <http://hadar.org/torah-resource/purity-impurity-code-life-and-death>.



Korah and his allies mock this explanation, and insist that all 250 of them can do the incense offering just as well as Aaron and the priests. So a “competition” is set up for the morning (16:5-7). The 250 and Korah will set up their incense firepans, alongside Aaron and the priests. The outcome will show that anyone can offer incense—or not. Korah and his allies gather a huge crowd around them and corner Moses and Aaron (16:19).<sup>4</sup> The crowd insists that it is all a matter of power. Moses and Aaron should give up the monopoly and the power should be shared equally by everyone. God appears threatening to wipe out the whole crowd (16:21). Moses pleads to God to spare them (16:22). The crowd is just following Korah and his allies out of despair and inability to adjust to the decree of doom. They have lost sight of their having undertaken the covenantal mission and forgotten Moses’ role as Rabbeinu—as teacher, as moral educator, as protector. Deal with Korah and his allies and the clarity of the mission and the vision of acquiring a homeland will be restored. When Korah and his allies are rebuffed, the crowd will realize that it is not a matter of substituting one group of gifters for another.

Then Moses tells the people to step back (16:26). It is time to reclaim the broader vision and purpose that drives them. When Korah and his allies are rejected, they will realize that Moses is on a mission from God. They will regain the clarity of purpose that they are all struggling to

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<sup>4</sup> Note the menacing “he (Korah) gathered all the community *against* them (Moses and Aaron).”



live up to a higher cause, and that they still have a generational task before them, even if it is no longer to conquer the homeland.

There is a swift, stunning denouement. A vast sinkhole opens and swallows up Korah and company (16:31-33). Then, a fire flashes back from the tabernacle and burns up all the incense fire makers (16:35).<sup>5</sup> Tragically, heartbreakingly, Moses and Aaron are validated but at the cost of many lives.

The Israelites do finally grasp that Moses and Aaron are on the line not for pride or pomp, but to protect them and to channel the divine energy toward life. This is evidenced by Aaron's actions during the subsequent plague. He carries the burning incense and stands between the dying and the living and thus checks the plague (17:12-13). The very incense burning, which Korah saw as a demonstration of status, actually stops the death-dealing plague in its tracks. The message is that religious leadership is not about rituals honoring God or about personal standing, but about protecting life. The incense fire pans used illegitimately are fused into a cover for the altar to serve as a permanent reminder of the special use of incense for enhancing life rituals and not for pomp (17:2-3).

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<sup>5</sup> Just as Nadab and Abihu were consumed by the reciprocal fire that flashed against their foreign flames (Leviticus 10:1-3).



One more demonstration is set up. All tribal chieftains are asked to give over their rods, placed in the tabernacle alongside Aaron's rod (17:17-20). The next day Aaron's rod blossoms, giving forth flowers and yielding almonds (17:23). This is the signal that he is chosen for divine services. The message again is that the holy is not some reified divinity or awe; the holy is the growth factor, the proliferations of life, the movement toward filling the world with life. The Israelites now understand that Aaron and the Levites are role models who are representing the people and protecting their lives. Holy ones do not lord it over anyone, but work to honor the God of life and uplift the life of all people.

Now they all—Moses, Aaron, and the people—can turn to the unfinished task of raising a generation capable of conquering a homeland, creating a covenantal society dedicated to life, realizing the dignities of all in a just and peaceful society.

