

במדבר פרק יז:א-ה

וידבר יקוק אל משה לאמר:

אמר אל אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן

וירם את המחלת מבין השרפה -

ואת האש זרה הלאה כי קדשו:

את מחתות החטאים האלה בנפשתם –

ועשו אתם רקעי פחים צפוי למזבח

כי הקריבם לפני יקוק ויקדשו

ויהיו לאות לבני ישראל:

ויקה אלעזר הכהן את מחתות הנחשת אשר הקריבו השרפים

וירקעום צפוי למזבח:

זכרון לבני ישראל

למען אשר לא יקרבו איש זר אשר לא מזרע אהרן הוא להקטיר קטרת לפני יקוק

ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו

כאשר דבר יקוק ביד משה לו:

“ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו” can be read as a command –

“must not [act] in the manner of Korach and Korach’s *eidah*”,

or else as a description –

“will not [be punished] in the manner of Korach and Korach’s *eidah*”.

Reading it as a command raises the question – exactly what behavior must one not engage in?

To this there are two basic Rabbinic responses:

A) One must not challenge the hereditary priesthood

B) One must not “hold firmly to *machloket*”.

A) has the advantage of immediate context – the command follows the explicit statement that the incense-pans were made into decorations as a reminder to the Jews that “no man draw near who is an outsider, i.e. not a descendant of Aharon, to bring an incense-offering before Hashem”. On the other hand, it seems redundant after that statement. Furthermore, it seems to reduce Korach’s rebellion to a challenge over the priesthood, leaving out the challenge to Mosheh entirely.

B), by contrast, seems out of context, but truer to the nature of Korach’s rebellion.

Why don’t commentators automatically adopt the descriptive reading, which would be neither redundant nor out of context?

Very likely because of the following phrase – as Hashem spoke via the hand of Mosheh to him.

Here we run into the obvious difficulty that Korach and his *eidah* suffered different fates – Korach was swallowed up by the ground, whereas they were burnt by the fire of Hashem.

One might choose to say that they shared the fate of miraculous death.

But that very unusualness poses its own difficulty – do we really want to promise that (fatal) miracles will occur to people who follow in Korach’s footsteps?

Furthermore, did G-d ever tell Mosheh to threaten Korach?

For these reasons, the Rabbis suggest inter alia that

- a) the reference is to Mosheh’s *tzora’at* when G-d told him to “put your hand in”, and it emerged with *tzora’at* - so we translate the phrase here as “as Hashem told Mosheh via Mosheh’s hand

- b) it refers to Hashem's telling the Jews via Mosheh *about* Aharon that his family would be the exclusive priesthood
- c) it refers to Hashem telling the Jews via Mosheh *about* the fate that would occur to Korach and/or his *eidah*

All of these seem unconvincing, for various reasons and to various degrees.

Dr. Richard Steiner, in a class I still find powerful years later, noted that Rashbam here comes up with a reading that has the rare combination of being wholly original and wholly convincing. Rashbam suggests that the phrase *לוי ביד משה לו* does not relate to the immediately preceding phrase, but rather to the beginning of the previous verse "and El'azar the priest took etc.". Everything about our verse is an excursus explaining the meaning of what El'azar did – that concluded, the Torah notes that El'azar's actions fulfilled what Hashem had commanded him via Mosheh, as described at the opening of this section. Dr. Steiner showed how Rashbam's reading simply sweeps the field afterward – note for example, Ramban (as always without attribution). He referred to this as "Rashbam's discovery of *inclusio*", or specifically of the idea that the end of a literary unit may refer back to its beginning rather than to the immediately preceding element. And while I admit it unsettles me to think that the correct reading of this verse simply vanished for hundreds of years and was then rediscovered without any new information being provided, the argument still seems compelling to me.

Rashbam's interpretation, however, is one that in a sense diminishes meaning rather than increasing it – he removes the concluding phrase as a source of information for interpreting *ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו*. Now I recall years ago my teacher Rabbi Michael Rosensweig saying that he found "academic Talmud" uninteresting because it removed interpretive options rather than adding them; I objected then (and still do) both because I thought it was not true as a matter of fact, and because I am (generally) happy to remove interpretive options that are demonstrably untrue. So I don't see the sterility of Rashbam's interpretation as an argument against it, but I still really want to know what *ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו* means.

Netziv takes Rashbam's reading as a start, but finds it insufficient, because it does not account for the emphasis on *לוי ביד משה*. As is his general tendency in **Haamek Davar**, he understands the phrase to refer to Mosheh's creative Torah capacity – that Mosheh uncovered something in the Divine Word that would not have been evident. The explicit command was not to perform the priestly Temple labors, but the implicit command was not to seek formal sanctity beyond that given by G-d.

In Meishiv Davar 2:9, Netziv further notes that the phrase is "like Korach and like his *eidah*", rather than "like Korach and his *eidah*", thus allowing the verse to account for the different fates and sins of Korach and his *eidah*. He therefore allows the verse to account for two imperatives – do not challenge the hereditary priesthood (like Korach's *eidah*) and generally do not seek sanctification which is not prescribed (like Korach), as this is almost certainly the result of ego rather than of genuine thirst for the Divine.

Now Chazal's second imperative is "Don't hold firmly to machloket", rather than "Do not demand excessive sanctity", so Netziv in Meishiv Davar does a better job of reclaiming derash as pshat than he does in Haamek Davar. But I think that his two readings unify in the sense that obstinacy in machloket is often the result – as he notes in Meishiv Davar – of a misplaced sense of a right to spiritual leadership. Of course, obstinacy in machloket, when the issue is who will be leader, generally requires two sides, especially when one does not have the option of appealing for a Divine ordeal to determine who is

justified, and so this prohibition is often more useful as a self-check than as an objective determinant. Moreover, it is precisely the machloket that is for the Name of Heaven that endures, even though this is opposed to "the machloket of Korach and his *eidah*". Nonetheless, asking participants in a leadership controversy to explain their cheshbon hanefesh on this issue can often be illuminating, and we should certainly ask this of ourselves whenever we find ourselves involved in such a machloket. Shabbat shalom!

שו"ת משיב דבר חלק ב סימן ט

והנני להוסיף דבר, במה שכתוב אזהרה "ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו" ולפי הענין הידוע שקרח ועדתו היינו הר"ן איש בעלי המחנות שנשרפו היו בדעה אחת, וא"כ הכי מיבעי: "ולא יהיה כקרח ועדתו", אלא באמת לא היה קרח והר"ן איש בדעה אחת, וכמו דתן ואבירם לא היו עמהם בדעה אחת, שבקשו הר"ן איש להקטיר קטרת לפני ה' ולא יכלו להגיע למשכן ה' לבא לידי כך עד שיעשו מחלוקת על משה ואהרן, והיה כ"ז מצד חסידות ואהבת ה' שהיה עזה כמות, ומסרו נפשם ע"ז, ומש"ה כתיב "את מחנות החטאים האלה בנפשותם", פי' שמסרו נפשם ע"ז, ובשביל שכוונו במחלקותם לשם מצוה, מש"ה אף על גב שנענשו ונשרפו, מכ"מ חלק להם הקדוש ברוך הוא כבוד והרים את מחנותם לעשות צפוי למזבח, וגם עדת ישראל נצטערו הרבה במותם ומש"ה התלוננו "על משה ועל אהרן לאמר אתם המתם את עם ה'", משא"כ דתן ואבירם לא בקשו להקטיר כלל, ולא כווננו למצוה כלל, ורק משנאה שהיה להם על משה שקרא אותם במצרים רשעים, עשו מחלוקת בשעה שמצאו ידיהם, על כן לא נשרפו אלא נבלעו כרוח הבהמה היורדת למטה לארץ, ועדת ישראל שמחו במיתתם כמבואר בס' דברים י"א שהכתוב מונה הטובות שעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל ממצרים עד ערבות מואב, וחושב גם טובה זו אשר עשה לדתן ולאבירם בני אליאב שבלעתם הארץ, ונפטרו מרשעים מחרחרי ריב ומדון, ואין להם טובה יותר מזה. והנה קרח שהיה גדול הדור כסבורים העם שתחשב ג"כ לשם מצוה להקטיר קטרת, ומש"ה נטל מחתה, אבל באמת תאות הכבוד הוציאתו מן העולם כידוע מפירש"י עפ"י אגדת חז"ל, ולא עשה מחלוקת לשם מצוה אלא להנאתו, ע"ז הזהיר הכתוב "ולא יהיה כקרח" - לעשות מחלוקת לטובת עצמו; "וכעדתו" - אפילו לשם מצוה,