

PARASHAS KORACH

The Easy Way In

How do you put down an insurrection? Sometimes, all it takes is calling their bluff. Moses had to face just such an insurrection in the Desert. Korach and his followers challenged the royal authority of Moses as the divinely ordained leader of the Jewish people and the right of Aaron to serve as the High Priest.

"All the people are holy," Korach and his followers declared. "Why do you place yourselves above them?" Surely, they contended, Hashem would want the power and the privilege spread about more equitably.

How did Moses respond? By challenging them to a test. On the morrow, Korach and each of his followers were to take a pan of incense and approach the Mishkan to perform the daily burning of the incense ritual. If Hashem accepted their offering, they would be vindicated. But if their claims were unjustified, they could expect to die. Sure enough, when the rebels brought the incense the next day, they were incinerated.

Why did Moses choose this particular ritual as a test of divine favor? The Midrash explains that the burning of the incense is the most exalted and important part of the divine service, and therefore, it is also the most devastating if its integrity is violated.

The commentators also discern another dimension in the choice of the burning of the incense as the test of divine favor. The rebels wanted to usurp the hereditary priesthood of Aaron because they felt they were equally qualified. And what were their qualifications? That they considered themselves as knowledgeable as Aaron about the intricacies of the temple service.

Therefore, Moses directed their attention to the burning of the incense. Although the production of the incense was an intricate and arcane process, the actual burning of the incense was very simple and straightforward, far simpler than the service of the animal sacrifices or the meal offerings. Clearly, Aaron's qualifications for this service were not any specialized knowledge or training. Rather, it was his many years of selfless dedication to Hashem, his transcendent spirit and his all-embracing love for the people that earned him the privilege of wearing the priestly vestments.

The service itself may have been easy, but getting to the required level of worthiness was not. It required a lifetime of effort. Unfortunately, the rebels had to learn the hard way that there is no easy way in.

A famous sage was traveling by wagon from town to town. In each place he stopped, crowds greeted him with great honor. Some people asked for his blessing, while others asked for his advice. The sage responded to each person kindly and quickly.

"I want to ask a favor," said the wagon driver once they were back on the road. "Never in all my life have I received honors such as you receive in each town we visit. Before the next town, could you change clothing and places with me? The people will think I am the sage, and they'll shower me with honors. I will give them blessings, and I will give them advice. For once in my life, I would like to experience that feeling."

"As you wish," said the sage.

They changed clothing and places, and sure enough, the people in the next town greeted the disguised wagon driver with adulation.

One man pushed through the crowd. "I need your advice desperately," he said to the sage, and he went on to describe his problem.

The wagon driver tried to think of an answer, but every solution only seemed to create more problems.

Suddenly, he had a flash of inspiration.

"This is really a very simple question," he said. "In fact, it is so simple even my wagon driver knows the answer. Why don't you ask him?"

In our own lives, we are often ready to criticize those in positions of leadership and authority, whether it be the rabbi, the school principal or anyone else in a similar position. From a distance, what they do may seem easy and uncomplicated, and we, of course, see with perfect clarity where they could use improvement. But appearances are deceiving. They spent many years preparing for those positions, and we are not qualified to second-guess everything they do. Better that we should turn that powerful lamp of scrutiny on ourselves and become the very best that we can possibly be.