

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

## KORACH 5785

What are we to make of the 250 men who joined Korach's rebellion? The Torah call them, "princes of the assembly, men of renown" (16:2). Clearly, they were men of importance. Yet, when each chose to take his fire-pan with incense and attempt to offer it before HaShem (16:17-18), as Moshe had suggested, they were consumed in a fire that "came forth from HaShem" (16:35). What is somewhat strange is that in the aftermath of this punishment, HaShem instructs Moshe to take "the copper firepans that the [250 men] had offered and spread them out as a coating for the Altar." Why distinguish these utensils, now items associated with sin, by placing them on a vessel of holiness - the Mizbei'ach? (17:4). The Torah then states that this repurposing of the machtot (firepans) would serve as a reminder that "no alien person who is not of the offspring of Aharon shall draw near to bring up the smoke of the incense before HaShem" (17:5). But could there be a deeper reason underlying this reminder?

To answer these questions, we turn to Ramban's extensive commentary on the Korach episode. Ramban persuasively argues that the 250 men were the firstborns of the tribes who

were disenfranchised from serving a priestly role following the debacle of the Golden Calf. That role was transferred to the tribe of Levi who, unlike the firstborns, remained loyal to HaShem in the wake of people's delinquency and did not sin. Apparently, contends Ramban, these firstborns never quite reconciled to their displacement, and harboring deep frustration and possible resentment, they bided their time until they could once again assert their longing to serve as HaShem's servants in the Mishkan. When Korach rose up against Moshe and Aharon, they saw an opportunity to reclaim their former status. And while they did not share at all Korach's cunning and nefarious agenda to depose Moshe as leader, they nevertheless wanted the singular distinction of being HaShem's close attendees. They hoped that by bringing the ketoret, HaShem would accept their sincere aspiration, reinstate them, and, if nothing else, would allow them to serve along with the Leviyim.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. HaShem chose to make it abundantly clear that only members of the tribe of Levi would be eligible to be the kohanim and leviyim. But, at least to acknowledge the genuine yearning of the 250 men to serve, their firepans (machtot) would find a place of honor on the Altar. Such, in my brief summary, is the explanation of

Ramban. Perhaps though, we might suggest another connection between the firepans and the Mizbei'ach. It begins with this question: What was it that marginalized the firstborns and qualified the tribe of Levi to be HaShem's M'SHOR-TIM (servants)?

The status of a firstborn is one of biological privilege, kinship, not of merit. It is an accident of birth, and while the halacha does grant the bechor certain material benefits and honors, it does not automatically confer upon him any other personal assets. Many of our great Biblical figures (Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, David, etc.) - including Moshe - were not firstborns. The members of the tribe of Levi demonstrated early on how they earned their exalted position. They consistently showed that they had the strength of character to do the right thing even when it went against the grain of their natural predispositions. Their patriarch Levi overcomes his violent temperament, turns his father Yaakov's, stern reprimand around to earn Moshe's supreme accolade of, "They shall teach Your laws to Yaakov and Your instructions to Israel. They shall offer You incense to savor and whole-offerings on Your Altar" (D'varim 33:10). And the descendants of Levi, in addition to their Temple duties, become the rabbinic leaders and teachers of Torah of their generation. In the glowing words of the

prophet: *"And you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, that my covenant might be with Levi, says the Lord of hosts. My covenant was with him for life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear with which he feared Me, and was afraid of My Name. The Torah of Truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not to be found on his lips: he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and turned many away from iniquity. For the kohen's lips should keep knowledge, and they [the people] should seek Torah at his mouth: for he is a messenger of the Lord of hosts."* (Malachi 2:4-7)

This astonishing transformation of Levi and his progeny - this heroic mark of character - becomes the defining qualification to serve HaShem. The firstborn never rose to the challenge; the tribe of Levi did! If so then, the plating of the Altar with the firepans of the firstborn contained a message quite beyond that of certifying the tribe of Levi to serve. To wit: that to earn the privilege of ministering to HaShem, one must be prepared to accept the "Altar experience", i.e. to sacrifice. Which means to undergo distress and embrace the struggle, to strain and toil, to wait and persevere amidst the uncertainties and absurdities of life - and all for a higher and more sacred purpose. The courage to stand up for moral clarity and remain ever-faithful

to HaShem outweighs the status of birth.

The message here is quite powerful. We may not all be of the Levitic tribe, nor are we all firstborn, but we would be wise to remember Rambam's extraordinary claim (Sh'mita v'Yovel 13:13) that "Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him... to set himself aside and stand before Gd to serve Him and minister to Him and to know Gd... he is sanctified as holy of holies. Gd will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the Kohanim and the Levites." In a word, if we can emulate the virtues of the tribe of Levi, we can all qualify to become "honorary kohanim/leviyim".

There is an additional message here, very much relevant to our beloved State of Israel, currently under such terrible assault. It comes from an address given by Rav Soloveitchik on the 10th anniversary of the State of Israel (1958). In that stirring speech, the Rav stressed that the designation of kedusha-holiness is only acquired through sacrifice. "Whatever is not sacrificed cannot become sanctified. Kedusha is created through suffering, effort, sleepless nights; when one is prepared to fight for something." Moshe is elevated to his great prophetic peak by virtue of his pleading with HaShem for a total of 120 days. The 10th of Tishrei is a

sanctified day - Yom Kippur - because of that period of tension and doubt that Moshe endured. David HaMelech is given the credit for having sanctified the Beit HaMikdash even though he did not build it. Why? because he fought and waited, planned and waited only to leave its construction to his son, Shlomo. What sanctified the First Temple, asked the Rav? David's distress and suffering! And then to the Rav's climactic peroration: The surest sign that the State is Israel partakes of kedusha is the stark reality that its existence is borne through apprehension and danger, pain and sacrifice. It is our very YISURIM that confirms our kedusha status and distinction.

In this regard and in terms of our previous discussion of the great legacy of the tribe of Levi, we might say that the choice of the Leviyim established a merit-based kedusha and not one based solely upon birth order.

We believe, of course, that all of our tribulations and sufferings will ultimately yield the redemption we so fervently pray for. But, if until then, we must deal with the monsters and demonic forces that seek our harm and destruction, we will continue to fight and wait, struggle and hope, because we know that - for My salvation is near to come, and My righteousness to be revealed" (Yeshayahu 56:1). 🙌