

PARASHAH ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTEEN

Num 17:1–18:32 [17:16–18:32]; Ezek 44:15–28; Heb 5:1–6

notes by Tim Hegg

Aaron's House & the Levites - HaShem's Chosen Ministers

After the rebellion of Korach, a rebellion which quickly spread among the people (16:41ff), it was necessary for HaShem to reveal to the congregation of Israel that He had indeed chosen Aaron and his family to be those who attended the altar and carried on the service in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). The question that Korach and the others had raised was whether or not God had actually chosen Aaron and Aaron alone, or whether all of Israel, having equally been redeemed from Egypt, should also share in the sacred duties.

We may delve a bit deeper into the motivation of this rebellion. Why would Korach and the rest want to share in these duties in the first place? The most logical answer to this obvious question is that they had come to believe that those who ministered “before HaShem” (a technical term meaning “perform the service in the *Mishkan*”) earned a greater degree of blessing than the common worshipper. Since, in their minds, this was a privilege which earned “points with God,” everyone should be allowed to participate. But in considering this possible motivation on the part of Korach and those who followed him, we may be reminded of several things. First of all, everyone serves HaShem, but in different ways and in different spheres of influence. But service to HaShem, regardless of its diversity, is (as long as it is according to His revealed will) equally accepted by Him as worthy. That is to say, from the skilled craftsman who built the beautiful furnishings of the Tabernacle to the farmer who carefully but diligently prepared the pure oil for the menorah, each is accredited by HaShem as completing a necessary service and each is therefore rewarded directly from HaShem. Here we have a good antidote to the common belief among modern Christendom that the “clergy” are closer to God than the “lay-person.” But in reality we find no such hierarchy in God’s plan of things. True, He may give one a responsibility He does not give the other; He may require some to lead and others to follow, but these “job descriptions” are not ranked from “important” to “not important!” Whatever God asks of an individual in life—all of that is service to Him, if life is lived as it should be. And service to Him, when done in Spirit and truth, is service that honors Him and which He honors. So Korach and the others should have viewed their work and service as that which God had ordained, and been content with the honor He gave them for their service, instead of coveting something they thought was of higher rank.

A second important lesson we learn from this is that God not only has the right to choose who does what, but He actually does choose—and not everyone does the same things, or has the same responsibilities. In our pluralistic and politically correct world this concept is difficult to swallow. “You mean God has the right to give one of His children something and not give all of His children that same thing?” (We all know how that goes over with our own children!) Yes, He does, and He expects us so to submit to His authority, and to rejoice in what He has given each of us. We are not to question why He endows one person to serve in one capacity, and other to minister in a different way. He expects us to realize, by faith, that any task and every task completed by the power of the Ruach for His glory and kingdom, is a task worthy of our best efforts and of His blessing.

The method by which HaShem demonstrates to Israel that He had, indeed, chosen Aaron, is most interesting. A rod (מַטֵּה, *mateih*) or staff is supplied by each tribe (מַטֵּה, *mateih*) and given to Moses. He plants them (causes them to rest, cf. נוּחַ, *nuach* in v. 22, which the Stone Chumash translates as “laid”) in the *Mishkan*, and the next morning the staff with Aaron’s name on it had blossomed, budded, and even brought forth almonds. Almond trees are usually the first to blos-

som and thus when Aaron's rod produced almonds, it may have symbolized his priority among the Levites. Likewise, almonds grow quickly and in this case may symbolize the zeal with which Aaron and the Levites were to serve HaShem. But the miracle of the event demonstrated to the people that this was no manipulation on the part of Moses, but that HaShem indeed had chosen Aaron.

Why did HaShem choose the method of the rods or staffs—what are we supposed to learn from this? The chieftain's rod or staff carried a tribal identification as well as a symbol of authority. This staff is made from a branch or stick of wood taken from a tree and usually carved or decorated to display the unique tribal identification. In other words, the staff no longer has life in it—it is dead. HaShem effectively showed that those He chooses to serve before Him are essentially incapable of bringing life—they would simply be vessels by which God would show forth His own life. The dead stick which sprouted and brought forth fruit over night was therefore a reminder to all who serve HaShem that the life which their service renders is life which comes from HaShem. While we may lead one another to HaShem in worship and service, it is HaShem Who brings forth all good things, not those who minister before Him. This also reminds us that as ministers before HaShem it is our duty to lead people to Him, not give them the idea that we're the source of their life! The measure of a true minister is that those He serves more and more look to HaShem. In contrast, the characteristic of "Korach" is that he gathers his own followers—people who are disciples of a man rather than of God. It must be our intent to be taught by HaShem Himself as we are taught and learn from the teaching of any man or woman. The service of any worthy minister points the people to HaShem, not to himself.

Aaron and his family were to be those priests who actually attended the altar (i.e., carried out the sacrifices) and the service of the *Mishkan*, including the Bread of the Presence, the Altar of incense, and the Menorah. Likewise, the High Priest (*Cohen HaGadol*, כהן הגדול) would be from Aaron's family, and would perform the necessary functions on Yom Kippur, the one day in the year when the Most Holy Place was entered. The Levites (i.e., the rest of the tribe apart from Aaron's family) were to be servants to Aaron and his family, helping with all of the many aspects of the *Mishkan* (and eventually the Temple) which were necessary for the maintenance of the on-going service. Not only did God make a distinction between the tribes, choosing the Levites as His ministers in the *Mishkan*, but He also made a hierarchy among the Levites, putting Aaron's family as the only ones who could perform the sacred rituals of the Altar and the *Mishkan*. Once again, this was God's right and the people were expected gladly to submit to His rule.

The people of Israel were required to demonstrate their submission to God's chosen leadership by supporting them via the tithe, a tenth of all the produce which they harvested each year, as well as a tenth of the livestock born in a year. The first-born of unclean animals and man (since neither could be sacrificed) were to be redeemed, the redemption price being given to the Levites for their maintenance. All first-born of clean animals were to be sacrificed to HaShem, a portion of which belonged to the Levites. In turn, the Levites were themselves to tithe the tithe, i.e., a tenth of all the tithes they were given was handed over to Aaron's family for their maintenance. This all was necessary because God had decreed that the Levites, including Aaron's family, had no inheritance in the Land—they were to be fully dependent upon the people for their food and other necessities, giving their time entirely to HaShem's service.

The issue of tithing is therefore brought forward in the *parashah* which outlined God's divine choice of Aaron and his family. Tithing was primarily instituted for the maintenance of God's chosen priests, and particularly as a demonstration of a willing heart to submit to God's leaders. How this has been abused in our day! After nearly discarding (for all practical purposes) the majority of the Tanach as "outdated" or "theologically inferior," many churches continue to use "tithing"

as the means of funding their many programs and staff-positions. But note carefully that the tithe prescribed here and elsewhere in the Torah is a tenth given directly to the priests for their maintenance—it was not collected for bigger and better Tabernacles. The funds raised for this (note the way the people responded when “building projects” arose) were gathered through “freewill offerings.” The tithe is obligatory, the offering is voluntary. But the tithe is obligatory to support the Levitical priesthood, period. We may presume that it will be reinstated when the millennial Temple is rebuilt. (A legitimate priesthood functions only in the Temple, and thus in the Land of Israel.) There is nothing wrong, of course, for any one of us to “practice” the principle of tithing (even as we “practice” other *mitzvot* which cannot be fully completed until the coming of Messiah), and we may find the principles contained in “tithing” are very beneficial for us as we strive to learn to walk in the footsteps of Messiah. But such a perspective (to “practice” tithing) is, in our times, voluntary, not obligatory. What is incumbent upon us, however, is the open-hearted giving of our means in order to further the work of God in our community, and to help the poor. Surely such offerings are both received and blessed by the Almighty.

Finally, we should take notice of the fact that when the proper order is set in place (i.e., Aaron and his descendants functioning according to God’s choosing, the remainder of the Levites serving according to their appointment, and the people serving as they were directed), stability and success returns to the camp of Israel. Here we may see a basic principle at work: when we accept the station in life ordained for us by the Almighty, and when we set ourselves both to accomplish our service and rejoice in it, then we experience the shalom we desperately seek. We can imagine that this is what Paul has in mind when he writes: “Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (2Cor 13:11), and again: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (Phil 4:4).