

Overview ...

Affirming the Divine Origin of the Torah and the Rights of the Kohanim and Levi'im

When Korach and the people rebelled against Moshe and Aharon, Hashem performed miracles affirming the divine origin of Moshe's teachings and the rights of the Kohanim and Levi'im

Part 1. Korach's Rebellion

Korach's jealousy. Korach was a Levi of great distinction. He was very wise, very wealthy,¹ and, as we will see, he had prophetic powers. He was even one of those honored with carrying the *Aron*.² Unfortunately, his riches made him proud and hungry for honor.³ When Moshe Rabbeinu appointed Elitzafan to lead the group of Kehas (one of the three groups of Levi'im), Korach fumed with jealousy. According to his swollen self-image, there was no one more fitting for the position than himself. He became convinced that Moshe was making decisions by himself, without Hashem's express command.⁴ Since he was also jealous of Aharon for being Kohen Gadol,⁵ foolishly thinking that he was Aharon's equal,⁶ he decided to challenge Moshe's authority with the goal of becoming nothing less than the new Kohen Gadol.⁷

Korach gathered support. Korach wisely refrained from challenging Moshe when Aharon and Elitzafan were appointed to their respective positions. At that time the nation was encamped at Mount Sinai, and Moshe enjoyed the people's complete support. After the tragic spying mission to Eretz Yisrael, and the decree that those between twenty and sixty years old would die in the desert (see *Parashas Shelach*), the situation changed. Many of the people felt bitter, and they resented Moshe for not pleading with Hashem to overturn the decree (as he had after the sin with the golden calf). Seeing the people's discontent, Korach saw that the time had come for him to mount his rebellion.⁸

First Korach drew Dasan and Aviram into his dispute. These two men had a long history of hostility toward Moshe. Among other incidents, they were the ones who forced Moshe to flee Mitzrayim when they revealed to Pharaoh that he had killed an Egyptian (even though he had done so to save a Jew's life).⁹ Korach also won over to his cause two hundred and fifty leaders of the community (16:1-2). They were all firstborn who had lost their right to perform the *avodah* (sacrificial service) after the

sin with the golden calf (see *Overview to Parashas Bamidbar*). Korach exploited their feelings of resentment, as well as those of the entire nation, to challenge Moshe.¹⁰

Korach's claim. Korach did not openly seek the position of Elitzafan or of Aharon.¹¹ He presented himself as the people's champion and, supported by his distinguished group of followers, publicly accused Moshe and Aharon of holding too much power (16:3).¹² He claimed that Moshe had decided to appoint his brother Kohen Gadol by himself. Really, Korach argued, all the people were holy and worthy of approaching Hashem; they had no need for Aharon to be their intermediary.¹³ He consequently demanded — as a means of gaining public support — that the rights of the Kohanim and Levi'im be returned to the firstborn.¹⁴ And if Hashem deemed it necessary to appoint a Kohen Gadol, then someone other than Aharon should be appointed.¹⁵

Moshe's response: a divine test. Korach's claim was in essence a denial of the divine origin of Moshe's teachings and thereby endangered the entire Torah — if one of Moshe's teachings was open to question, they were all open to question.¹⁶ Moshe realized that the only way to conclusively prove Korach wrong was to place the matter before Hashem.¹⁷ He proposed a divine test: Korach and his followers would take fire pans and offer Hashem incense — just like Kohanim — together with Aharon. Hashem would accept the incense of the one chosen for the *kehunah* (priesthood), but, Moshe warned, everyone else would die (16:4-7).

Korach was not afraid. He foresaw that a succession of great people would descend from him, including the great judge and prophet, Shmuel HaNavi. He assumed this meant that Hashem would choose him to be Kohen Gadol instead of Aharon,¹⁸ so he ignored Moshe's warnings, as well as Moshe's attempts to appease him. Dasan and Aviram also refused Moshe's peace offers. There was nothing left to do but wait for the test. Moshe fixed it for the next morning in the hope that the rebels would have time to come to their senses.¹⁹ But Korach used the time to arouse the entire nation against Moshe and Aharon through flattery, lies, and mockery (16:8-17).²⁰

Hashem's anger. Korach and his followers came with their fire pans to the entrance of the *Ohel Mo'ed*. Incited by Korach, the people also gathered there, eager to see what would happen.²¹ Suddenly Hashem's Presence appeared in a pillar of cloud, and He told Moshe that He intended to annihilate the people immediately. The fact that they had even entertained the possibility that He agreed with Korach and would take away the rights of the Kohanim and Levi'im revealed that they doubted the words of their teacher and prophet, Moshe. This was tantamount to doubting Hashem's words, and for this they deserved death (16:18-21).²²

Moshe and Aharon immediately fell on their faces, pleading on behalf of the people that only Korach be judged since only he was really to blame for rebelling (16:22).²³ Hashem relented and instructed Moshe to tell the people to dissociate themselves from the rebels by moving away from the tents of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram. This

10. *Ramban*, 16:1; *Ibn Ezra*, 16:1. 11. See *Gur Aryeh*, 16:1. 12. *R' Hirsch*, 16:4; *Gur Aryeh*, 16:1. 13. *Gur Aryeh*, 16:3; *R' Hirsch*, 16:3. 14. *Ramban*, 16:5. 15. *Nachalas Yaakov*, 16:1; see *R' Hirsch*, 16:4. 16. *R' Bachya*, 16:30; *R' Hirsch*, 16:4-5. 17. *R' Hirsch*, 16:4-5. 18. *Rashi*, 16:7. 19. *Ohr HaChaim*, 16:5; *R' Hirsch*, 16:5. 20. *Tanchuma 7; Rashi*, 16:19. 21. *Rashi*, 16:19. 22. *Ramban*, 16:20. 23. *Rashi*, 16:22; *Ramban*, 16:21.

1. *Pesachim* 119a. 2. *Tanchuma* 2. 3. *Rashbam*, *Pesachim* 119a; see *Mesilas Yesharim*, chap. 11. 4. *Rashi*, 16:1, and *Sifsei Chachomim* there. 5. *Ramban*, 16:1. 6. *Maiarshia*, *Sanhedrin* 110a. 7. *Abarbanel; Malbim*, 16:1; *R' Hirsch*, 16:8-11; *Tzeidah LaDerech*, 16:1; see *Tanchuma* 10 and *Rashi*, 16:1. 6. 8. *Ramban*, 16:1; *Tanchuma* 3-4. 9. See *Shemos* 2:13-15 and *Rashi* there; *Megillah* 11a.

16 Korach son of Yitzhar, son of Kehas, son of Levi, took himself to one side to quarrel, and Dasan and Aviram sons of Eliav, and On son of Peles, all three being descendants of Reuven, joined him. ² They defiantly rose up in public before Moshe, together with two hundred and fifty important men from Bnei Yisrael who were leaders of the community, the ones called on at times of assembly to represent the nation, men of renown

טו א ויקח לוֹ אֶת־עַדְוָהוּ בְּרֵי־עֵזֶר בְּרֵי־קָהָת בְּרֵי־לֵוִי וְדָסָן וְאֵבִירָם בְּנֵי אֶלְיָב וְאֹן בְּרֵי־פֶלֶס בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: וַיִּקְבְּלוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאֶנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַכֹּלְשִׁים וְהַמְּאִתָּהִם נְשִׂאֵי עֵדוּת קָרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־יָדוּם:

For clarity, brackets [] indicate an addition by the author or a different commentator from the one being cited. ⇨ "See commentary on..." and "see comm. on..." refer to the Running Commentary in this or another parashah. ⇨ For easy reference, all sources are in italics.

..... Running Commentary

Part 1. Korach's Rebellion

Verses 16:1–17:5

Korach's Accusation

- Korach assembled a following that included Dasan, Aviram, On, and 250 leaders of Yisrael to gather against Moshe and Aharon.
- Korach and his followers sought to discredit Moshe and accused Moshe and Aharon of taking too much greatness for themselves.

..... 16:1-2

This parashah recounts the tragic story of Korach, a distinguished member of the tribe of Levi, who presumed to question Moshe and Aharon's leadership of the nation. Before explaining why he thought he was justified, it is important to note that he was someone of great importance and distinction. The Torah makes this clear from the outset by detailing his illustrious lineage: "**Korach son of Yitzhar, son of Kehas, son of Levi**" (16:1) (*Gur Aryeh*).¹ Not only was he a member of the tribe of Levi — the tribe chosen to serve Hashem in the Mishkan — he was also the grandson of the righteous Kehas, whose offspring were chosen to guard and transport the Mishkan's holiest objects, including the *Aron*, Menorah, and Altars (see comm. on 3:21–38 and 4:1–3). Chazal say that he was actually one of those honored with carrying the holy *Aron* itself. They also tell us that he was very wise (*Tanchuma* 2) and, as we will see, blessed with prophetic powers (*Rashi*, 16:7; *Divrei Ha'amim* 1 6:18–22). Nevertheless, despite all his greatness, he became involved in a terrible dispute with Moshe Rabbeinu that led to his death.

Who was Korach?

He was a prominent Levi who was wise, a prophet, and even helped carry the *Aron*.

Korach's motives. How could such a great man rebel against Hashem's chosen leader? Several factors led to Korach's rebellion:

1. *Wealth.* Korach was fabulously wealthy. He acquired his wealth back in Mitzrayim. When Yosef HaTzaddik, the son of Yaakov Avinu, was in charge of Mitzrayim, there was a world famine. Nations from all over the world, including Yaakov and his family, were forced to descend to Mitzrayim to buy grain (which, on Yosef's advice, the Egyptians had stockpiled during the previous years of plenty). Mitzrayim became the recipient of the world's riches, which Yosef stored in three enormous treasure houses. Korach discovered one of them, and he became so rich that just carrying the keys to his treasure chests required countless donkeys (*Pesachim* 119a; *Maharsha, Sanhedrin* 110a). Unfortunately, this wealth proved to be Korach's undoing. It made him proud and arrogant, and this led to his eventual downfall (*Pesachim* 119a and *Rashbam* there; see *Ba'al HaTurim*).

2. *The pursuit of honor.* After the Mishkan was set up, Moshe took a census of the Levi'im (see 3:14–39) and appointed leaders for each of its three groups (Gershon, Kehas, and Merari).² For the group of Kehas, he chose Elitzafan son of Uziel (see 3:30). Although Moshe had done this at Hashem's command, Korach reasoned that the position was rightfully his. "My father was one of four brothers," Korach said to himself.³ "Since Amram was the firstborn, it is understandable that his two sons, Moshe and Aharon, took the highest positions — Moshe became king [i.e., the national leader] and Aharon the Kohen Gadol. But surely I should have taken the next highest position. After all, I am Yitzhar's firstborn [Kehas's second son]. So why did Moshe appoint Elitzafan son of Uziel, the youngest of the four brothers, to be the leader of the group of Kehas? [It must be that he is making decisions by himself, without consulting Hashem (*Sifsei Chachomim, R' Bachya*; see 16:28).] Therefore," Korach concluded "I will challenge him and invalidate *all* his teachings." Although Korach thought his reasoning logical, he was swayed by jealousy and the desire for honor (*Rashi*, citing *Tanchuma* 1).⁴

3. *Jealousy of Aharon.* Korach was also jealous of Aharon (*Ramban*).⁵ These feelings began burning inside him soon after the Mishkan was set up. The Midrash relates that Korach was humiliated at the inauguration of the Levi'im [on the seventh of Nissan] when he was the first Levi to be shaved of all his hair and waved around (see comm. on

Why did Korach rebel?
He was very wealthy, which made him arrogant.

Also, he was jealous of Elitzafan ben Uziel, who had been appointed leader of the group of Kehas.

and he was jealous of Aharon, too, who was Kohen Gadol.

2. As explained in the commentary on 3:44–51, this census either took place right after the Mishkan was erected or a month later, when the other tribes were counted.

3. From oldest to youngest, the four brothers were Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron, and Uziel. See *Shemos* 6:18.

4. Korach's argument was, of course, fallacious. The new hierarchy that came into existence with the rearrangement of the camp was based on merit (individual and tribal), not lineage. See the *Overview to Parashas Bamidbar*.

5. As proof of this, *Ramban* cites Moshe's rebuke to Korach: "You also demand the priesthood!" (16:10).