



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Korach** (קָרַח, "Korah")
- **Chapters: Numbers 16:1-18:32**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Shelach Lekha) told the tragic story about the "sin of the ten spies" and the divine decree that the generation of Israelites rescued from Egypt was sentenced to die while in the exile of the desert. In this week's portion, the hard truth of their condition began to sink in, and the people bemoaned their fate and rebelled further by attempting to overthrow the Lord's designated leadership and return to Egypt. This rebellion was instigated and organized by Moses' cousin Korach, who – along with a band of co-conspirators – was swiftly judged and put to death, thereby vindicating the Aaronic priesthood and Moses' leadership of Israel.

Korach was the cousin of Moses and a well-respected Kohathite who was honored to be one of the carriers of the Holy Ark. He was renowned as a wealthy man of influence - a *nassi* (prince) of the people. Despite all this privilege, however, Korach rationalized that he should be the head of the Kohathite clan (instead of his cousin Elzaphan), since he was the firstborn of Kohath's second son, whereas Elzaphan was not even a firstborn son. Indeed, because he felt slighted by Moses' choice, Korach went even further and brazenly questioned whether the office of the High Priest should not have been given to him – rather than to Aaron.

Korach's co-conspirators were two brothers named Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuben, Israel's firstborn son. Together, they put together a force of 250 men to confront Moses and to challenge his exclusive claim to leadership: "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

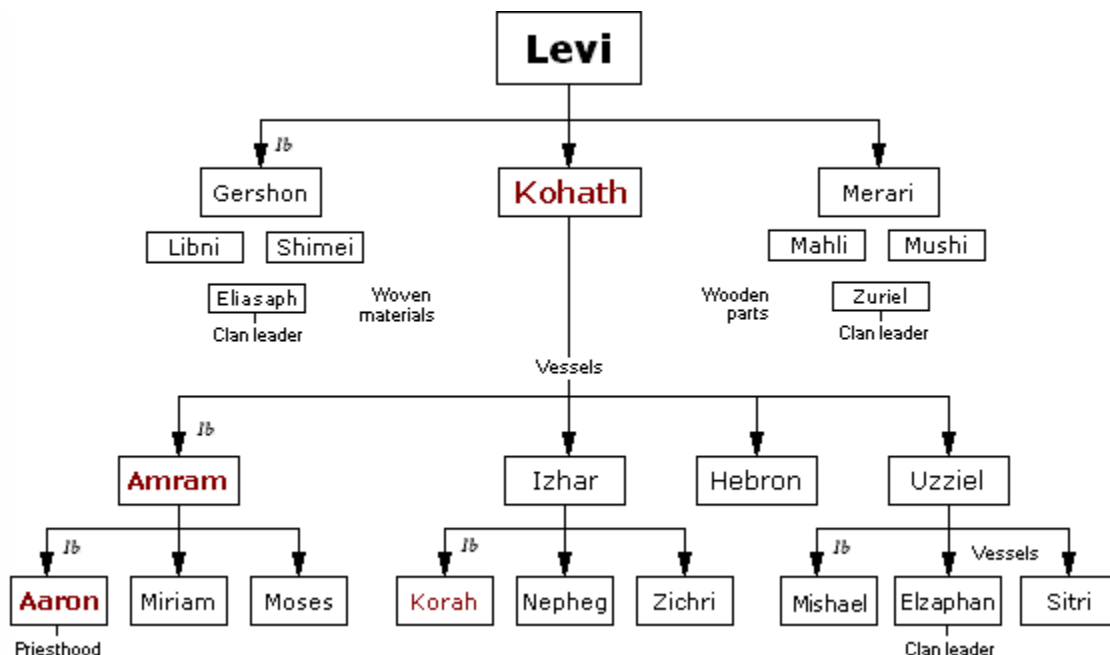
In response to their challenge, Moses proposed that Korach and his followers bring firepans to offer incense at the Tabernacle to determine whether they were indeed worthy to function as priests. The following morning, when Korach and his 250 followers assembled at the gate of the Tabernacle to offer incense, God threatened to destroy them all instantly. Moses begged God not to destroy all the people, but only the rebels. He then warned the congregation to stand clear of the dwellings of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram. The earth then opened up and swallowed them alive, and a fire consumed the 250 men who illegitimately offered the incense.



Korach's rebellion introduced outright mutiny and chaos within the leadership of the camp that brought swift and terrible rebuke from the LORD. Nevertheless, the very next day the entire congregation of Israel audaciously began to accuse Moses and Aaron, saying: "You have killed the people of the Lord." When the people looked toward the Tabernacle, however, the Glory of the LORD appeared, where God descended to tell Moses and Aaron that he was going to destroy the Israelites for their treason. Despite Moses and Aaron's fervent intercession, however, a deadly plague broke out among the people. Moses then instructed Aaron to take his firepan with incense and to bring it in the midst of the congregation to make atonement for them. Aaron did so, "and he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed." The Torah tells us that 14,700 Israelites died because of the plague, not including the deaths of those involved in the rebellion of Korach.

As a final test to vindicate Aaron as God's chosen priest, each of the twelve tribal heads of Israel, as well as Aaron himself, were instructed to bring their staffs to Moses. Moses then inscribed their names on each staff and brought them into the sanctuary before the ark of the testimony. "And the staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout. Thus I will make to cease from me the grumblings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against you." The following day Moses went into the Tabernacle and "behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds." He then brought out all the staffs and gave them back to each of the tribal leaders. The LORD then told Moses to return Aaron's staff to the Tabernacle as a testimony for generations to come.

After all this transpired, the people began to dread the Presence of the LORD and the Tabernacle. To allay their fears, Moses gave them assurance that the sons of Aaron (i.e., the priests) and the Levites alone would bear responsibility for the sanctuary. But since the Levites and priests would receive no portion in the Promised Land, the people were instructed to generously support them by means of various gifts that are listed at the end of the parashah.





Parashah Questions

1. Levi had three sons. What were their names? ¹
2. From which of Levi's three sons would come Israel's priesthood? ²
3. Levi's son Kohath had four sons. What were their names? ³
4. To which clan did Moses and Aaron belong? ⁴
5. To which clan did Korach belong? ⁵
6. What was the relationship between Korach and Aaron? ⁶
7. Are the Levites the priests of Israel? ⁷
8. Why was Korach angry with Moses? ⁸
9. Who were the three other leaders of the rebellion besides Korach? ⁹
10. How many men took part in the rebellion and what was their status in the congregation? ¹⁰
11. What was the rebel's stated reason for challenging Moses and Aaron? ¹¹
12. What did Moses say was Korach's real reason for rebelling? ¹²
13. What was the test to determine who were chosen to be the priests? ¹³
14. What does this test remind you of? ¹⁴
15. How did Dathan and Abiram describe *Egypt*? ¹⁵

¹ Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, from whom came the three clans of the Gershonites, Merarites, and Kohathites.

² From Kohath, his middle son.

³ Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel.

⁴ Moses and Aaron were Kohathites from Amram (i.e., ben Amram, ben Kohath...).

⁵ Korach was a firstborn Kohathite from Izhar (i.e., ben Izhar, ben Kohath...).

⁶ They were cousins; their fathers were brothers.

⁷ Only those Kohathites who descended from Aaron were qualified to be priests. God gave the other Levites as a "gift" to Aaron and his sons for helping maintain the Tabernacle and to help offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. So, while all priests are Levites, not all Levites are priests.

⁸ Because Moses did not appoint him as the head of the clan of the Kohathites, even though he was next in line.

⁹ Dathan, Abiram, and On, from the tribe of Reuben (Jacob's firstborn son who was disgraced and replaced by Levi).

¹⁰ 250 princes of the people – men of renown – who were perhaps all firstborn sons.

¹¹ They said that all the congregation was holy, and that God was among them, and therefore rejected the idea that Moses and Aaron were to be exalted above the people. Note how this is similar to Miriam's earlier complaint.

¹² He said that Korach was attempting to seek the priesthood for himself.

¹³ Each of the 250 men (along with Aaron) would take censers filled with burning incense to offer at the Tabernacle. God would then give "signs" as to who was right and who was sinning in this matter.

¹⁴ The death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, who offered "strange fire" when the Tabernacle was first dedicated.

¹⁵ As a land flowing with milk and honey...



16. What did Moses predict for Korach, Dathan, Abiram, their families, and all who followed them in the rebellion? ¹⁶
17. Were all the sons of Korach killed? ¹⁷
18. According to Midrash, what happened to On, one of the rebel leaders? ¹⁸
19. What one word would you say described the motive behind Korach's rebellion? ¹⁹
20. What happened to the 250 rebels after the earth swallowed the rebel leader's camps? ²⁰
21. What happened to the copper firepans the rebels used to offer incense? ²¹
22. Did the people learn their lesson when they saw Korach's fate? How long did it take them to turn against Moses and Aaron, and what was their grievance? ²²
23. What happened to those who complained about the fate of the rebels? ²³
24. How did Moses intervene to save the people from destruction? ²⁴
25. What was the final test to vindicate God's choice of Aaron as priest? ²⁵
26. What did God tell Moses to do with Aaron's staff? ²⁶
27. After the rebellion was entirely quelled by God, what was the reaction of the surviving Israelites? ²⁷
28. How did God instruct (and reassure) the survivors? ²⁸

¹⁶ If they died a natural death, they were right, but if they died by being swallowed up by the earth, Moses was right.

¹⁷ No. His three sons (Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaph) apparently escaped their father's fate by exercising *teshuvah*. Indeed, eleven psalms are ascribed to the "descendants of Korach," including Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88. Even the great prophet Samuel was Korach's descendent (1 Chron. 6:22-28).

¹⁸ His righteous wife convinced him to repent and forsake the rebellion.

¹⁹ Jealousy (or pride).

²⁰ A fire sent from God consumed those who illegitimately offered incense and they died.

²¹ They were melted by the fire of God and Aaron's son Eleazar was instructed to hammer them into a cover for the altar of sacrifice in the courtyard as a reminder of the rebellion.

²² Until the next day. The people complained that Moses had killed people of the LORD.

²³ God issued a plague that killed 14,700 of them.

²⁴ He instructed Aaron to take his incense censer and to run among the people to save them from the plague.

²⁵ Each tribal head brought a staff with the name of the tribe engraved upon it. Moses put the staffs inside the Tabernacle, beside the Ark of the Covenant, and God caused Aaron's staff to miraculously put forth buds and blossoms and to bear ripe almonds.

²⁶ To put it back in front of the Ark and keep it there as a reminder of his choice of Aaron as priest.

²⁷ They were terrified of the Tabernacle and were afraid they would all die.

²⁸ He reminded them that Aaron and his sons would bear the guilt of the sanctuary, but the people were to support the priests through contributions rendered for their service. "All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the firstfruits of what they give" shall be given to the priests. The people were also reminded to redeem all firstborn sons by giving five shekels to the priests and to offer regular tithes to the Levites.



Discussion Topics

1. Korach is mentioned in the Book of Jude as a “type” of false teacher. Korach pretended to be a “man of the people” by arguing “all the congregation is holy” (i.e., a “kingdom of priests and a holy people”). His accusation that Moses and Aaron “exalted themselves” above the people was therefore hypocritical, since we know that his inner motivation was one of envy and lust for power, and indeed, he wanted to be the High Priest of Israel himself (Num. 16:19). What characteristic(s) do you see in Korach that might be present in other false teachers?
2. Korach argued that since Aaron was honored as the firstborn son of Amram (who was himself the firstborn son of Kohath), he was “next in line” to be honored in the clan, since he was the firstborn son of Amram’s *next* oldest son, Izhar. When Moses sidestepped him in favor of Elzaphan, Korach was offended and hurt. Discuss the laws of “primogeniture” or the primacy of the firstborn (bechor). Was Korach justified in his resentment? What criteria does God use to choose leaders for his people?
3. God’s chosen priests were vindicated in this Torah portion, and the contributions offered to them by the people are described as a “covenant of salt” in Numbers 18:19. Salt was used in offerings as a preservative (today it is used to “kasher” meat). What connection do you see between the contributions given to the priests and the preservation of the people?
4. As followers of Yeshua, we are all regarded as “priests and kings” before the LORD, and yet there are still assigned roles within the community of faith. For example, God calls some to be pastors and teachers to equip the saints (Eph. 4:11-12), and he imparts to others spiritual gifts to help build up the “body” or assembly of Messiah (1 Cor. 12:27-30). The goal or aim of these roles and gifts is to become more like Yeshua as we live within this world. Discuss.
5. How do you understand the idea of “rabbinical authority,” that is, the claim that rabbis are direct descendants of Moses and the judges of Israel, especially in light of this portion’s clear message about encroaching upon sacred offices? After all, most Rabbis are not part of Aaron’s priestly line. What was Yeshua’s view about the role rabbis?
6. The sages distinguish between two types of controversy. There are some arguments that come from a person’s pride, and there are others that are *machloket l’shem shamayim*, “a disagreement for the sake of Heaven.” How can you distinguish between the two types of controversy? What controversies would you regard as “for the sake of heaven?”

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Chukat** (Numbers 19:1-22:1)
- Read the Haftarah (Judges 11:1-33)
- Read the New Testament (Heb. 9:11-28; John 3:10-21)