

Deadly Contest

PARSHA INSIGHTS - KORACH (5758)

WHY DID MOSHE REPEAT THE ORDER TO CONDUCT AN INCENSE TEST?

What were the underlying motives for the fatal uprising of Korach? Much can be said about this; we will explore a few remarks of the *Ramban*. In doing so, something startling will come to light. In the minds of some skeptics, even a fire from heaven, at the *kohanim's* [priests'] installation ceremony, was not conclusive proof that Aharon deserved the high priesthood! We will now explore the *Ramban*; some comments will be added to help us comprehend his words.

The *Ramban* is on 16:16. The commentators are wondering: If Moshe already told the rebels to be ready the next day with fire pans to participate in a test (16:6-7), why does he seem to give an identical order again in 16:16-17? Is this not repetitive? Incidentally, Moshe was directing them to prepare pans for burning incense. If their offering would be accepted by G-d, this would prove that their grievances were well founded, and Moshe and Aharon did not deserve to be the leader and *Kohen Gadol* [High Priest]. Moshe did hint that only one person offering *ketores* [incense] would survive this test. Yes, Aharon *Hakohen* [Aaron the priest] was the chosen individual to be progenitor of those serving in the holiest places and capacities, so only his *ketores* would be accepted. All the rest would perish. This is found in the end of *Rashi* on 16:6, in his explanation of 16:7.

So why repeat the command to offer *ketores*? The *Ramban* examines the *psukim* [verses] carefully; the following is his analysis. At first, Moshe told the rebellious people to take fire pans; this only included Korach and his cohorts. That was also when Moshe indicated that this was a lethal undertaking, one that would cost them their lives if they did not back out of the rebellion immediately.

☞ In truth, they were not being FORCED by Moshe's command to bring *ketores*. Moshe would never demand that people do something suicidal, the dreadful transgression of offering unauthorized *ketores*. Recall that the sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, had died from this very sin (*Shmini* 10:2). The *Chizkuni* on 16:6 declares that MOSHE NEVER EXPECTED THEM TO TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE of attempting to burn this incense. Everyone knew full well what the consequences were! Rather, says the *Chizkuni*, since Korach and his comrades were maliciously challenging the leadership of Moshe, Aharon, and the tribe of Levi, Moshe "also came upon them with words of confrontation". In other words, the *Chizkuni* insists that Moshe did not require the *ketores* test, nor did he ever think the rebels would actually go through with it. He was merely responding to their attack with boldness. Of course, we know that they took his idea as realistic, and they were burned by Hashem (16:35).

Let us continue in the *Ramban*. When Moshe first advised Korach and his men to prepare for the next day's *ketores* test, he did not mention that Aharon would participate. Why? *Ramban* maintains that at this early stage of the dialogue, Moshe did not plan for **Aharon** to bring *ketores* as part of the experiment. This makes even more sense if you combine it with the *Chizkuni* we mentioned above. Since Moshe was not actually serious about the rebels offering *ketores*, which would be classified as unauthorized by Hashem, he did not even consider that Aharon be part of the entire activity. In response to Moshe's proposal that they burn incense the next day without Aharon joining them, *Ramban* says that the rebellious people were silent. They were not interested in this plan at all. They wanted Aharon, whose high priesthood they were challenging, to be there as well.

Why did Korach and his friends insist on Aharon offering *ketores* with them? They figured that if Aharon were present, a fire would possibly descend from heaven and consume EVERYONE'S incense. This would happen **in Aharon's merit**, and it would burn their incense together with Aharon's. This, of course, would be a sign of Divine endorsement for all these 250 men and Korach. Their *ketores* would be accepted by Hashem - a heavenly fire would surely consume it! Or, they figured, NO FIRE would descend, not for their incense, and not for Aharon's. Why not? They suspected that their *ketores* was unacceptable (and they were right); Hashem would not send a fire to accept it. To be consistent regarding the use of heavenly fire, they assumed, no fire at all would come down from heaven, so even Aharon's *ketores* would be left untouched. Consequently, he HAD to be with them, since they felt they would all be treated the same. The worst result would be that NONE of them, not even Aharon, would be favored. At best, the *ketores* contained in ALL their pans would be licked up by Divine flames.

On the other hand, says the *Ramban*, they refused to conduct this test without Aharon in attendance. In his absence, if a fire would NOT descend to accept the *ketores* of the rebels, everyone would conclude that G-d was not interested in their offering. Surely the Jewish people would believe that Aharon WAS the chosen *kohen* [priest] to serve Hashem, but not these 250 men. What firm basis would there be for this? **A fire had once come down to accept Aharon's sacrifice.** When was this? At *Miluim* [the week-long induction ceremony through which the *kohanim* were ushered into their Divine service], of course.

☞ The TORAH PARSHA *Titzaveh* (not the essay) deals with *Miluim* in general. Please see *Parshiyos* [Torah portions] *Tzav*, and *Shmini* for details of *Miluim*. Copies of the essays are available by clicking the following link, or online at TorahMax.com under: "Sefer Vayikra", "Parshas Tzav" and "Parshas Shmini", "[Do We Interpret the Torah Literally? \(Part 1\)](#)" and "[\(Part 2\)](#)" - R. Moshe Heigh.

A heavenly fire lapped up Aharon's offering in *Shmini* 9:24, and there it says that Aharon received national acknowledgement. "All the nation saw and sang praise, and they fell on their faces" (ibid). It seems that everyone was overjoyed and impressed at that awesome moment. Or maybe not - was anyone skeptical about its implications?

The *Ramban* declares that the traitors of today's *parsha* [Torah portion] doubted the heavenly fire of *Miluim* could prove anything about AHARON. Perhaps Moshe should not have "chosen" his brother, Aharon, to be the *Kohen Gadol* from the beginning. OF COURSE, THE GRAVE ERROR WHICH PRECIPITATED THIS REBELLION WAS THE OUTRAGEOUS CONCLUSION THAT MOSHE MADE THESE DECISIONS ON HIS OWN. We know that Moshe was "trustworthy in Hashem's entire house" (*Beha'aloscha* 12:7), and was the most humble person on earth (ibid. 12:3). Yet, the participants of Korach's uprising, out of their thirst for prestige and their desire to perform services not assigned them, accused Moshe of forming policies based on his own preferences. Thus, they claimed that the heavenly fire of that *Mishkan* [Tabernacle] inauguration, back in *Nissan* 1, 2449, would have descended for ANYONE chosen to do the Divine service! This, says the *Ramban*, was the distorted attitude that prevailed among the rebellious parties. They insisted that Hashem would have accepted the *Miluim* offerings from any representative of the nation, since the heavenly fire had been in the merit of *Bnai Yisroel's* [the Children of Israel's] dedication in creating the *Mishkan*. They asserted that Moshe's "unauthorized selection" of Aharon as *Kohen Gadol* was the act which led to the fire from Hashem consuming his *korbon* [sacrifice].

The *Ramban* develops the point further, but suffice it to say that these wicked individuals insisted on Aharon's participation in the incense experiment. That is why Moshe restated the order to bring incense in 16:16. Notice that back in 16:6, Aharon was NOT mentioned as a participant. In 16:16, however, Moshe included Aharon. As the *Ramban* shows, this was in response to Korach's demand that Aharon be there. If Aharon would be missing, and no fire would come to consume the *ketores* of the rebels, people would certainly honor Aharon as the high priest, at the exclusion of these 250 men and Korach. The Jewish people knew that the heavenly fire of *Miluim* had already proven Aharon's right to be *Kohen Gadol*, but the insurgents were determined to unravel that supernatural evidence. Of course, Hashem demonstrated that it was impossible to do this. Moshe did approve of Aharon bringing incense for the test, since he knew that Aharon was picked by Hashem Himself, and he would suffer no harm.

This shows how far people sometimes go for the sake of honor. May it remind us that our task is to do the will of Hashem, not to pursue power and recognition.

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