



Fire and Flower: A (not so) Subtle God

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In Parashat Korah, there are multiple accusations against Moshe and Aharon's leadership and dramatic responses. Instead of viewing these through the lens of rebellion and punishment, one can view the various "demonstrations" as conveying divergent messages about the nature of God and what religious leadership looks like. Between the cracks of a fiery and violent display of God's power, there is also a hint of a gentle, nourishing, but no less powerful, force.

When Moshe first hears the accusations against his leadership, he falls on his face. He has adopted this posture before, but this time one interpretation suggests that it is not a sign of prayer but embarrassment.¹ He is ashamed that others think he is motivated by nepotism and ego. Given all the ways he has put himself out there for the people, it hurts to be accused of malintent.

¹ Bekhor Shor to Numbers 16:4

וישמע משה שחשדוהו שהוא מתכוין לשם שררה לאחיו:
ויפל על פניו. כבש פני לגבי קרקע כי נתבייש:



His embarrassment swerves towards anger (16:15), and he proposes a test where the two hundred fifty leaders complaining against him go ahead and offer incense and see if it is accepted (16:16-17). In the aftermath, when a divine fire consumes them, the people accuse Moshe and Aharon of much worse, saying: “You have killed God’s people” (17:6). Death by divine fire does not bring any resolution;² it just reinforces their distrust and fear of Moshe’s leadership. They see the trial not as proof for Moshe’s position, but as a ploy he devised specifically in order for them to fail.

The God of fire is the God Moshe knows. That is how he first “met” God at the burning bush. He spent forty days exposed to this divine fire at Sinai, on behalf of the people. It is understandable that Moshe sees his devotion to this fierce God as a source of liberation. But now it has become clear that unleashing God’s force into the peoples’ lives leaves them to think he seeks their harm.

The people need a different proof of leadership, unlike these violent and destructive demonstrations.³ The second test must show the people that Aharon and his descendants

² Bekhor Shor observes that, in the eyes of the challengers, this test has done nothing to prove that the two hundred fifty people were consumed by fire to show they were undeserving of being priests. Nadav and Avihu **were** fitting to be priests, but still got burnt up!

בכור שור יז:

אתם המתם. את עם ה' [שאמרתם להביא קטורת] הלא ראיתם נדב ואביהו שהביאו קטרת ומתו למה צויתם אותם לעשות כמו כן אלא שמדעת המיתם כי ידעתם כי הקטרת סם המות והם סמכו על דבריכם ועשו מצותכם ומתו ועוד מה הבחנה יש כאן שאינם ראויים לכהונה, הלא נדב ואביהו אתם מודים שהיו ראויים לכהונה ומתו בשביל הקטורת, ואם הוכחתם שאהרן קדוש יותר מהן מיהו לא הוכחתם שאינם ראויים לכהונה, ומתו בשביל הקטרת:

See also Ramban, who says that the people thought Moshe had given the wrong test - the firstborns would serve in the function of “Levites,” not priests.

רמבן יז:

והנכון בעיני שהיו העם מאמינים עתה בכהונת אהרן שכבר יצאה אש מלפני ה' ותאכל את קרבנותיו אבל היו חפצים שיהיו הבכורות משרתי המשכן במקום הלויים ולא ירצו בחלופין שעשו בהם כי היו חפצים שיהיה לכל השבטים חלק בעבודת בית ה' והנה יתלוננו אתם המיתם אותם שנתתם העצה הזאת שיקריבו קטורת ככהנים והם היו ראויים לעבודת לויים לא שיהיו ככהנים מקריבי קטרת וזה טעם פרח מטה אהרן לבית לוי (במדבר י"ז:כ"ג):

³ This is based on a linear, synchronic reading of the text. A diachronic approach suggests competing narratives with differing concerns interwoven in this passage.

were chosen to serve in the *mikdash* **and** that this is for the people's benefit, not harm. It must emerge from an understanding on Moshe's part that the people need to be acquainted with a different side of God, to set into motion adaptive change so that both sides begin to view religious leadership in an entirely new way.

In the test of Aharon's staff, the people witness a miracle that is not centered around sudden violent death and punishment, but around blossoming and flourishing.

במדבר יז:כג

וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת, וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲלֵי הָעֵדוּת, וַהֲנֶה פָּרַח מִטֶּה-אַהֲרֹן, לְבֵית לֹוִי; וַיֵּצֵא פָּרַח וַיִּצֹץ צִיץ, וַיִּגְמַל שְׁקָדִים.

Bemidbar 17:23

The next day Moshe entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aharon of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds.

Aharon's staff blossoms, and then miraculously grows young almonds that ripen right in front of the people's eyes.⁴ The image of blossoming, and of the almond in particular, is rich with meaning. Literarily, the blossoming (ויצץ ציץ) corresponds to the headpiece of the high priest (*tzitz*), which bore the words "holy to God." The organic and natural *tzitz* flowering on the staff is symbolic of the *tzitz* on the high priest's head.

Yet, this symbolism isn't only about proving to the people that Aharon has been chosen. It can work in the opposite direction as well. When Aharon wears the *tzitz*, he would, from this time forward, be reminded of his staff that blossomed, and how that image reflects on religious

⁴ Rashbam 17:23

רשב"ם במדבר (פרשת קרח) פרק יז פסוק כג
(כג) ויוצא פרח ויצץ ציץ ויגמל שקדים - נראה לפי הפשט כשהוציאו משה מצאו שפרח ולא יותר כדכתיב והנה פרח מטה אהרן, אבל אחר כן ויצץ ציץ לעיני כל ישראל, ואחרי כן ויגמול שקדים, שכן הוא העניין [בפירות האילן], שאם הכל היה בבת אחת, אם כן כשהוציאו משה נגמר כל אותו העניין תחילה, והנה לא היתה נראית לא הפריחה [ולא הניצה]. וגם לא היה לו לכתוב והנה פרח אלא והנה גמל שקדים מטה אהרן לבית לוי:

leadership. Associating the *tzitz* on his garment with the botanical *tzitz* could make him think of religious leadership that is rooted in growth and flourishing, not about punishing others.

The almond, שקדיה, doubles down on this message. Its name relates to “awake” in Hebrew because it blossoms or “awakens” first in the season, heralding the blossoming and growth of all the other plants. Perhaps Aharon’s blossoming almond stick conveys that the leader’s “blossoming” is supposed to be a catalyst, heralding everyone else’s growth.

At the same time, the fragile *tzitz* is a reminder of fragility and triviality in the wake of God’s ongoing presence.

ישעיהו מ:ז-ח

יְבֹשׁ חֲצִיר נָבֵל צִיץ, כִּי רוּחַ ה' נִשְׁבָּה בּוֹ; אֲנִי חֲצִיר, הָעֵם. יְבֹשׁ חֲצִיר, נָבֵל צִיץ; וְדִבַּר-אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יִקּוּם לְעוֹלָם.

Isaiah 40:7-8

Grass withers, flowers fade when the breath of the Lord blows on them. Indeed, man is but grass: Grass withers, flowers fade—But the word of our God is always fulfilled!”

Lest Aharon become too absorbed in being chosen for divine service, seeing his own position as analogous to the delicate *tzitz* reminds him that he will come and go. All that matters is the extent to which anyone felt a bit more aware of God’s pervasive and ongoing voice and presence by virtue of his service.

Finally, the almonds’ ripening (ויגמל שקדים) has rich overtones if we understand it in light of later passages in Tanakh. Jeremiah sees a flower stick in an early prophecy:

ירמיהו א:יא-יב

וַיְהִי דִבְרֵה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר, מֶה-אַתָּה רֹאֶה יְרֵמְיָהוּ; וְאָמַר, מִקֵּל שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי רֹאֶה. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי, הִיטַבְתָּ לְרֹאוֹת: כִּי-שֶׁקֶד אֲנִי עַל-דְּבָרִי, לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ.

Jeremiah 1:11-12

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of an almond tree. The Lord said to me: You have seen right, For I am watchful to bring My word to pass.

On the one hand, this is a scary image, as the same root for the word almond also represents insistence and inevitability - God assures that punishment will come.⁵ But God also insists on rewarding and rebuilding:

ירמיהו לא:כח

וְהָיָה כְּאִשֶּׁר שָׁקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם, לְנִתּוֹשׁ וּלְנִתּוֹץ וְלִהְרֹס--וְלִהְאֵבִיד וְלִהְרַע: כֵּן אֲשַׁקֵּד עֲלֵיהֶם לְבָנוֹת וּלְנֹטַע, נָאִם-ה'.

Jeremiah 31:28

And just as I was watchful over them to uproot and to pull down, to overthrow and to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will be watchful over them to build and to plant—declares the Lord.

The associations of the root ד.ק.ש. in the almonds on Aharon's staff bring to mind the fiery God who destroys, and the equally forceful constructive God, who builds and plants.

This second test, to prove Aharon's leadership, is not just about proving to everyone that Aharon was chosen, but about embodying this transition in religious leadership. The almonds / שקדים acknowledge a destructive God and at the same time point towards a theology of flourishing, not punishment. The flowering staff can be seen as planting the seeds of a paradigm shift in how the people conceive of religious leadership altogether.

⁵ This message is amplified in Jeremiah 5:6 as well.



Sadly, the people cannot integrate this message.⁶ Even with the gentle, beautiful symbol of the blossoming almond, their reaction is utter despair. It has finally sunk in how dangerous it is to have God in their midst, and the need to stay away:

במדבר יז:כז-כח

וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: הֵן גּוֹעֵנוּ אֲבֹדִנוּ, כָּלֵנוּ אֲבֹדִנוּ. כָּל הַקָּרֵב הַקָּרֵב אֶל-מִשְׁכַּן ה', יָמוּת; הָאֵם תָּמֹנוּ, לְגֹועַ.

Bemidbar 17:27-28

But the Israelites said to Moshe, “Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost! Everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord’s Tabernacle must die. Alas, we are doomed to perish!”

The people have been traumatized by God’s ferocity. It is not so easy to bounce back to experience a nourishing God, and to accept that the same religious leaders who invited an encounter with that ferocity actually want the people to live and thrive.

Perhaps Moshe realizes that the incense test was traumatic, that the people now think their leaders are not there to protect them but to cause harm. He turns to the tribe of Levi and states very clearly that their role is to ensure no one else dies, specifically by coming too close to God (18:3). They must not play with fire (as Moshe did), but vigilantly protect the people from God’s potency. This boundary-focused approach may ultimately reduce death and harm, but it doesn’t capture the beauty and delicateness of the *tzitz*.

In the drama of Korah—the yelling matches, the intense monologues, and the violent death scenes—we might ignore the subtlety of the flowering staff as an alternative way to establish religious leadership. This is to our detriment. As we see in the people’s responses, leadership

⁶ From a text-critical perspective, these lines likely go back to the people’s reaction described after the violent images of death, and this gentler scene of the almonds has interrupted that unit. See for example the postulated division of textual layers by Dr. Tzemah Yoreh, see: <https://opensiddur.org/readings-and-sourcetexts/weekly-torah-readings/annual-cycle/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-qorah/parashat-qorah-color-coded-according-to-its-narrative-layers/>.





built on violence will only yield more fear and violence. The blossoming almond represents leadership that is about “wakefulness”—being alert to potential for growth at the earliest glimpse of possibility, and setting the stage for others to blossom in their own ways.

