

Parashat Korach 5779, 2019:

*Understanding the Miracle of the Matot*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a rich array of stimulating narratives that challenge our understanding and cry out to us, “*Darshani!*” (“Interpret me!”) One of these is known as the “Test of the *Matot* (Staffs):”

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying: “Speak to the children of Israel and take from them a staff for each father’s house from all the chieftains according to their fathers’ houses; [a total of] twelve staffs, and inscribe each man’s name on his staff. Inscribe Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi, for there is [only] one staff for the head of their fathers’ house. You shall place the staffs in the Tent of Meeting before the [Ark of] the Testimony where I commune with you. The staff of the man whom I will choose will blossom, and I will calm down [turn away] from Myself the complaints of the children of Israel which they are complaining against you.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 17:16-20, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

A direct reading of our passage indicates that the Almighty commanded Moshe to undertake these actions so that, “I [Hashem] will calm down [turn away] from Myself the complaints of the children of Israel which they are complaining against you [Moshe].” *Midrash Tanchuma* suggests that this process was crucial, since the people were strongly opposed to the *Kehunah* (*Kohanim*) being under Aharon’s control (*b’yad Aharon*). (Parashat Acharei Mot VIII, translation my own) While this interpretation is certainly helpful, it does not explain the underlying reason our ancestors’ passionate resistance to Aharon’s stewardship of the *Kehunah*.

We are fortunate that Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk *zatzal* (1843-1926) addresses this issue in his classic work, *Meshech Chachmah*, and, in so doing, enables us to understand the “story behind the story.” In his view, the people’s negative attitude toward Aharon being granted the *Kehunah* was fomented by none other than Korach and his band of rebels:

For the error of Korach and his followers was that they thought the *Kehunah* was not a matter of *segulah* (unique choice by Hashem) and [genealogical endowment] to Aharon’s descendants. [Instead, they thought it was] solely a matter of the [present *Kohanim*’s] ability to effectively carry out the actions that they were called upon to perform (*kishron pe’ulah*) — which had put them in good stead in conjunction with their elevated status. If so, over time when the *Kohanim* would eventually sin, or the majority of the people would [potentially] achieve higher levels of *kedushah* (holiness) than the *Kohanim*, then [they thought the *Kehunah* could be wrested from Aharon’s future offspring] and others more deserving of this honor would join the *Kehunah*... (Parashat Korach 17:17, this and all translations and brackets my own)

Rav Meir Simcha’s position is clear: The error of Korach and his followers regarding the status of the *Kohanim* and the *Kehunah* was predicated upon a radical misconception, namely, that the *Kehunah* was a meritocracy, rather than a *segulah* and eternal covenant between Hashem and Aharon’s biological heirs. This notion is explicitly stated in reference to Pinchas, wherein we find: “Therefore, say, ‘I [Hashem] hereby give him [Pinchas] My covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him [as] an eternal covenant of Kehunah (*brit kehunat olam*)...’” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:13)

Rav Meir Simcha continues his presentation by alluding to the following *pasukim* (verses) in our *parasha* that describe the manifest miracle that took place concerning Aharon’s staff:

Moses spoke to the children of Israel, and all their chieftains gave him a staff for each chieftain according to their fathers’ houses, [a total of] twelve staffs, and Aaron’s staff was amidst their staffs. Moses placed the staffs before the L-rd in the Tent of the Testimony. And on the following day Moses came to the Tent of Testimony, and behold, Aaron’s staff for the house of Levi had blossomed! It gave forth blossoms, sprouted buds, and produced ripe almonds. (17:21-23)

Rav Meir Simcha suggests that this kind of *nes* (miracle) which utilized common everyday objects, yet took them above the laws of nature, was necessary in order to provide incontrovertible proof that Aharon was uniquely both:

genealogically and [through] Hashem's Divine choice (*tevi v'seguli'i*) [the progenitor of the *Kohanim*] — just like we find in reference to the election of the Jewish people [as the Chosen People]. [Moreover, we must ever remember] that the Holy One blessed be He took an oath that He would never replace us [with any other nation], which is the case, as well, regarding Aharon [and his future descendants], for their covenant, too, is everlasting in nature (literally a “covenant of salt,” *brit melach*).

Rav Meir Simcha concludes that just as Hashem chose the Jewish people as His *segulah* nation, so, too, did He choose Aharon and his descendants to be the *Kohanim*. As such, Korach's idea to replace Aharon and the other *Kohanim* violated Hashem's will, and His holy Torah.

While the *Kehunah* specifically rests with Aharon and his descendants, our Sages have taught us that it is laudatory for all the nations of the world to emulate the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im*, and in so doing, they will be rewarded by the Almighty. The Rambam (1135-1204) was one of the greatest scholars to give voice to this idea:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and understands with his wisdom [how] to set himself aside and stand before G-d to serve Him and minister to Him and to know G-d, proceeding justly as G-d made him ... is as sanctified as the holy of holies. G-d will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world, just like He provides for the *Kohanim* and the *Levi'im*. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shemitah v'Yovel* 13:13, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

May we be counted among those who, as the Rambam describes, develop such closeness to Hashem that we become a kingdom of *Kohanim*, dedicating ourselves to sanctifying His holy Name throughout the entire world. Then, with the Almighty's help and our fervent

desire, may we participate in the realization of Zechariah's grand vision: "And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His Name one."

(*Sefer Zechariah* 14:9) May this time come soon and in our days, *v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio** *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.