

## Burning Incense - Life and Death

This weeks reading is from **Parashat Korach** (*Bamidbar / Numbers 16:1-18:32*) Korach, Datan, and Aviram rose up and assembled themselves against Moshe and against Aaron and questioned whether their role as priests was really the will of God (ב וַיִּקְמוּ). Moshe tells the men to assemble in the morning and two hundred and fifty men went to offer incense by fire before the Lord. The result, the entire assemble of men died by fire that proceeded from the Lord God because of their sin. The entire camp of Korach, Datan, and Aviram were also swallowed up in the earth going down to the grave alive. The peoples response over the death of Korach, Datan, and Aviram is recorded in *Bamidbar / Numbers 17:6* in the Hebrew translation and *16:41* in the English translation וַיִּלְלוּ: *16:41* *But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people.'* (NASB) The congregation (sons of Israel) complained claiming that it was Moshe's and Aaron's fault the people died? A plague broke out and Moshe told Aaron to take a censor filled with burning incense and stand in the gap between the dead and the living. It is interesting how, according to the Torah, burning incense resulted in both death and life. As we study the reading for this week, the children of Israel persisted in a rebellious Spirit against Moshe, Aaron, and the Lord. What is the significance of burning incense in the ritual service before the Lord? Rebellion and having a rebellious spirit before the Lord is certain death. All forms of rebellion cause sin in our lives before the Lord especially those of the thoughts of our hearts.

### ספר במדבר פרק טז *Bamidbar / Numbers 16:4-8*

ד וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו:  
 ה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-קִנְרַח וְאֶל-כָּל-עֲדָתוֹ  
 לֵאמֹר בֹּקֶר וַיָּדַע יְהוָה אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-  
 לוֹ וְאֶת-הַקְּדוֹשׁ וְהַקָּרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֵת  
 אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר-בּוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו: ו זֹאת  
 עֲשׂוּ קַחוּ-לָכֶם מַחְתֹּת קִנְרַח וְכָל-  
 עֲדָתוֹ: ז וַתִּגְבוּ-בָהֶן | אִישׁ וְשִׁמּוֹ  
 עֲלֵיהֶן | קִטְרֹת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה מִקָּר  
 וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה הוּא  
 הַקְּדוֹשׁ רַב-לָכֶם בְּנֵי לְוִי:  
*16:4 When Moses heard this, he fell on his face;  
 16:5 and he spoke to Korah and all his company,  
 saying, 'Tomorrow morning the Lord will show who  
 is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to  
 Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will  
 bring near to Himself. 16:6 'Do this: take censers  
 for yourselves, Korah and all your company, 16:7  
 and put fire in them, and lay incense upon them in  
 the presence of the Lord tomorrow; and the man  
 whom the Lord chooses shall be the one who is holy.  
 You have gone far enough, you sons of Levi!' 16:8  
 Then Moses said to Korah, 'Hear now, you sons of  
 Levi, (NASB)*

Generally incense was offered in a “*makhtot*” (מַחְתֹּת) “*a pan,*” before the Lord, were the priest would carry the pan in his hand. While reading through this section of Scripture, Moshe tells the people that each man is to take his “*makhtot*” (מַחְתֹּת) or

“*censer*” and go before the Lord to offer incense by fire. What is interesting about this Scripture in *Bamidbar / Numbers 16:6* is that the offering of incense before the Lord was to be conducted only by Aaron and his sons and yet 250 men had censers of their own to bring before the Lord. The Scriptures say that each of Aaron’s sons had his own pan (*Vayikra / Leviticus 10:1*). Did these 250 men make their own censers with the intention of displacing Aaron and his sons from the Tabernacle? In the case of Aaron’s two sons Nadav and Avihu, while performing their service they perished when committing the error of putting “*strange fire*” in their censers instead of fire from the altar of the burnt offering. The incense in and of itself is to be set apart as holy for use only in the Tabernacle according to *Shemot / Exodus 30:31-38*.

***Shemot / Exodus 30:31-38***

*30:31 ‘You shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘This shall be a holy anointing oil to Me throughout your generations. 30:32 ‘It shall not be poured on anyone’s body, nor shall you make any like it in the same proportions; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you. 30:33 ‘Whoever shall mix any like it or whoever puts any of it on a layman shall be cut off from his people.’ 30:34 Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. 30:35 ‘With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. 30:36 ‘You shall beat some of it very fine, and put part of it before the testimony in the tent of meeting where I will meet with you; it shall be most holy to you. 30:37 ‘The incense which you shall make, you shall not make in the same proportions for yourselves; it shall be holy to you for the Lord. 30:38 ‘Whoever shall make any like it, to use as perfume, shall be cut off from his people.’ (NASB)*

According to these Scriptures, the person who takes of the holy incense or makes the incense for purposes other than its intended use in the Tabernacle does so in a profane manner and he is to be cut off from his people. During Yom Kippur, the High Priest would enter into the Holy of Holies with the pan of incense filled with live coals. The *Talmud Bavli Yoma 47b* indicates that the picking up of incense is to be done with the hollow of the hand and not with one’s fingers (*Vayikra / Leviticus 16:12*). The incense is to be heaped upon the coals to create a plume of smoke. The rabbis discuss that it was difficult to take the incense up in the cup of the hand without spilling any upon the floor.

Maimonides (Rambam) regarded the incense offering saying it was designed originally to counteract the odors arising from the slaughtered animals and to animate the spirit of the priests (*Moses Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed, Chapter 45, p. 511, 2nd ed. 1904, [http://www.teachittome.com/seforim2/seforim/the\\_guide\\_for\\_the\\_perplexed.pdf](http://www.teachittome.com/seforim2/seforim/the_guide_for_the_perplexed.pdf), Access Date: June 12, 2014*). The importance of the incense, according to Rambam, is the priority in which the priests are to offer saying “*This provision likewise tended to support the dignity of the Temple. If there had not been a good smell, let alone if there had been a stench, it would have produced in the minds of the people the reverse*”

*of respect; for our heart generally feels elevated in the presence of good odor, and is attracted by it, but it abhors and avoids bad smell.”* The idea was that the incense was meant to cause the heart of the worshiper to be glad in the presence of good odor as opposed to bad odor by the burning of the flesh of the sacrifice upon the altar.

The rabbis of *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 18, Part 8* (מדרש רבה במד) (דבר פרשה יה סימן ה) on this week's Torah portion have the following to say regarding the incense in the Tabernacle.

### ***Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashah 18, Part 8***

*This Do, Take you censers, Korach, and all his company; and put fire therein, and put incense upon them before the Lord tomorrow (Bamidbar / Numbers 16:6). What reason had he for saying so? He said to them, it is the way of the other nations to have many religious observances and many priests, and they cannot all gather together in one edifice. We, however, have only one God, one Torah, one code of laws, one altar, and one High Priest, and you, to hundred and fifty strong, all seek the High Priesthood. I too am agreeable. Therefore, you and all your assembly, This do, take you censers, Korach, and all his company. I offer you a service more precious than all others. That was the incense, which is more precious than all the sacrifices, but there was poison in it and through it Nadav and Avihu were burnt. Accordingly, he warned them that It shall be that the man whom the Lord does choose, he shall be holy (Bamidbar / Numbers 16:7). Moshe said to Korach, I advise you not to incur guilt; only the man who shall come out alive, and all the rest of you will perish. Enough for you, you sons of Levi. See, I have warned you. Were they not fools that, in spite of his having given them such a warning, they still decided to offer? They sinned against their own lives; as it says, The fire-pans of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives (Bamidbar / Numbers 17:3). Now Korach, who was a clever man, what reason had he for such folly? His mind's eye misled him, he foresaw that a long and distinguished progeny would emanate from him, particularly Samuel, whose importance would equal that of Moshe and Aaron; as may be inferred from the text, Moshe and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among them that call upon His name (Tehillim / Psalms 99:6), and that from among his descendants there would be formed twenty four levitical divisions all of whom would prophesy under the influence of the Holy Spirit; as it says, All these were the sons of Heman (1 Chronicles 25:5). He argued, Is it reasonable that, since such greatness is destined to emanate from me, I should keep silent? He did not, however, foresee accurately. In fact, his sons repented, and it was from them that the distinguished progeny was to emanate. Moshe, however, did foresee it. The reason then why Korach was foolish enough to risk that danger and because he heard from Moshe that they would all perish*

*and one of them would escape; as it says, And it shall be that the man whom the Lord does choose, he shall be holy.*

According to the midrash, the incense offering was more important than all of the other sacrifices. How do the rabbis come to this conclusion? Was it because the incense was meant to bring joy (gladness) to the heart because of the sweet smell? According to the Torah we are to go before the Lord with joy (וּשְׂמֵחֹתֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם).

***Devarim / Deuteronomy 12:11-12***

*12:11 then it shall come about that the place in which the Lord your God will choose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution of your hand, and all your choice votive offerings which you will vow to the Lord. 12:12 ‘And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates, since he has no portion or inheritance with you. (NASB)*

יא וְהָיָה הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בּוֹ לְשֹׁכֵן שָׁמוּ שָׁם שְׁמָה תִבְיֵאוּ  
את כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם עוֹלֹתֵיכֶם וְזִבְחֵיכֶם מַעֲשֵׂוֹתֵיכֶם וּתְרִמַת  
יְדֵכֶם וְכֹל מִבְּחַר גְּדַרְיֶכֶם אֲשֶׁר תִּדְרוּ לַיהוָה: יב וּשְׂמֵחֹתֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אַתֶּם וּבְנֵיכֶם וּבָנֹתֵיכֶם וְעַבְדֵיכֶם וְאִמָּהֵתֵיכֶם וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵי-  
כֶם כִּי אֵין לוֹ חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה אִתְּכֶם:

The purpose of the incense, according to the rabbis, was to bring gladness to one’s heart while going before the Lord. This brings up an interesting fact about the Apostolic Writings according to *Revelation 8:3-5*.

***Revelation 8:3-5***

*8:3 Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. 8:4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand. 8:5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (NASB)*

According to *Revelation 8:4*, the prayers of the saints goes up before God along with the smoke of the incense. According to the midrash, there was poison in the incense that these men offered up before God (*They sinned against their own lives; as it says, The fire-pans of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives (Bamidbar / Numbers 17:3), Midrash Tehillim Bamidbar, Parashat 18, Part 8*) Could that poison be sin? If we have sin in our lives, David said in his Psalm (*Tehillim / Psalms 66:18*) “If I regard



wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear” (NASB) and also Isaiah 59:1-2 says “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not so short That it cannot save; Nor is His ear so dull That it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear.” (NASB) The Lord will not hear our prayer if we regard sin in our hearts. What would happen if we go in prayer with sin in our hearts? Note that when the 250 men of Korach, Nadav, and Avihu went before the Lord, their hearts were not filled with rejoicing, they were angry and were disputing with Moshe and Aaron about the priesthood. In addition to this, the 250 men did not take fire from the altar, there would not have been enough to go around if that were the case, so they needed to add fire of their own making (*they added “strange fire”*). This is why it is believed that Nadav and Avihu died because the Scriptures state explicitly that they offered “*strange fire*” before the Lord. Why would Aaron’s sons who were putting forth effort to please God, incur instead His wrath? What is the principle being taught here? The Targum Onkelos and Pseudo Jonathan have the following to say about these men of Korach, Datan, and Aviram that gives us a little more insight.

***Targum Onkelos on Bamidbar / Numbers 16:1-2***

*BUT Korack bar zhar bar Kahath bar Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On bar Pelath of the Beni Reuben, made a division. And they rose up in the presence of Mosheh with (other) men of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty, chiefs of the congregation, who at the time of the convocation had been men of name.*

***Targum Pseudo Jonathan on Bamidbar / Numbers 16:1-5***

*XVI. But Korach bar Tizhar bar Kehath, bar Levi, with Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On bar Peleth, of the Beni-Reuben, took his robe which was all of hyacinth, and rose up boldly, and in the face of Mosheh appointed a (different) observance in the matter of the hyacinth. [JERUSALEM. And Korach took counsel, and made division.] Mosheh had said, I have heard from the mouth of the Holy One, whose Name be Blessed, that the fringes are to be of white, with one filament of hyacinth; O but Korach and his companions made garments with their fringes altogether of hyacinth, which the Lord had not commanded; and two hundred and fifty men of the sons of Israel, who had been made leaders of the congregation at the time when the journeys and encampments were appointed, by expression of their names, supported him. And they gathered together against Mosheh and Aharon, and said to them: Let the authority you have (hitherto had) suffice you, for all the congregation are holy, and the Lord’s Shekinah dwelleth among them; and why should you be magnified over the church of the Lord?*

According to the Targum translations we read that “*Korach took counsel and made a division*” (Onkelos) and “*appointed a different observance in the matter if hyacinth*” (Pseudo Jonathan, *hyacinth = bulbous plant having fragrant bell-shaped flowers*). Rashi

says that Korach took himself to a “*different side*,” and Rambam says that he took “*evil counsel*” into his heart. These men were creating a division, they were separating themselves from the congregation of people in their pride. According to the *Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:20*, we read “*Any machloket (argument) which is for the sake of Heaven will stand; and any machloket which is not for the sake of Heaven will not stand.*” For the sages, a dispute between the House of Hillel and Shammai was for the sake of heaven, whereas, that of Korach, Datan, and Aviram was clearly not. In the case of Hillel versus Shammai, disputes were made for the purpose of discerning the will of God; in Korach, Datan, and Aviram’s case, each person contended (disputed) for his own honor and power.

The principle that appears to be taught here in Parashat Korach is that we are not to walk in wickedness in our lives, we are not to go before the Lord with anger or malice in our hearts, we are not to follow the way of the nations, and we are not to serve the Lord God the way the nations do, or even the way we want too as opposed to the way Scripture tells us too, etc. The Torah states explicitly:

***Devarim / Deuteronomy 12:8-9***

*12:8 “You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes; 12:9 for you have not as yet come to the resting place and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you. (NASB)*

We are told to be careful that we do not live doing whatever we feel is right in our own eyes. Korach, Datan, and Aviram did what they thought was right in their own eyes and they died in their sins. Something to note about *Devarim / Deuteronomy 12:9* which says “*you have not yet come to the resting place and inheritance the Lord your God is giving you.*” What do we have in Yeshua the Messiah today? We have a resting place and a inheritance in God’s Messiah. Therefore, we are not to do whatever we feel is right in our own eyes. These Scriptures hold significant weight in light of what the Lord has done in Yeshua the Messiah (*e.g. we are to remain and abide in Him*). Part of the command in the Torah, according to *Devarim / Deuteronomy 12*, is to go before the Lord with joy and thanksgiving, innocence, truth, and purity of heart. This is the pearl of great price, seek the Lord God in Heaven and His love. We are to seek the Lord, His kindness, His mercy, His love, and what He has for our lives in innocence, truth, and purity of heart. Korach and his followers remind us that getting this wrong leads to madness, arrogance, and spiritual death. Let’s not be consumed by the strange fire of our own making by worshiping God on our own terms. Let’s seek the Lord in the way He chooses, in the name of His Son, Yeshua the Messiah!