

Parashat Korach 5784, 2024:

The Heroism of Aharon

Rabbi David Etengoff

ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

When we think about Parashat Korach, we most often focus on Korach's failed rebellion and its ramifications for Jewish history. In contrast, relatively little attention is given to our people's reaction to this mutiny, despite the Torah's dramatic statement: "The following day, the entire congregation of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon saying, 'You have killed the people of Hashem.'" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 17:6, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, c. 1085 - c. 1158) explains this specious accusation:

We [the people] acknowledge that Datan and Aviram deserved to be swallowed [by the earth], for after all, they sinned [in a grievous manner]. As for the 250 men [*Levi'im* who sought to be *Kohanim*] that died in the same fashion as Nadav and Avihu—you are the ones who killed them, since you [and not Hashem] commanded them to offer [the forbidden] incense! (Translation and brackets my own)

The people's unwillingness to recognize that Moshe and Aharon were acting as Hashem's agents led to this baseless claim and elicited a powerful response from the Almighty:

It came to pass while the congregation were assembled against Moshe and Aharon, that they turned to the Tent of Meeting, and behold, the cloud had covered it, and the glory of Hashem appeared. Moshe and Aharon came to the front of the Tent of Meeting. Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: "Stand aside from this congregation, and I shall consume them in an instant." They fell on their faces. (17:7-10)

At this moment, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* was on the cusp of annihilating the Jewish people, just as He had sought to do following the *Egel HaZahav*. Once again, Moshe rose to the occasion and prevented the total destruction of *klal Yisrael*:

Moshe said to Aharon, “Take the censer and put fire from the altar top into it and place incense therein. Then take it quickly to the congregation and atone for them, for wrath has gone forth from Hashem, and the plague has begun.” Aharon took [it], just as Moshe had said, and he ran into the midst of the assembly, and behold the plague had begun among the people. He placed the incense on it and atoned for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague ceased... Aharon returned to Moshe at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and the plague was checked. (17: 11-13, 15)

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1150) presents an amazing midrashically-suffused interpretation of these *pasukim*:

He stood between the dead...: He took hold of the Angel [of Death] and held him against his will. The angel said to him, “Allow me to accomplish my mission.” He [Aharon] said to him, “Moshe commanded me to stop you.” He [the Angel of Death] said to him, “I am the messenger of the Omnipresent, and you are the messenger of Moshe.” He [Aharon] said to him, “Moshe does not say anything on his own volition, but only at the bidding of the Almighty. If you do not believe [me], the Holy One blessed be He and Moshe are at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; come with me and ask.” This is the meaning of the statement, “Aharon returned to Moshe...and the plague was checked.” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh* 15).

According to our *midrash*, Aharon acted upon his own inspired initiative to directly challenge the *Malach HaMavet*. Like Moshe he presented a “*lamrot hakol*—against all odds”—attitude in order to save the Jewish people. Crucially, Aharon proclaimed to his heavenly adversary: “Moshe does not say anything on his own volition, but only at the bidding of the Almighty.” This was precisely the idea that *b’nai Yisrael* had failed to grasp.

I believe that Aharon’s consummate bravery in the face of such manifest danger was the result of his overwhelming love for our people, as demonstrated by their reaction upon hearing the news of his demise: “The whole congregation saw that Aharon had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aharon for thirty days.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 20:29) Rashi explains why “the entire house of Israel wept for Aharon for thirty days:” “**the entire house of Israel:** [both] the men and the women, for Aharon had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife.” [*Avot d’Rabbi Nathan* 12:4, *Midrash Aggadah*] Little wonder then, that

Hillel describes the *talmidei Aharon* in these famous words: “Hillel said: ‘Be from the students of Aharon: Love peace, pursue peace, love your fellow Jews, and bring them close to the Torah.’” (*Pirkei Avot* 1:12, translation my own). With Hashem’s help, may we be *zocheh* to emulate this *middah* in all our actions, and in that way help hasten the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu*. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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