

עץ חיים

ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM



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16 Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—²to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community,

טז וַיִּקַּח קָרַח בֶּן־יִצְחָר בֶּן־קֹהַת בֶּן־לֵוִי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאֹן בֶּן־פִּלֶת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: ²וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאָתַיִם

The Generation of the Exodus: The March to Transjordan (continued)

ENCROACHMENT ON THE TABERNACLE (16:1–18:32)

THE KORAHITE REBELLIONS (16:1–35)

LEADERS OF THE REBELLION (vv. 1–2)

1. Dathan and Abiram . . . Reuben Because they were descended from Reuben, Jacob's firstborn and hence the original leader of the tribes,

they resented Moses' leadership (see 1 Chron. 5:1–2).

2. Israelites chieftains of Here referring to dignitaries. These 250 chieftains were not only Levites but represented a cross-section of the tribes.

CHAPTER 16

The theme of Israel's unhappiness and rebelliousness continues in this *parashah*. Several highly placed Israelites, resenting the prominence of Moses and Aaron, claim the right to leadership for themselves. Korah, a Levite, asserts himself as the equal of Moses and Aaron (it is not entirely clear which of them he wishes to replace). Leaders of the tribe of Reuben claim leadership in the name of the descendants of Jacob's firstborn son. It may be that a series of discouraging events—including the deaths at Taberah (11:1–3) and at Kibroth-hattaavah (11:10–34), and the disastrous episode of the scouts (13–14)—have demoralized the people to the point at which they are vulnerable to this uprising (Ramban). The uprising is put down only after two miraculous events. One miracle destroys the rebels and affirms the primacy of Moses and Aaron, and a second miracle authenticates the primacy of the Levites for the divine service.

In Jewish lore, Korah is the arch-demagogue, lusting for power to inflate his own prominence, not to serve the people. Thus the Mishnah describes illegitimate controversy (for personal gain, "not for the sake of Heaven") as being "like the dispute of Korah and his followers" (Avot 5:17). One interpreter understands this as "the dispute of Korah with his followers," because each faction in the rebellion had its own agenda. They were united only in their opposition to Moses and Aaron. Like many

demagogues, they defined themselves by what they were against, not by a vision of what they stood for (Kalischer).

One tradition (Num. R. 18:4) pictures Korah complaining about the tithes and offerings Moses demanded of the people, saying "You lay a heavier burden on us than the Egyptians did." Korah, in this *midrash*, never mentions that these taxes were designed to help the poor, to maintain the sanctuary, and to give the Israelites ways of expressing their gratitude to God and their dependence on God. Another *midrash* (Num. R. 18:3) portrays Korah as caricaturing the rituals of the Torah by casting them in extreme form: Does a library full of Torah scrolls require a *m'zuzah* (with a few biblical verses in it) on the doorpost? Does a completely blue *tallit* need the required blue thread added to its *tzitzit*? Thus Korah was challenging not only Moses and Aaron's authority but that of Torah and, ultimately, of God.

1. son of Kohath son of Levi Why does Korah's genealogy stop there and not trace itself back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Because Jacob on his deathbed prayed, "If any of my descendants turns out wicked, may my name not be associated with them." Such a person is not worthy of being called "an Israelite" (Num. R. 18:5).

On son of Peleth He is never mentioned again in the story. An ancient tradition relates that his wife talked him out of following Korah. "What good will it do us if Korah wins? We will be subservient to him as we now are to Moses and Aaron" (BT Sanh. 109b).

chosen in the assembly, men of repute.³ They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the LORD is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD’s congregation?”

⁴When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.

⁵Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, “Come morning, the LORD will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen. ⁶Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans,⁷ and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the LORD. Then the man whom the LORD chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!”

⁸Moses said further to Korah, “Hear me, sons

נְשִׂיאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אַנְשֵׁי־שָׁם: ³ וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כֹּהִלִים קְדוֹשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוֹעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהַל יְהוָה:

⁴ וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פָּנָיו: ⁵ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־קֹרַח וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדָתוֹ לֵאמֹר בִּקֶּר וַיָּדוּעַ יְהוָה אֶת־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ וְאֶת־הַקָּדוֹשׁ וְהַקְּרִיב אֵלָיו: וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר־בּוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו: ⁶ זֹאת עֲשׂוּ קְחוּ־לָכֶם מִחֲתוֹת קֹרַח וְכָל־עֵדָתוֹ: ⁷ וַתִּנּוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וְשִׂימוּ עֲלֵיהֶן קִטְרֹת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה מִחֹר וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִבְחַר יְהוָה הוּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ רַב־לָכֶם בְּנֵי לֵוִי:

⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־קֹרַח שְׁמַעוּנָא בְנֵי

chosen in This can also be rendered, with the ancient Greek translation, “called to.” Chieftains were heads of clans and, by virtue of that office, were called to the national assembly.

repute Hebrew: *shem*; literally, “name.” (Conversely, ignoble persons are “nameless.”)

THE INCENSE TEST FOR HOLINESS (vv. 3–7)

3. You have gone too far Literally, “you have too much” power and prestige.

all the community are holy This claim is in opposition to the priestly teaching that only priests are holy (see Exod. 28:1–3 and Lev. 8 for the special status of priests). Thus either Aaron is the intended target of the attack (and Moses is included with him because he appointed and consecrated Aaron) or Moses too is accused of presuming to be holy because on occasion he assumed priestly powers, as when he officiated at Aaron’s consecration (Exod. 29; Lev. 8).

4. fell on his face So that God would provide him an answer. Apparently Moses entered the tabernacle enclosure to consult God.

5. morning A day is needed for the required rituals of purification before one may appear at the tabernacle.

who is His and who is holy To lead Israel and the priesthood.

has chosen God intends to designate His priest for all time.

6–7. The offering of incense is an exclusive priestly prerogative. Nonpriests offer it only at the peril of their lives.

fire pans A flat pan used for removing ashes or live coals from the altar, and on which incense is placed.

7. before the LORD That is, at the entrance to the tabernacle court (v. 18).

MOSES REBUKES THE LEVITES (vv. 8–11)

When Moses’ leadership is contested, he leaves his

3. Yeshayahu Leibowitz sees Korah’s demagoguery exposed in his claim that “all the community ‘are’ holy,” i.e., we have achieved our goal and nothing more need be demanded of us. The Torah’s position is that all the community is challenged to “become” holy (Lev. 19:2). It is a future goal, not a present boast. Leibowitz interprets the words of the Torah several chapters later (26:11), “the sons of Ko-

rah . . . did not die,” to mean that such people exist in every generation, claiming that just being Jewish means that they are already as close to God as they have to be. True messengers present themselves as unworthy of the task, as Moses did at the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:11). Only persons motivated by self-interest, eager for the position of leader, proclaim “I can do it better” (Hirsch).

of Levi. ⁹Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, to perform the duties of the LORD's Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? ¹⁰Now that He has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too? ¹¹Truly, it is against the LORD that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?"

¹²Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come! ¹³Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us? ¹⁴Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come!" ¹⁵Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the LORD, "Pay no regard to their oblation.

defense to God. When Aaron is the target, Moses springs to his aid.

8. sons of Levi In verse 2 we are told that Korah's allies are the tribal chieftains, but here they seem to be Levites.

9. duties The responsibility and privilege of dismantling, transporting, and reassembling the tabernacle and its sacred objects.

serve them By assisting the Israelites with the preliminary acts of preparing the sacrifice: slaughtering, flaying, and washing the animal, tasks that normally are performed by the one who makes the offering.

11. The true thrust of the rebellion is against the Lord, who has chosen Moses and Aaron.

who is Aaron Literally, "what is [wrong] with Aaron?"

MOSES DEFIED (v. 12–15)

12. We will not come! That is, "We will no

לוי: ⁹המַעַט מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי־הַבְּדִיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְתּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשָׁרְתָם: ¹⁰וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲחֵיךָ בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אִתָּךְ וּבִקְשַׁתֶּם גַּם־כֹּהֲנָה: ¹¹לָכֵן אֶתְּהַ וְכָל־עַדְתְּךָ הַנֹּעֲדִים עַל־יְהוָה וְאֶהְרֵן מִה־הוּא כִּי תִלוּנוּ תִלְיִנוּ עָלָיו:

¹²וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְקַרְא לְדָתָן וּלְאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא נַעֲלֶה: ¹³הַמַּעַט כִּי הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ זֶבֶת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ לְהַמִּיתָנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי־תִשְׁתַּרְר עָלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְׁתַּרְר: ¹⁴אִם לֹא אֶל־אֶרֶץ זֶבֶת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ הֵבִיאָתָנוּ וְתַתֵּן־לָנוּ נַחֲלֹת שָׂדֵה וְכַרְם הַעֵינֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם תִּנְקֹר לֹא נַעֲלֶה: ¹⁵וַיַּחַר לְמֹשֶׁה מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־יְהוָה אֶל־תִּפֶּן אֶל־מִנְחָתָם לֹא חֲמוֹר אָחַד

longer obey your orders." This is an open break with Moses' authority.

13. Dathan and Abiram contradict Moses' major claim: Egypt and not Canaan is the true land of milk and honey.

14. Even if you had As you promised (see Exod. 3:8,17, 13:5, 33:3, and others in Lev., Num., and Deut.).

gouge out those men's eyes This idiom also means "hoodwink." It corresponds to the modern idioms "throw dust in the eyes" or "pull the wool over the eyes." "Those men" refers either to the elders who accompanied Moses (v. 25) or, more likely, euphemistically, to themselves.

15. oblation This refers either to their prior but unmentioned offering, to their incense offering, or to any sacrifice they might wish to offer before the test.

12. Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram Here we see the greatness of Moses' soul. He set aside his own dignity and his feelings of re-

sentment toward those who spoke ill of him and took the initiative to heal this breach in the community (Rashi).

I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them.”

¹⁶And Moses said to Korah, “Tomorrow, you and all your company appear before the LORD, you and they and Aaron. ¹⁷Each of you take his fire pan and lay incense on it, and each of you bring his fire pan before the LORD, two hundred and fifty fire pans; you and Aaron also [bring] your fire pans.” ¹⁸Each of them took his fire pan, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and took his place at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as did Moses and Aaron. ¹⁹Korah gathered the whole community against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

Then the Presence of the LORD appeared to the whole community, ²⁰and the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²¹“Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!” ²²But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?”

²³The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁴“Speak to the community and say: Withdraw from

מֵהֶם וּנְשֹׂאתֵי וְלֹא הִרְעֵתִי אֶת־אֶחָד מֵהֶם:

¹⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־קָרַח וְכָל־עַדְתּוֹ הֲיִו לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אַתָּה וְהֵם וְאַהֲרֹן מִחֵר: ¹⁷ וּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וּנְתַתֶּם עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאתִים מִחֶתֶת וְאַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן אִישׁ מִחֶרְן אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ וַיִּשְׂימוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן: ¹⁹ וַיִּקְהַל עֲלֵיהֶם קָרַח אֶת־כָּל־הָעֵדָה אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד

וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד־יְהוָה אֶל־כָּל־הָעֵדָה: ²⁰ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ²¹ הִבְדִּילוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאַכְלֶה אֹתָם כְּרָגַע: ²² וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל אֱלֹהֵי הַרְוִחוֹת לְכָל־בָּשָׂר הַאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחַטָּא וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְצֹף: ²³ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²⁴ דַּבֵּר

שלישי

THE INCENSE TEST AT THE TENT
OF MEETING (vv. 16–24)

16–17. This repeats verses 6–7, except that Aaron, missing there, is explicitly mentioned here, and the Levites, addressed in verses 6–7, are missing here. Possibly Korah stands for all the rebellious Levites.

before the LORD See Comment to 16:7.

18. The execution of the test, presumably on the next day.

put fire in it Moses, however, did not command them to do this now (see v. 17), although he did so earlier (v. 7). Is this omission a hint that Korah and the chieftains were guilty of offering “unauthorized fire” (*esh zarah*), that is, not from the altar—which was the sin of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1)? It is hardly accidental that when Moses asks Aaron to offer incense on a fire pan he specifies that the fire be taken from the altar.

in it That is, on it.

19. the whole community Korah rallied all of Israel behind him; hence God intended to destroy them all.

21. Stand back Hebrew: *hibbad’hu*; literally, “separate yourselves” (17:10).

22. they fell on their faces In prayer.

Source of the breath God gives humans His breath at birth and withdraws it at death. Because God is the Creator of life and alone determines who is to live and who is to die, His anger need not be turned on the innocent.

When one man Korah alone instigated the action of the community.

wrathful with the whole community The divine right to punish collectively is here both assumed and questioned.

24. But the community was gathered at the Tent of Meeting (vv. 18–19)! Originally the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram and the

24. Withdraw from about the abodes “The Israelites were in a dangerous situation characteristic of many people to this day. They did not agree with Korah but neither did they ac-

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about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.”

²⁵Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him. ²⁶He addressed the community, saying, “Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins.” ²⁷So they withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

Now Dathan and Abiram had come out and they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones. ²⁸And Moses said, “By this you shall know that it was the LORD who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: ²⁹if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the LORD who sent me. ³⁰But if the LORD brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men

rebellion of Korah may have been separate events.

PUNISHMENT OF THE REBELS (vv. 25–35)

25. elders of Israel Perhaps the 70 elders of 11:16. Thus Dathan and Abiram had no support from the other tribes.

26. the community The Israelites who did not take part in the rebellion.

tents The Hebrew term *ohel* refers both to the tent curtains and to its contents.

27. had come out For a curse to be effective, the object of the curse must be in view. Dathan, Abiram, and their families had to be seen by Moses.

אֶל־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר הֶעֱלוּ מִסָּבִיב לְמִשְׁכַּן־
 קָרַח דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם:
²⁵ וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם וַיִּלְכוּ
 אַחֲרָיו וְקָנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ²⁶ וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל־הָעֵדָה
 לֵאמֹר סוּרוּ נָא מֵעַל אֹהֲלֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים
 הַרְשָׁעִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאַל־תִּגְעוּ בְכֹל־אֲשֶׁר
 לָהֶם פֶּן־תִּסָּפּוּ בְכֹל־חַטָּאתָם: ²⁷ וַיַּעֲלוּ
 מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן־קָרַח דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם מִסָּבִיב
 וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם יִצְאוּ נֹצְצִים פֶּתַח אֹהֲלֵיהֶם
 וּנְשֵׂיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם וְטַפָּם: ²⁸ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה
 בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי־יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת
 אֵת כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי־לֹא מִלְּבָבִי:
²⁹ אִם־כַּמּוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִמָּתוּן אֵלֶּה
 וּפְקֻדַת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִפְקַד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא יְהוָה
 שְׁלַחְנִי: ³⁰ וְאִם־בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה
 וּפְצָתָהּ הָאֲדָמָה אֶת־פִּיהָ וּבִלְעָה אֹתָם
 וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה
 וַיִּדְעוּתָם כִּי נֹאצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־

28. all these things This refers to Moses’ leadership, declared a failure by Dathan and Abiram. Or it could refer to Moses’ appointment of the Levites in place of the firstborn, or to his appointment of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood.

my own devising Literally, “my own heart.” In the Bible, the heart is the locus of thought. Moses wishes to demonstrate that he is not “lording it” over Israel, but simply fulfilling the will of God.

29. common fate A natural death.

30. brings about something unheard-of Literally, “will create a creation,” i.e., something that did not exist before.

Sheol The netherworld, the abode of the dead.

tively oppose him. They stood aside to see how things would turn out” (N. Leibowitz, after Malbim). That is why Moses has to urge them to distance themselves from Korah and his followers, lest they be caught up in the latter’s punishment, suffering the deserved fate of the bystander who does nothing to

stop evil and perhaps even hopes to benefit from it.

28–30. It would seem that Moses is showing the strain of having to deal with one episode of complaint and faithlessness after another. With each successive incident, he becomes more short tempered with the people he is leading.

have spurned the LORD.”³¹ Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder,³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah’s people and all their possessions.³³ They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.³⁴ All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!”

³⁵And a fire went forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

17 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:² Order Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to remove the fire pans—for they have become sacred—from among the charred remains; and scatter

יהוה: ³¹ ויהי ככלתו לדבר את כל-
הדברים האלה ותבקע האדמה אשר
תחתיהם: ³² ותפתח הארץ את-פיה
ותבלע אתם ואת-בתיהם ואת כל-
האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל-הרכוש:
³³ וירדו הם וכל-אשר להם חיים שאלה
ותכס עליהם הארץ ויאבדו מתוך
הקהל: ³⁴ וכל-ישראל אשר סביבתיהם
נסו לקלם כי אמרו פן-תבלענו הארץ:
³⁵ ואש יצאה מאת יהוה ותאכל
את החמשים ומאתים איש מקריבי
הקטרת: פ

17 וידבר יהוה אל-משה לאמר:
² אמר אל-אלעזר בן-אהרן הכהן וירם
את-המחות מביין השרפה ואת-האש

you shall know Earthquakes were well known in the ancient world. The “unheard-of thing” was that this quake, like the plagues in Egypt, occurred precisely at the command of Moses.

the LORD But not me.

32. earth That is, the netherworld. It is equivalent to Sheol in verses 30 and 33.

households The families of Dathan and Abiram.

all Korah’s people And Korah too was swallowed by the earth (26:10).

33. the earth closed over them This, and not the earth’s opening, is what also constitutes the “unheard-of” creation.

vanished from the midst of the congregation All traces of the line of Dathan and Abiram were eliminated but, contrary to this text, not all traces of the line of Korah (see 26:11).

35. from the LORD From the tabernacle.

THE AFTERMATH OF KORAH’S REBELLION (17:1–18:32)

THE FIRE PANS AS REMINDERS (17:1–5)

2. Eleazar Eleazar attended to the tabernacle’s interior appurtenances (4:16); and so he, not Aaron, was ordered to remove the fire pans.

remove That is, set aside or dedicate. Presumably, the fire pans were first handled by nonpriests, perhaps Levites. As a priest, Eleazar would not have been allowed to touch the pans before they underwent purification from having been in the hands of the slain chieftains.

sacred The fire pans became sacred by their use in the sacred precincts or because they were touched by the divine fire.

charred remains Of Korah and his followers.

scatter the coals abroad The coals must

32. “The world exists on account of people who are able to restrain themselves during a quarrel” (BT Hul. 89a). Korah and his followers were not able to do that, so the earth gave way and swallowed them (Simḥah Bunem). The earthquake that swallowed Korah vindicated Moses as God’s choice to be Israel’s leader. The tribe of Reuben, however, was still challenging

Aaron and the Levites. Here we see the contrasting personalities of Moses and Aaron. Moses destroys his opponents, calling down a divine miracle to bury them alive. Aaron disarms his rivals by outproducing them; his staff sends forth sprouts and blossoms, whereas the staffs of the other tribes cannot flower (17:23). Moses is the voice of justice; Aaron is the pursuer of peace.

the coals abroad. ³[Remove] the fire pans of those who have sinned at the cost of their lives, and let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar—for once they have been used for offering to the LORD, they have become sacred—and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel. ⁴Eleazar the priest took the copper fire pans which had been used for offering by those who died in the fire; and they were hammered into plating for the altar, ⁵as the LORD had ordered him through Moses. It was to be a reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider—one not of Aaron's offspring—should presume to offer incense before the LORD and suffer the fate of Korah and his band.

⁶Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You two have brought death upon the LORD’s peo-

ple. They have come from a source other than the altar and hence did not have to be returned there.

3. hammered sheets The fire pans were hammered into thin layers.

4. copper Better: bronze. See Comment to Exod. 25:3.

plating for the altar According to Exod. 27:2 and 38:2, the altar was already plated with bronze. This second plating was to serve as a warning sign to encroachers.

5. him Eleazar.

outsider Any unauthorized person, a non-priest, a non-Levite, or even a disqualified priest.

Korah and his band Here it is stated that Korah died with his company in the incense trial.

וְרַהֲלֵאָהּ כִּי קָדְשׁוֹ: ³ אֵת מַחְתּוֹת הַחֹטְאִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנִפְשׁוֹתָם וְעָשׂוּ אֹתָם רִקְעֵי פָחִים צְפוּי לַמִּזְבֵּחַ כִּי־הִקְרִיבָם לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיִּקְדָּשׁוּ וַיְהִיו לְאוֹת לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ⁴ וַיִּקַּח אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶת מַחְתּוֹת הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיבוּ הַשֹּׂרְפִים וַיִּרְקְעוּם צְפוּי לַמִּזְבֵּחַ: ⁵ וּזְכָרוֹן לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְרַב אִישׁ זָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזֶּרַע אֶהְרֹן הוּא לְהִקְטִיר קֹטֶרֶת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְלֹא־יְהִיֶּה כְקֶרַח וְכַעֲדָתוֹ כֹּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה לּוֹ:

⁶ וַיִּלְנוּ כָּל־עַדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמַּחֲרַת עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם הַמֵּתִים

OUTBREAK OF

THE PLAGUE (vv. 6–15)

6. Next day This phrase connects the plague with the previous story of the fire pans.

You two Hebrew: *attem*, which is emphatic: It was you two who devised the incense test by which they lost their lives. Although the text attributes the test solely to Moses' initiative (16:6–7, 16–17), he and Aaron are accused of collusion.

the LORD's people That is, the chieftains. The people at large, unconvinced by the incense test and continuing to believe that all are equally holy, pick up Korah's refrain: Moses and Aaron are lording it over everyone. Furthermore, they caused the deaths of the chieftains, who repre-

CHAPTER 17

2–3. The firepans used by the rebels to offer incense have become sacred and are to be used as plating for the altar. To some commentators, they have become holy simply because they had been consecrated by use in a ceremony. For Arama, they have become holy as mementos of the victory of truth over falsehood, like the trophies of a victorious army. For another commentator (*Ha-amek Davar*), they are holy because the men who offered incense in them were not really rebels and sinners, but people with a yearning for the opportunity to be close

to God, to be of special service to God, a yearning that cost them their lives. Kook taught that the holiness of the firepans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy. Challenges to tradition, he taught, are necessary because they stand as perpetual reminders of the danger that religion can sink into corruption and complacency. Plating the altar with the firepans of the rebels is meant to remind us of the legitimacy, indeed the potential holiness, of the impulse within each of us to rebel against the stagnation and complacency that can infect religion.

ple!”⁷ But as the community gathered against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the Tent of Meeting; the cloud had covered it and the Presence of the LORD appeared.

⁸When Moses and Aaron reached the Tent of Meeting, ⁹the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹⁰“Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant.” They fell on their faces. ¹¹Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and make expiation for them. For wrath has gone forth from the LORD: the plague has begun!” ¹²Aaron took it, as Moses had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and made expiation for the people; ¹³he stood between the dead and the

אֶת־עַם יְהוָה: ⁷וַיְהִי בְהַקְהֵל הָעֵדָה עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיִּפְּנוּ אֶל־אַהֲלֵ מוֹעֵד וַהֲנִיחָה כְּסָהוּ הָעֲנָן וַיֵּרָא כְבוֹד יְהוָה:

⁸וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פְּנֵי אַהֲלֵ מוֹעֵד: ⁹וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹⁰הֲרִמּוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאַכְלֵה אֹתָם כְּרָגַע וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם: ¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קח אֶת־הַמִּחְתָּה וְתֵן־עָלֶיהָ אֵשׁ מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשִׂים קֹטֶרֶת וְהוֹלֵךְ מִהֵרָה אֶל־הָעֵדָה וְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם כִּי־יֵצֵא הַקֶּצֶף מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה הַחַל הַנֶּגֶף: ¹²וַיִּקַּח אַהֲרֹן בְּאֶשֶׁר ׀ דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּרְץ אֶל־תּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל וַהֲנִיחָה הַחַל הַנֶּגֶף בְּעַם וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַקֹּטֶרֶת וַיְכַפֵּר עַל־הָעַם: ¹³וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין־הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים

sented the Israelites in the national assembly and whose decisions may well have come from God.

7. the cloud had covered it When the tabernacle was stationary it was always covered by the divine cloud.

the Presence of the LORD appeared The pillar of fire within the cloud was visible only at night. To be seen by day, it probably increased its brightness, thereby signaling to Moses that God wished to communicate with him.

8. Moses' audiences with God were normally held inside the shrine, but when he was accompanied by Aaron or the people, the audiences were held in the courtyard that served as the entrance to the shrine.

9. Although Aaron was with him, only Moses heard God's voice.

10. Remove yourselves So as to escape the plague. Similarly, the people earlier had to distance themselves from Dathan and Abiram or the earth would have swallowed them too (16:26).

that I may annihilate them in an instant It had already been decreed that they would die in the wilderness; the only additional punishment left was their instantaneous death.

fell on their faces In prayer.

11. Moses said The lack of response from God compels Moses to attempt his own solution. His offering of incense outside the sacred precincts is an unprecedented act, improvised for the emergency.

incense The same incense that causes destruction when used by unauthorized persons averts destruction when used by those in rightful authority.

make expiation for them In the religions of the ancient Near East, incense served to appease and soothe the anger of the gods.

wrath Wrath is conceived as an independent entity, a destroyer, that acts as God's agent.

12. put on That is, on the fire pan.

13. Although Aaron, as high priest, is forbidden to come into close proximity with the

11–12. Once again, we see the greatness of soul that characterizes Moses and Aaron. They are the targets of the people's anger, but when God is about to punish the people and vindicate them, it is Moses and Aaron who intercede on their behalf. The two-pronged rebellion has

been put down. The supremacy and legitimacy of Moses and Aaron as God's elect have been affirmed, but not without cost. Successive collisions have taken their cumulative toll on the people and on their leaders, as later events will show.

living until the plague was checked. ¹⁴Those who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of Korah. ¹⁵Aaron then returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, since the plague was checked.

¹⁶The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁷Speak to the Israelite people and take from them—from the chieftains of their ancestral houses—one staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house: twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each man's name on his staff, ¹⁸there being one staff for each head of an ancestral house; also inscribe Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. ¹⁹Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact, where I meet with you. ²⁰The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you.

²¹Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. Their chieftains gave him a staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house, twelve staffs in all; among these staffs was that of Aaron. ²²Moses deposited the staffs before the LORD, in the Tent of the Pact. ²³The next day Moses entered the Tent

וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמִּגַּפָּה: ¹⁴ וַיְהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה אַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר אֲלָף וּשְׁבַע מֵאוֹת מִלְבָּד הַמֵּתִים עַל-דִּבְרֵי-קָרַח: ¹⁵ וַיָּשָׁב אַהֲרֹן אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהַמִּגַּפָּה נִעְצְרָה: פ

חמישי ¹⁶ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹⁷ דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאֵתָם מִטָּה מִטָּה לְבֵית לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל-נְשֵׂי־אֲהָהֶם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת-שְׁמוֹ תִּכְתֹּב עַל-מִטָּהּ: ¹⁸ וְאֵת שֵׁם אַהֲרֹן תִּכְתֹּב עַל-מִטָּה לְוִי בִּי מִטָּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אָבוֹתָם: ¹⁹ וְהִנַּחְתָּם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אוֹעֵד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה: ²⁰ וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֶבְחַרְבּוּ מִטָּהוּ יִפְרַח וְהִשְׁכַּחְתִּי מֵעַלִּי אֶת-תְּלֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מְלִינִם עֲלֵיכֶם: ²¹ וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנוּ אֵלָיו | כָּל-נְשֵׂי־אִיהֶם מִטָּה לְנִשְׂיָא אֶחָד מִטָּה לְנִשְׂיָא אֶחָד לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת וּמִטָּה אַהֲרֹן בְּתוֹךְ מִטּוֹתָם: ²² וַיִּנַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמִּטּוֹת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּאֹהֶל הָעֵדוּת: ²³ וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּבֵא

v. 20. חצי הספר בפסוקים

dead (see Lev. 21:11), he does so in this case to save the living.

14. those who died on account of Korah The 250 chieftains (16:35) and probably also Dathan, Abiram, and their families.

15. since the plague was checked Moses' presence at the tent is repeated to emphasize the achievement of Aaron: It was not Moses' prayer but Aaron's ritual that placated God.

THE TEST OF THE STAFFS (vv. 16–26)

17. staff Hebrew: *matteh*, which also means “tribe.” The staff was the official insignia of a tribal chieftain.

an ancestral house That is, the entire tribe.
each man's name But not the name of the tribe. The test was designed to choose God's priest from among the tribal chieftains; thus it was the individual who mattered, not the tribe.

18. Aaron's name on the staff of Levi The contest is between Aaron and the other chieftains who, like their 250 fallen colleagues, are still reluctant to see Aaron as the head of the priesthood.

19. the Pact Hebrew: *ha-edut*; short for “the Ark of the Pact” (*aron ha-edut*). The Ark's chief function was to serve as the receptacle for the Decalogue, the symbol of the pact or covenant between God and Israel (see Exod. 25:16, 40:20). Thus the staffs were placed in the Holy of Holies in front of the Ark (see also Num. 17:25).

20. the man whom I choose Either Aaron or one of the other tribal chieftains.

rid Myself God will settle the matter once and for all.

22. See Comment to 17:19.

23. A number of traditional commentators explain that when Moses entered the tent, the staff

of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds. ²⁴Moses then brought out all the staffs from before the LORD to all the Israelites; each identified and recovered his staff.

²⁵The LORD said to Moses, “Put Aaron’s staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die.” ²⁶This Moses did; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did.

²⁷But the Israelites said to Moses, “Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost! ²⁸Everyone who so much as ventures near the LORD’s Tabernacle must die. Alas, we are doomed to perish!”

מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֶהָל הָעֵדוּת וְהִנֵּה פָּרַח מִטֶּה־
אֶהָרֶן לְבֵית לֵוִי וַיֵּצֵא פָּרַח וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ
וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים: ²⁴ וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־
הַמַּטֵּת מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִטֶּהוּ: ס

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲשִׁב אֶת־מִטֶּה
שׁוֹי ²⁵ אֶהָרֶן לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת לְמַשְׁמֶרֶת לְאוֹת
לְבְנֵי־מִרִי וּתְכַל תְּלוּנְתָם מֵעָלַי וְלֹא
יָמָתוּ: ²⁶ וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה
אֹתוֹ כִּן עָשָׂה: ס

וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר
²⁷ הֵן גּוֹעַנּוּ אַבְדָּנוּ כָּלָנוּ אַבְדָּנוּ: ²⁸ כָּל־
הַקָּרֵב | הַקָּרֵב אֶל־מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה יָמוּת
הָאֵם תָּמְנוּ לְגֹועַ: ס

18 The LORD said to Aaron: You and your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctu-

יח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אֶהָרֶן אַתָּה
וּבְנֵיךָ וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ אַתָּה תִשָּׂאוּ אֶת־עֹנֶן

had only sprouted, and that it blossomed and bore fruit while he held it in his hand.

24. each That is, each chieftain.

identified The chieftains and the Israelites were able to verify for themselves that Aaron’s staff had sprouted.

25. as a lesson Literally, “for safekeeping, as a warning.”

PANIC AND REMEDY: GUARDS AGAINST
ENCROACHMENT (17:27–18:7)

The Israelites, as a consequence of the death of their chieftains at the tabernacle and the toll taken by the plague, begin to dread the tabernacle and will not come near it. To allay their fright, they are given assurances that henceforth priests and Levites alone will bear the responsibility for encroachment.

27. perish . . . lost . . . lost An ancient Aramaic translation renders the threefold cry of de-

spair as follows: “Behold some of us were killed by the sword, some were swallowed up by the earth, while others died in the plague.”

28. so much as ventures near Hebrew: *ha-karev ha-karev*; the verb *karev* can mean “encroach.” Its doubling tells us that the Israelites now fear to enter the tabernacle even to offer proper sacrifices. Like their chieftains who offered incense, they might encroach and be struck down.

must die That is, at the hands of God. The people fear that even unintentional encroachment on the sanctuary will be fatal.

we are doomed to perish Literally, “we are being wiped out.”

18:1. to Aaron God gives instructions directly to Aaron only in this chapter (vv. 1,8,20) and in Lev. 10:8. Otherwise they are transmitted to him through Moses. The direct address to Aaron is a fitting conclusion to the rebellion over

CHAPTER 18

1. Is this rare instance of God speaking directly to Aaron a reward for Aaron’s behavior in the previous chapter? Or is it intended to

strengthen and comfort him after the challenge to his authority? Is the list of priestly prerogatives (v. 8ff.) given here to emphasize the special role of the Aaronide priesthood after Korah’s challenge?

ary; you and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood.² You shall also associate with yourself your kinsmen the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, to be attached to you and to minister to you, while you and your sons under your charge are before the Tent of the Pact.³ They shall discharge their duties to you and to the Tent as a whole, but they must not have any contact with the furnishings of the Shrine or with the altar, lest both they and you die.⁴ They shall be attached to you and discharge the duties of the Tent of Meeting, all the service of the Tent; but no outsider shall intrude upon you⁵ as you discharge the duties connected with the Shrine and the altar, that wrath may not again strike the Israelites.

⁶I hereby take your fellow Levites from among the Israelites; they are assigned to you in dedication to the LORD, to do the work of the Tent of Meeting; ⁷while you and your sons shall be careful to perform your priestly duties in everything pertaining to the altar and to what

הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וְאֶתְהָ וּבְנֵיךָ אֶתְךָ תִּשְׂאוּ אֶת־
עֹן כְּהֵנְתְּכֶם : ² וְגַם אֶת־אֲחֵיךָ מִטֵּה לֹי
שָׁבֵט אֲבִיךָ הַקָּרֵב אֶתְךָ וְיִלְווּ עִלְיֶךָ
וְיִשְׁרְתוּךָ וְאֶתְהָ וּבְנֵיךָ אֶתְךָ לִפְנֵי אֹהֶל
הָעֵדוּת : ³ וְשִׁמְרוּ מִשְׁמֶרֶתְךָ וּמִשְׁמֶרֶת כָּל־
הָאֹהֶל אַף אֶל־כְּלֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
לֹא יִקְרְבוּ וְלֹא־יָמְתוּ גַם־הֵם גַּם־אֲתֶם :
⁴ וְנָלוּ עִלְיֶךָ וְשִׁמְרוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת אֹהֶל
מוֹעֵד לְכָל עֲבֹדַת הָאֹהֶל וְזָר לֹא־יִקְרַב
אֲלֵיכֶם : ⁵ וְשִׁמְרֹתֶם אֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ
וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה עוֹד
קֶצֶף עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל :

⁶ וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה לֹקְחָתִי אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם הַלְוִיִּם
מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָכֶם מִתְּנָה נְתֻנִים
לִיהוָה לְעֹבֵד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד :
⁷ וְאֶתְהָ וּבְנֵיךָ אֶתְךָ תִּשְׂמְרוּ אֶת־כְּהֵנְתְּכֶם
לְכָל־דְּבַר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּלְמִבֵּית לְפָרֶכֶת

the priesthood: God here vindicates Aaron by granting him a personal revelation.

ancestral house This refers to the members of the clan of Kohath, who were responsible for transporting the sacred objects on their shoulders during the wilderness march.

connected with They will bear the consequences for encroachment on the sacred area and its objects.

your priesthood If disqualified priests—those who are blemished, inebriated, unwashed, or improperly dressed—attempt to officiate at the altar or enter the shrine, only their fellow priests can be held responsible for this encroachment.

2. also The priests do not reduce their own guarding responsibilities by sharing the custody of the tabernacle with the Levites. To the contrary, the Levites are now an added source of possible encroachment and priestly blame.

minister to you “Assist you” in your guarding duties.

before the Tent of the Pact Outside the sacred area, where the Levites perform their guard duty.

3. furnishings of the Shrine The altar utensils that were placed in the courtyard. Like

the altar, they would be vulnerable to encroachment by the levitical guards and the lay worshiper.

both they and you die If a Levite encroaches, then the negligent guards, both priestly and levitical, suffer death by divine agency. If, however, a layperson encroaches, he or she is slain by the guards. The entire tabernacle cordon, including all priests and Levites on guard duty, is responsible for levitical encroachment. They will guard very carefully.

4. all the service The Levites share with the priests the custody of the tabernacle as well as their transport labors.

outsider A nonpriest.

6–8. I Whereas you, Aaron, will be responsible in the event of the desecration of the sanctuary, I, in turn, will provide you with levitical assistance and ample gifts as a reward.

6. The tasks of the Levites in regard to the transport of the tabernacle are contrasted with the priests’ responsibility for guarding the altar and its sacred objects.

work Removal of the tabernacle.

7. be careful to perform your priestly duties Priests will be penalized for failing to guard the

is behind the curtain. I make your priesthood a service of dedication; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.

⁸The LORD spoke further to Aaron: I hereby give you charge of My gifts, all the sacred donations of the Israelites; I grant them to you and to your sons as a perquisite, a due for all time. ⁹This shall be yours from the most holy sacrifices, the gifts: every such offering that they render to Me as most holy sacrifices, namely, every grain offering, purification offering, and reparation offering of theirs, shall belong to you and your sons. ¹⁰You shall partake of them as most sacred donations: only males may eat them; you shall treat them as consecrated.

¹¹This, too, shall be yours: the gift offerings of their contributions, all the elevation offerings of the Israelites, I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for all time; everyone of your household who is pure may eat it.

¹²All the best of the new oil, wine, and

וְעַבְדְתֶם עֲבֹדַת מִתְנָה אֶתֶן אֶת־כְּהֻנַּתְכֶם
וְהָזֵר הִקְרַב יוֹמָת: ^ס
⁸ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַאֲנִי הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי
לְךָ אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרֶת תְּרוּמָתִי לְכָל־קֹדֶשׁ
בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ נֹתְתִים לְמִשְׁחָה וּלְבִנְיָהּ
לְחֶק־עוֹלָם: ⁹ וְהָיְהִיֶּה לְךָ מִקֹּדֶשׁ
הַקֹּדְשִׁים מִן־הָאֵשׁ כָּל־קָרְבָּנִים לְכָל־
מִנְחָתָם וּלְכָל־חֻטְאֹתָם וּלְכָל־אֲשָׁמָם
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁיבוּ לִי קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים לְךָ הוּא
וּלְבִנְיָהּ: ¹⁰ בְּקֹדֶשׁ הַקֹּדְשִׁים תֹּאכְלֶנּוּ כָּל־
זָכָר יֹאכַל אֹתוֹ קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה־לְךָ:
¹¹ וְזֶה־לְךָ תְּרוּמַת מִתְנָם לְכָל־תְּנוּפֹת בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ נֹתְתִים וּלְבִנְיָהּ וּלְבָנֹתֶיהָ אֵתֶּךָ
לְחֶק־עוֹלָם כָּל־טָהוֹר בְּבֵיתְךָ יֹאכַל אֹתוֹ:
¹² כֹּל חֶלֶב יִצְהָר וְכָל־חֶלֶב תִּירוֹשׁ וְדִגְּן

sacred area against encroaching nonpriests and disqualified priests.

the altar . . . behind the curtain Nonpriests and disqualified priests are prohibited from officiating at the altar, and all priests are prohibited from entering the Holy of Holies, the inner shrine.

PRIESTS' REWARDS FOR STANDING GUARD (vv. 8–19)

After an introductory verse, the gifts to the priests are enumerated according to the accepted division: “most sacred” and “sacred.”

8. charge of My gifts The Levites are assigned tithes as a reward for their guard duties. Priestly gifts fulfill a similar function.

all Priests receive gifts in two ways, directly (bypassing the altar) and indirectly (from sacrifices). This section lists the required gifts of both types.

to your sons The common denominator of all the gifts is that they may be eaten by priests.

Gifts from the “Most Holy” Sacrifices (vv. 9–10)

9. from the most holy sacrifices Refers to offerings reserved from the fire. “From” implies

that there are sacrifices classified as most holy from which the priests do not receive an altar gift of flesh. This would be the burnt offering (*olah*) from which the priest receives the skin (Lev. 7:8) and whose flesh is entirely burned on the altar.

gifts These are reserved for the priests from the portions of the sacrifices not burned on the altar. The entire sacrifice is intended for the altar, but God has assigned parts of it to the priesthood.

10. Priests eat these gifts in the tabernacle courtyard on the same day (Lev. 6:9, 19, 7:6).

Gifts from the “Holy” Sacrifices (vv. 11–19)

11. gift offerings Hebrew: *t'rumah*. Nonsacrificial “gifts,” those dedicated to the Lord outside the sanctuary.

elevation offerings Hebrew: *t'nufah*. The gifts brought to the sanctuary and dedicated by an elevation ritual.

daughters that are with you Members of a priest's household may partake of sacred food, including slaves—but not hired laborers, who maintain their own households. Nor may a married daughter who joins her lay husband's household eat sacred food (Lev. 22:10–13).

grain—the choice parts that they present to the LORD—I give to you. ¹³The first fruits of everything in their land, that they bring to the LORD, shall be yours; everyone of your household who is pure may eat them. ¹⁴Everything that has been proscribed in Israel shall be yours. ¹⁵The first issue of the womb of every being, man or beast, that is offered to the LORD, shall be yours; but you shall have the first-born of man redeemed, and you shall also have the firstling of impure animals redeemed. ¹⁶Take as their redemption price, from the age of one month up, the money equivalent of five shekels by the sanctuary weight, which is twenty *gerahs*. ¹⁷But the firstlings of cattle, sheep, or goats may not be redeemed; they are consecrated. You shall dash their blood against the altar, and turn their fat into smoke as a gift for a pleasing odor to the LORD. ¹⁸But their meat shall be yours: it shall be yours like the breast of elevation offering and like the right thigh.

¹⁹All the sacred gifts that the Israelites set aside for the LORD I give to you, to your sons, and to the daughters that are with you, as a due for

ראשיתם אשר יתנו ליהוה לך נתתים: ¹³ בכורי כל אשר בארצם אשר יביאו ליהוה לך יהיה כל טהור בביתך יאכלנו: ¹⁴ כל חרם בישראל לך יהיה: ¹⁵ כל פטר רחם לכל בשר אשר יקריבו ליהוה באדם ובבהמה יהיה לך אף | פדה תפדה את בכור האדם ואת בכור הבהמה הטמאה תפדה: ¹⁶ ופדויו מן חדש תפדה בערבך בסף חמשת שקלים בשקל הקדש עשרים גרה הוא: ¹⁷ אף בכור שור או בכור כשב או בכור עז לא תפדה קדש הם את דמם תזרק על המזבח ואת חלבם תקטיר אשה לריח ניחוח ליהוה: ¹⁸ ובשרם יהיה לך כחזה התנופה וכשוק הימין לך יהיה: ¹⁹ כל | תרומת הקדשים אשר ירימו בני ישראל ליהוה נתתי לך ולבניך

13. first fruits Literally, the “first ripe” of the crops in the field and orchard.

they bring The first fruits (*bikkurim*) are brought to the sanctuary.

15. first issue of the womb Refers to the first-born of the mother if the child is a male.

that is offered to the LORD All male firstborn to a mother, whether human or beast, are the innate property of the Lord. Hence, they can only be “offered,” not “given.”

shall be yours That is, the priests’.

you shall have . . . redeemed You, the priest, shall conduct the redemption proceedings. The redeemers are, obviously, the owners or the parents.

16. one month up This applied to the first time all the firstborn were redeemed (3:40). Henceforth, this redemption of the firstborn

must take place at the age of one month.

money equivalent As previously mentioned (Lev. 27:6, Num. 3:47).

17. cattle Hebrew: *shor*, which usually refers to an individual of the bovine species without specifying its sex, here stands for the female.

17–18. blood . . . fat . . . meat The firstborn sacrificial animal is to be treated as a well-being offering whose blood, suet, and certain internal organs are offered up on the altar but whose meat is eaten by its owner who brings the sacrifice. Because the priest in this case is the de jure owner of the animal as soon as it is born (Lev. 27:26), he sacrifices it as a well-being offering and eats the meat.

19. sacred gifts The required gifts from sacred offerings, listed in vv. 12–18, that the priest and his household may eat.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

18:15. This is the source of the ceremony of *Pidyon ha-Ben*, redeeming the firstborn son from the priest (*kohen*) on the child’s 31st day of life, or soon thereafter if that day falls on a *Shabbat* or holiday. The modern service to welcome a newborn girl into the covenant (*Simhat Bat*) can include a special prayer when a daughter is the firstborn.

all time. It shall be an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD for you and for your offspring as well. ²⁰And the LORD said to Aaron: You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any portion in their midst; I am your portion and your share among the Israelites.

²¹And to the Levites I hereby give all the tithes in Israel as their share in return for the services that they perform, the services of the Tent of Meeting. ²²Henceforth, Israelites shall not trespass on the Tent of Meeting, and thus incur guilt and die; ²³only Levites shall perform the services of the Tent of Meeting; others would incur guilt. It is the law for all time throughout the ages. But they shall have no territorial share among the Israelites; ²⁴for it is the tithes set aside by the Israelites as a gift to the LORD that I give to the Levites as their share. Therefore I have said concerning them: They shall have no territorial share among the Israelites.

²⁵The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²⁶Speak

covenant of salt An unbreakable covenant. Salt, a symbol of permanence, was the best food preservative in antiquity, and its use was required for all sacrifices.

LEVITES' REWARD FOR STANDING
GUARD (vv. 20–24)

20. Here, Aaron is addressed not as the head of the priests but as the tribal leader of the Levites. The land prohibition, therefore, applies to the Levites as well as the priests.

your portion and your share Refers to the land allotted each family within its tribal territory in the Promised Land. Because land was denied to the families of priests and Levites (v. 24), they received the perquisites enumerated here as compensation.

21. This is a continuation of the address to Aaron, implying that Aaron, as leader of the tribe of Levi, is responsible for seeing to it that the Levites receive their tithes. The tithe is a compulsory, permanent grant to the Levites. It falls due on every crop in the Promised Land (Lev. 27:30,

וּלְבַנְתֵיךָ אֶתְךָ לְחֶק-עוֹלָם בְּרִית מֶלֶח
עוֹלָם הוּא לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לָךְ וּלְזַרְעֶךָ אֶתְךָ:
²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן בְּאַרְצָם לֹא
תִנְחַל וְחֶלֶק לֹא יִהְיֶה לָּךְ בְּתוֹכָם אָנֹכִי
חֶלְקִי וְנִחְלַתְךָ בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ס
²¹ וּלְבָנִי לֹא יִהְיֶה נִתְנֵי כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂר
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְנִחְלָה חֶלֶף עֲבָדְתֶם אֲשֶׁר-הֵם
עֲבָדִים אֶת-עֲבֹדַת אֱהֱל מוֹעֵד: ²² וְלֹא-
יִקְרְבוּ עוֹד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-אֱהֱל מוֹעֵד
לְשֹׂאת חֹטָא לְמוֹת: ²³ וְעֹבֵד הַלְוִי הוּא
אֶת-עֲבֹדַת אֱהֱל מוֹעֵד וְהֵם יִשְׂאוּ עֹנָם
חֶקֶת עוֹלָם לְדוֹרֹתֵיכֶם וּבְתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לֹא יִנְחָלוּ נִחְלָה: ²⁴ כִּי אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂר בְּנֵי-
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָרִימוּ לַיהוָה תְּרוּמָה נִתְנֵי
לְלוֹוִים לְנִחְלָה עַל-כֵּן אֲמַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּתוֹךְ
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יִנְחָלוּ נִחְלָה: פ
²⁵ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ²⁶ וְאָל-

but see Deut. 14:23) as annual wages for their labors in the sanctuary (see Num. 18:31).

services That is, all the guarding and removal responsibilities assigned to the Levites.

23. others would incur guilt Henceforth, the Levites will bear the responsibility for Israelite encroachment.

law for all time That the Levites will perform the guarding and removal duties of the tabernacle.

no territorial share No farmland. Because the Levites will receive a tithe of the grain, wine, and oil of their fellow Israelites' crops, they need not produce those crops on their own. (They will need permanent residences, however.)

24. gift to the LORD The tithe properly belongs to the Lord who, in turn, assigns it to the Levites as payment for their sanctuary labors. Thus levitical and priestly perquisites are gifts from God.

A TENTH OF THE TITHE: A GIFT TO THE
PRIESTS (vv. 25–32)

25. to Moses But not to Aaron, as in verses

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

18:23. Levites shall perform the services To this day, Levites (*L'viyim*) assist priests (*kohanim*) who are to bless the congregation (see Num. 6:23) by washing the priests' hands beforehand (see Exod. 30:19).

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary

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to the Levites and say to them: When you receive from the Israelites their tithes, which I have assigned to you as your share, you shall set aside from them one-tenth of the tithe as a gift to the LORD. ²⁷This shall be accounted to you as your gift. As with the new grain from the threshing floor or the flow from the vat, ²⁸so shall you on your part set aside a gift for the LORD from all the tithes that you receive from the Israelites; and from them you shall bring the gift for the LORD to Aaron the priest. ²⁹You shall set aside all gifts due to the LORD from everything that is donated to you, from each thing its best portion, the part thereof that is to be consecrated.

³⁰Say to them further: When you have removed the best part from it, you Levites may consider it the same as the yield of threshing floor or vat. ³¹You and your households may eat it anywhere, for it is your recompense for your services in the Tent of Meeting. ³²You will

הַלֹּוִיִּם תִּדְבֹר וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי־תִקְחוּ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֵׂר אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָכֶם מֵאֲתָם בְּנַחֲלַתְכֶם וְהִרְמַתֶם מִמֶּנּוּ תְרוּמַת יְהוָה מַעֲשֵׂר מִן־הַמַּעֲשֵׂר: 27 וְנִחְשַׁב לָכֶם תְרוּמַתְכֶם כְּדִגְן מִן־הַגֶּרֶן וְכַמְלֵאָה מִן־הַיָּקֵב: 28 כֵּן תִּרְיִמוּ גַם־אֲתָם תְרוּמַת יְהוָה מִכָּל מַעֲשֵׂרְתֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחוּ מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתֶּם מִמֶּנּוּ אֶת־תְרוּמַת יְהוָה לְאַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן: 29 מִכָּל מִתְּנֵיתֵיכֶם תִּרְיִמוּ אֵת כָּל־תְרוּמַת יְהוָה מִכָּל־חֲלָבֹו אֶת־מִקְדָּשׁוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ: 30 וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּהִרְיַמְכֶם אֶת־חֲלָבֹו מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִחְשַׁב לְלֹוִיִּם כְּתְבוּאֵת גֶּרֶן וְכְתְבוּאֵת יָקֵב: 31 וְאָכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּכָל־מְקוֹם אֲתָם וּבֵיתְכֶם כִּי־שָׁכַר הוּא לָכֶם חֶלֶף עֲבַדְתֶּם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: 32 וְלֹא־

מפטיך

1 and 8, to avoid the conflict of interest that would result if Aaron were told to collect the 10th of the levitical tithe assigned to him.

26. receive Literally, “collect” or “take.” The Levites may seize the tithe assigned to them.

27. As with the new grain Just as the Israelites set aside from the new grain a gift to the priests (v. 12), so too shall you Levites set aside a tithe for the priests.

flow This refers to wine or oil.

29. donated to you God has commanded that the Israelites donate a tithe to the Levites. The Levites, likewise, are to donate a tithe to the priests.

its best portion Literally, “its fat.” The priestly perquisite from the levitical tithe should come from its best portion, just as the priestly perquisite from the laity is also from its “best” (v. 12).

the part . . . to be consecrated The tithe of the tithe set aside for the priests automatically as-

sumes a sacred status, as do all priestly perquisites (vv. 8–10,19), whereas the levitical tithe is never called sacred in these priestly texts, just as the Levites are not.

30. you Levites may consider it the same That is, it will be reckoned by God as belonging to the Levites.

the same as the yield of threshing floor or vat After it is tithed and thus permitted to its owner.

31. eat it anywhere After the priestly portion is removed, the tithe’s status becomes profane, and it may be eaten anywhere without concern for ritual purity.

recompense The Levites are entitled to the excessive wage of the tithe as compensation for subjecting themselves to lethal dangers in performing their tabernacle duties. Any lapse on their part while handling the sacred objects could lead to their death.

26. Every Israelite was expected to give a tenth of his or her income to the Levites to support them because the Levites had no other income. (The custom of tithing income is still operative for many Jews and non-Jews.) The Levites themselves had to tithe, to give to the

priests a tenth of what they received. Even those who depend on public support for their livelihood must give part of what they receive as *tz’dakah* (commonly translated as “charity”), because *tz’dakah* nourishes the soul of the donor even as it sustains the recipient.

incur no guilt through it, once you have removed the best part from it; but you must not profane the sacred donations of the Israelites, lest you die.

תִּשְׂאוּ עָלֶיךָ חֹטֵא בְּהִרְמִימְכֶם אֶת־חֶלְבֹו
מִמֶּנּוּ וְאֶת־קִדְשֵׁי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא תַחֲלִלֻוּ
וְלֹא תָמוּתוּ: פ

32. A warning not to tamper with the sacred donations and thereby incur death at God's will.

guilt As long as the sacred 10th of the tithe has not been set aside for the priests, it is lethal for one in a state of impurity to eat it or touch it—or even for one in a state of purity to tamper

with it—because the sacred is still intermixed with the profane.

profane Unauthorized contact with sacred objects is prohibited. If sacred food was accidentally eaten, the penalty is monetary reparation. If the act was deliberate, the penalty is capital punishment.

הַפְּטָרָה קֹרַח

HAFTARAH FOR KORAH

1 SAMUEL 11:14–12:22

This *haftarah* marks the end of the period of the chieftains (“Judges”) and the onset of the rule of kings. Samuel bridges the two periods. He was both a prophet-like figure who judged the people in various locales and the one who was divinely enjoined to anoint a monarch. Initially, he refused to go along with the people’s desire for a king “like all the nations.” This was not because of any political calculations. For Samuel, the shift from theocracy to monarchy was theologically unconscionable, a betrayal of God and divine rule. Only God’s support for the people’s request changed his mind (1 Sam. 8:7).

Samuel, nevertheless, continued to believe that the nation’s request was a betrayal of God’s ongoing and gracious care. He even brings the nation to confess this fault and to a state of anguish and fear of divine abandonment. Samuel reassures them that “the LORD will never abandon His people, seeing that the LORD undertook to make you His people” (12:22). The Sages chose to end the *haftarah* with this message of hope, in contrast to the episode’s last verse (12:25) with its doomsday warning that “if you persist in your wrongdoing, both you and your king shall be swept away.”

RELATION OF THE *HAFTARAH* TO THE *PARASHAH*

In the *parashah*, the rebels Dathan and Abiram flouted and insulted Moses; in response, the “much aggrieved” Moses said to God, “Pay no re-

gard to their oblation. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them” (Num. 16:15). These words of self-defense are a condensed version of Samuel’s litany in the *haftarah* (1 Sam. 12:3). Faced with a successful rejection of his leadership, Samuel reviews his conduct before the people and calls God to witness as well. Both leaders epitomize their rule in terms of justice and respect for the property of others.

The personalities of Moses and Samuel are linked from early biblical tradition. They are paired in Ps. 99:6 as intercessors before God. So the Lord also refers to them while speaking with Jeremiah in the final days of the kingdom of Judah (Jer. 15:1). Early rabbinic homilies present the two men as paragons of the righteous judge, completely just and beyond reproach (Tanh. Shof’ tim).

Each of them was also called a “man of God”—Moses in the context of his blessing the tribes before his death (Deut. 33:1) and Samuel as a prophetic diviner of fortune at the shrine of Ramah (1 Sam. 9:7). Yet these men represent two stages in the nation’s leadership. Moses, the first teacher of divine revelation to the people, set the basic pattern. Dealing with the details of ongoing life in each generation then fell to his heirs, to men like Samuel who stood in the breach as questions arose. The *parashah* and the *haftarah* underscore their ideal common denominator: selfless service on behalf of justice and a commitment to righteousness in societal affairs.

11 ¹⁴Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there inaugurate the monarchy.” ¹⁵So all the people went to Gilgal, and there at Gilgal they declared Saul king before the LORD. They offered sacrifices of well-being there before the LORD; and Saul and all the men of Israel held a great celebration there.

12 Then Samuel said to all Israel, “I have yielded to you in all you have asked of me and have set a king over you. ²Henceforth the king will be your leader.

“As for me, I have grown old and gray—but my sons are still with you—and I have been your leader from my youth to this day. ³Here I am! Testify against me, in the presence of the LORD and in the presence of His anointed one: Whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you.” ⁴They responded, “You have not defrauded us, and you have not robbed us, and you have taken nothing from anyone.” ⁵He said to them, “The LORD then is witness, and His anointed is witness, to your admission this day that you have

יא ¹⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל-הָעָם לְכוּ וַיִּלְכְּהוּ הַגִּלְגָּל וַיִּנְחֲדֹשׁ שָׁם הַמְּלוּכָה: ¹⁵ וַיֵּלְכוּ כָל-הָעָם הַגִּלְגָּל וַיִּמְלְכוּ שָׁם אֶת-שָׂאוּל לְפָנֵי יְהוָה בְּגִלְגָּל וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-שָׁם זִבְחִים שְׁלָמִים לְפָנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׂמַח שָׁם שָׂאוּל וְכָל-אֲנָשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד-מָאד: פ

יב וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנֵּה שָׁמַעְתִּי בְקִלְכֶם לְכָל אֲשֶׁר-אַמַּרְתֶּם לִי וְאִמְלִיךָ עָלֵיכֶם מֶלֶךְ: ² וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הַמֶּלֶךְ | מִתְהַלֵּךְ לְפָנֵיכֶם וְאֲנִי זְקֵנִתִי וְשֹׁבֵתִי וּבְנֵי הַנֶּם אֵתְכֶם וְאֲנִי הִתְהַלַּכְתִּי לְפָנֵיכֶם מִנְעָרֵי עַד-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה: ³ הֲנִנִי עֲנּוּ בִי נִגְדַי יְהוָה וְנִגְדַי מְשִׁיחוֹ אֶת-שׂוֹר | מִי לְקַחְתִּי וְחַמּוֹר מִי לְקַחְתִּי וְאֶת-מִי עֲשָׂקְתִּי אֶת-מִי רִצּוֹתִי וּמִי־מִי לְקַחְתִּי כֶּפֶר וְאֶעֱלִים עֵינַי בּוֹ וְאֲשִׁיב לָכֶם: ⁴ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא עֲשָׂקְתָנוּ וְלֹא רִצּוֹתָנוּ וְלֹא-לְקַחְתָּ מִי־אִישׁ מְאוֹמָה: ⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם עַד יְהוָה בְּכֶם וְעַד מְשִׁיחוֹ הַיּוֹם

1 Samuel 11:14. Come, let us go to Gilgal and there inaugurate the monarchy This collective invocation dramatizes the nation’s involvement in the coronation. In the previous chapter, after Saul was selected as king by divine lot, the people had ratified his selection with the shout, “Long live the king!” (10:20–24). Several malcontents among the people had demurred at that time. Thus this event at Gilgal “renews” rather than simply “inaugurates” the monarchy (Rashi, Radak, Kara). At this ceremony, “all the people” declare Saul king (v. 15).

Gilgal An old site with sacral connotations. After the Israelites’ entrance into Canaan, Joshua performed a mass circumcision there, initiating the settlement of the Land (Josh. 5:2–9). As a home for the tabernacle and the Ark, it was also

a center of national life (Radak). The monarchy is now ritually inaugurated there.

12:3. Whose ox have I taken Samuel’s declaration of judicial probity includes a denial of ever robbing or taking bribes. This clearly reflects an old code of honor and standards. When Jethro advised Moses to appoint judges in the wilderness, he told him to seek out “capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain” (Exod. 18:21). A more formal statement of proper conduct appears among the legal ordinances, in which the Israelites are told “not [to] subvert the rights of your needy in their disputes,” to “keep far from a false charge,” and “not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear-sighted and upset the pleas of those who are in the right” (Exod. 23:6–8).

found nothing in my possession.” They responded, “He is!”

⁶Samuel said to the people, “The LORD [is witness], He who appointed Moses and Aaron and who brought your fathers out of the land of Egypt. ⁷Come, stand before the LORD while I cite against you all the kindnesses that the LORD has done to you and your fathers.

⁸“When Jacob came to Egypt, ... your fathers cried out to the LORD, and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place. ⁹But they forgot the LORD their God; so He delivered them into the hands of Sisera the military commander of Hazor, into the hands of the Philistines, and into the hands of the king of Moab; and these made war upon them. ¹⁰They cried to the LORD, ‘We are guilty, for we have forsaken the LORD and worshiped the Baalim and Ashtaroth. Oh, deliver us from our enemies and we will serve You.’ ¹¹And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Bedan and Jephthah and Samuel, and delivered you from the enemies around you; and you dwelt in security. ¹²But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was advancing against you, you said to me, ‘No, we must have a king reigning over us’—though the LORD your God is your King.

¹³“Well, the LORD has set a king over you! Here is the king that you have chosen, that you have asked for.

¹⁴“If you will revere the LORD, worship Him, and obey Him, and will not flout the LORD’s command, if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, [well and good]. ¹⁵But if you do not obey the LORD

הָיָה כִּי לֹא מָצַאתֶם בְּיָדִי מֵאוֹמָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ *עַד: פ

⁶וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־הָעָם יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֲשֶׁר הָעֲלָה אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: ⁷וַעֲתָה הִתִּיצְבוּ וְאִשְׁפֹּטָה אֶתְכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֵת כָּל־צְדָקוֹת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם:

⁸כַּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא יַעֲקֹב מִצְרַיִם וַיִּזְעָקוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן וַיּוֹצִיאוּ אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בְּמִקְוֵם הַזֶּה: ⁹וַיִּשְׁכְּחוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּיַד סִיסְרָא שַׂר־צָבָא חָצוֹר וּבְיַד־פְּלִשְׁתִּים וּבְיַד מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב וַיִּלְחָמוּ בָּם: ¹⁰וַיִּזְעָקוּ אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ וַיִּמְרוּ חָטְאוּנוּ כִּי עֲזַבְנוּ אֶת־יְהוָה וְנִעַבְדָּה אֶת־הַבְּעֻלִים וְאֶת־הַעֲשֻׁתוֹת וַעֲתָה הִצִּילְנוּ מִיַּד אִיְבֹנֵינוּ וְנִעַבְדְּךָ: ¹¹וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת־יִרְבֵּעֵל וְאֶת־בְּדֹן וְאֶת־יִפְתָּח וְאֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל וַיִּצַּל אֶתְכֶם מִיַּד אִיְבֵיכֶם מִסַּבִּיב וַתֵּשְׁבוּ בְּטָח: ¹²וַתֵּרְאוּ כִּי־נָחַשׁ מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי־עַמּוֹן בָּא עֲלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ לֵי לֹא כִּי־מֶלֶךְ יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ וַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִלְּכֶכֶם:

¹³וַעֲתָה הִנֵּה הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר בַּחֲרַתֶּם אֲשֶׁר שְׁאַלְתֶּם וְהִנֵּה נָתַן יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם מֶלֶךְ:

¹⁴אִם־תִּירְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה וַעֲבַדְתֶּם אוֹתוֹ וְשָׁמַעְתֶּם בְּקוֹלוֹ וְלֹא תִמְרוּ אֶת־פִּי יְהוָה וְהִיתֶם גַּם־אִתָּם וְגַם־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר מֶלֶךְ עֲלֵיכֶם אַחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: ¹⁵וְאִם־לֹא

v. 5. סבירין ומטעין לשון רבים

5. They responded Literally, “He responded.” This implies that the people responded as one person (Radak). Puzzled by the singular form of the Hebrew verb, an old tradition regarded this as an instance of divine intervention in human legal proceedings. Because earlier in the verse Samuel

invoked God as a witness on his behalf, this verse was seen as the response of a heavenly voice declaring that God is indeed a witness (BT Mak. 23b; Gen. R. 85:12).

8. When Jacob came to Egypt, ... Septuagint adds, “the Egyptians oppressed them” [Transl.].

and you flout the LORD's command, the hand of the LORD will strike you as it did your fathers.

¹⁶“Now stand by and see the marvelous thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. ¹⁷It is the season of the wheat harvest. I will pray to the LORD and He will send thunder and rain; then you will take thought and realize what a wicked thing you did in the sight of the LORD when you asked for a king.”

¹⁸Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel. ¹⁹The people all said to Samuel, “Intercede for your servants with the LORD your God that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins the wickedness of asking for a king.” ²⁰But Samuel said to the people, “Have no fear. You have, indeed, done all those wicked things. Do not, however, turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. ²¹Do not turn away to follow worthless things, which can neither profit nor save but are worthless. ²²For the sake of His great name, the LORD will never abandon His people, seeing that the LORD undertook to make you His people.”

תִּשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹל יְהוָה וּמְרִיתֶם אֶת־פִּי יְהוָה
וְהִיְתָה יַד־יְהוָה בְּכֶם וּבְאַבְתֵּיכֶם:

¹⁶ גַּם־עַתָּה הִתְיַצְבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת־הַדָּבָר
הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יַהוָה עֹשֶׂה לְעֵינֵיכֶם:
¹⁷ הַלְוֹא קְצִיר־חֹטִים הַיּוֹם אֶקְרָא אֶל־
יְהוָה וַיִּתֵּן קִלּוֹת וּמָטָר וַדַּעוּ וּרְאוּ כִּי־
רַעַתְכֶם רַבָּה אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם בְּעֵינַי יְהוָה
לְשֹׂאֵל לְכֶם מֶלֶךְ: ס

¹⁸ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה
קִלּוֹת וּמָטָר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּירָא כָּל־הָעָם
מְאֹד אֶת־יְהוָה וְאֶת־שְׁמוּאֵל: ¹⁹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ
כָּל־הָעָם אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל הֲתַפְּלֵל בְּעַד־
עַבְדֶּיךָ אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאֶל־נַמּוֹת כִּי־
יִסְפְּנוּ עַל־כָּל־חַטָּאתֵינוּ רָעָה לְשֹׂאֵל לָנוּ
מֶלֶךְ: ס ²⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־הָעָם
אֶל־תִּירְאוּ אֹתָם עֲשִׂיתֶם אֵת כָּל־הָרָעָה
הַזֹּאת אַךְ אֶל־תִּסּוּרוּ מֵאַחֲרַי יְהוָה
וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֶת־יְהוָה בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם: ²¹ וְלֹא
תִסּוּרוּ כִּי אַחֲרַי הִתְהוּ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִוָּעִילוּ
וְלֹא יִצְּלוּ כִּי־תִהְיוּ הַמָּדָה: ²² כִּי לֹא־יִטָּשׁ
יְהוָה אֶת־עַמּוֹ בְּעֶבְוֹר שְׁמוֹ הַגָּדוֹל כִּי
הוֹאִיל יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת אֹתְכֶם לֹו לְעָם:

17. season of the wheat harvest Heavy rain here serves as a sign from God that the people during the harvest season was rare; its occurrence sinned in asking for a king (Rashi, Ralbag).