

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



KORACH and UFOs: A DVAR TORAH FROM THE ZAR SIDE

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

After the 250 men of Korach's crowd are consumed by Divine fire (Bamidbar 16:35), we read:

Hashem spoke to Mosheh, saying:

Say to Elazar son of Aharon the kohen

and he must uplift the firepans from amidst the burning-up
and scatter the remaining coals
because they have become holy

The firepans of these sinners at the expense of their lives
and they will make them into thin sheets as plate for the
altar

because they brought them near before Hashem,
and they became holy

and they will become a sign for the Children of Israel.

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

אָמַר אֶל-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן

וְגַם אֶת-הַמִּחֲתָת מִבֵּין הַשֵּׂרֶפָה

וְאֶת-הָאֵשׁ זָרָה הַלְאֵה

כִּי קִדְּשׁוּ:

אֵת מִחֲתֹת הַחֲטָאִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנִפְשֹׁתָם

וְעָשׂוּ אֹתָם רִקְעֵי פָחִים צְפוּי לַמִּזְבֵּחַ

כִּי-הִקְרִיבִם לִפְנֵי-יְהוָה

וַיְקַדְּשׁוּ

וַיְהִי לְאוֹת לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Hashem tells Mosheh to tell Elazar to recover the firepans **because they have become holy**, and then to rework those firepans into an ADAT KORACH MEMORIAL FRIEZE on the altar (17:3), **because they were brought near and became holy**. The description and commands indicate honor rather than ordure. Why is Hashem so ambivalent about these men and their deaths?

A textual clue is contained in the phrase I translated conventionally as “scatter the remaining coals”. The Hebrew is *v'et haeish zrei hal'ab*. *Haeish zrei* has the same consonants as the *esh zarab* (alien fire) brought by Nadav and Avihu (Vayikra 10:11), before they too were consumed by Divine fire. So we have a sort of slant-rhyme connecting these thematically connected stories.

The consonantal pair ZR also plays a role in the Torah's explanation of the memorial frieze's purpose (17:5):

A memorial for the Children of Israel
so that no alien man (ish **zar**) will draw near
who is not a descendant (lo **mizera**) of Aharon
to burn incense before Hashem

so there will be none like Korach and his crowd
as Hashem spoke via Mosheh to him.

זָכַרוּן לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִקְרַב אִישׁ זָר

אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזְרַע אַהֲרֹן הוּא

לְהִקְטִיר קִטְרֵת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה

וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה כְּקִרְחוֹ וּכַעֲדָתוֹ

כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה לּוֹ:

ZR thus contrasts the incense-bringers while connecting their fires. Unlike Nadav and Avihu, the 250 men were not *zera* (descendants) but rather *zarim* (aliens). Nadav and Avihu were *zera* who brought an *esh zarab*; what was the status of the *esh* brought by the *zarim* that Elazar was ordered to *zrei*? Is it all-the-more-so *zarab*, or is the ZR connection intended to contrast the fires as well as the incense-bringers?

To answer this question, let's turn to the mysterious end of our verse. Commentators labored to explain the referent of “as Hashem spoke via Mosheh to him” – to whom? until Rashbam argued that it refers to the original command to Elazar in 17:2 to remove the firepans. Professor Richard Steiner taught me that Rashbam's reading was so obviously better than the alternatives that it became almost universally accepted.

However, Rashbam does not explain why the Torah chose to convey its intent in such a confusing form. My inclination is that the form must also be significant. I therefore suggest that we are intended to (mis)understand “as G-d commanded him” as referring to Korach. The verse acknowledges that the 250 men acted as G-d and Mosheh commanded them to act.

The first ZR pair is therefore also intended at least partially as a contrast. The fire brought by the 250 men was **not** *zarab*, even though it was brought by *zarim*. What made Nadav and Avihu's incense-burning *zarab*, according to Vayikra 10:11, was *asher lo tzivah otam* – that it was an Uncommanded Fiery Offering. But here, G-d via Mosheh had in fact commanded Korach and his crowd to bring incense offerings (16:6-7). So their fire was not *zarab*, even though it led to their death by Divine fire.

The memorial made of the firepans is therefore more plea than warning or even command. “*So there will be none like Korach and his crowd*” - Hashem does not want to be placed again in a position where obeying His command will lead people to their premature death at His hand.

Left to be explained is why such a command was His best available response to the apparently sincere challenge of these 250 men.

We can intensify this question. I have been translating the end of 17:5 as *Hashem spoke via Mosheh to him*. The Hebrew for *to him* can also be translated *for His own sake*, and while the word is common, here it can plausibly be read as referring back to 16:5:

He (=Mosheh) spoke to Korach and to his entire crowd, as follows:

Morning, and Hashem will make known that which is His (et asher לו, לו, את אשר לו) and the holy, and will bring them near (or: will sacrifice them; Hebrew vehikriv) to Him and that which He chooses, He will bring near (Hebrew: yakriv) to Him.

Furthermore, both meanings of the verb *kry*, “draw near” and sacrifice”, appear in Mosheh’s speeches to Korach and his Levite followers in Chapter 16.

Verse 9:

Is it a little thing to you that the G-d of Israel separated you from the crowd of Israel to bring you near (lehakriv) to Him

Verse 10:

He brought you near (vayakrev)

Verse 17:

and you will sacrifice (vehikravtem) before Hashem, each man with his firepan.

Finally, in 17:35

A fire went out from before Hashem
It consumed the 250 men
sacrificers (makrivei) of the incense.

Note also that after Nadav and Avihu dies, Mosheh tells Aharon (Vayikra 10:3)

This is what G-d spoke
“amongst those near to me (bikrovai) I will make holiness (ekadesh)”

All this suggests that G-d chose the 250 men as His.

In fact, the flowering-staff process by which Aharon’s chosenness is demonstrated begins only after this entire episode – perhaps it happens on the “morning” promised by Moshe, perhaps not. Furthermore, the flowering staff chooses Aharon as the representative of Levi over the other tribes – it assumes his status within Levi rather than demonstrating it.

I cannot find a coherent way to say that G-d chose the 250 Levite men over Aharon and or Moshe as “those who were His” or “the holy”. But perhaps he chose them in addition.

What does all this mean for us?

Korach opens by charging Mosheh with denying that each and every Jewish person is holy –

because the whole crowd –
all of them are holy,
and Hashem is within them,
so why should you be raised above the community of Hashem?

Our tradition has struggled ever since to explain why Korach was wrong. After all, every Jew is commanded to be holy! I have long been struck by Shu”T Mas’et Binyamin 62 being dated “Parshat *because the whole crowd – all of them are holy*”, especially as the substance of the teshuvah is a plea for his continuing to receive Torah aliyot despite losing his sight. Shu”T Mishneh Halakhot 19:357 in the name of the Shnei Luchot Habrit similarly concludes that “the statement *because the whole crowd – all of them are holy* had no evil intent at all on the part of those 250 men, even though they erred, therefore, since their intent was for good, there is no rationale for not citing these words”.

We are not told what if anything was written on the altar-plates made from the firepan. But it seems likely to have been just that – “*because the whole crowd – all of them are holy*”.

What would it mean for a community to so honor, in its most sacred place, the slogan of the paradigmatic demagogic rebel against its community’s leadership and hierarchy, on the ground that his followers meant well and merely had their energies misdirected? I’m interested in suggestions as to how that might play out in contemporary Orthodoxy, America, and Israel.

Shabbat shalom!

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