

Incensed over Incense

ויקרא פרשת שמיני פרק י

(א) וַיִּקְחוּ בְנֵי אֶהֱרֹן נָדָב וַאֲבִיהוּא אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֶיהָ קִטְרֹת וַיִּקְרִיבוּ לִפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק אֵשׁ זָרָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא צִוָּה אֹתָם:

Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before Hashem, which he had not commanded them

(ב) וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמָתוּ לִפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק:

And fire came forth from before Hashem, and devoured them, and they died before Hashem.

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֶהֱרֹן הוּא אֲשֶׁר דָּבַר יְקֹנֶק לֵאמֹר בְּקִרְבִּי אֶקְדֹּשׁ וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל הָעָם אֶכָּבֵד וַיִּדַּם אֶהֱרֹן:

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what Hashem spoke of, saying, 'I will show myself holy to those who come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" Aaron held his peace.

במדבר פרשת קרח פרק טז

(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל קֶרַח אֶתָּה וְכָל עֲדֹתְךָ הֵיוּ לִפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק אֶתָּה וְהֵם וְאֶהֱרֹן מָחָר:

Moses said to Korah, "You and all your company go before Hashem, you, and they, and Aaron, tomorrow.

(ז) וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַנְתִּתֶם עָלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֵתִים מִחֶתֶת וְאֶתָּה וְאֶהֱרֹן אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ:

Each man take his censer, and put incense on them, and each man bring before Hashem his censer, two hundred fifty censers, you also, and Aaron, each his censer."

(יח) וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִחֶתְתּוֹ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵיהֶם אֵשׁ וַיִּשִׂימוּ עָלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמֹשֶׁה וְאֶהֱרֹן:

They each took his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense on them, and stood at the door of the Tent of Meeting with Moses and Aaron.

(לה) וְאֵשׁ יֵצְאָה מֵאֵת יְקֹנֶק וַתֹּאכַל אֶת הַחֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֵתִים אִישׁ מִקְרִיבֵי הַקִּטְרֹת: פ

Fire came forth from Hashem, and devoured the two hundred fifty men who offered the incense.

במדבר פרשת קרח פרק יז

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֶהֱרֹן קַח אֶת הַמִּחֶתָּה וְתֵן עָלֶיהָ אֵשׁ מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשִׂים קִטְרֹת וְהוֹלֵךְ מְהֵרָה אֶל הָעֵדָה וְכַפֵּר עָלֵיהֶם כִּי יֵצֵא הַקֶּצֶף מִלִּפְנֵי יְקֹנֶק הַחַל הַנִּגָּף:

Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer, and put fire from off the altar in it, and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from Hashem! The plague has begun."

(יב) וַיִּקַּח אֶהֱרֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר דָּבַר מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּרָץ אֶל תּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל וְהִנֵּה הַחַל הַנִּגָּף בָּעָם וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַקִּטְרֹת וַיִּכְפֹּר עַל הָעָם:

Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and behold, the plague had begun among the people. And he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people.

(ג) וַיֵּעַמַד בֵּין הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים וַתַּעֲצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה:

He stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.

“For Heaven’s Sake”

משנה מסכת אבות פרק היז כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים ושאינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקיים איזו היא מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי ושאינה לשם שמים זו מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו:

Ramban (Numbers 16:1)

"Korach was angered by the appointment of Elitzafan as leader [over the Levite family of Kehat] as our Sages say, and he envied Aharon, too, as it says, '... and you seek priesthood, as well.' Datan and Aviram were attracted to him, but not [in protest] over the privileges of the firstborn, for it was Yaakov their patriarch who removed it from Reuven and granted it to Yosef. Rather, they, too, explicitly state their claim: 'to kill us in the wilderness'; 'You have not even brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey.' Benei Yisrael, during their stay in the wilderness of Sinai, experienced no harm; even in the incident of the calf, which constituted a grave and well-known sin, the casualties were few. They were spared through the prayer of Moshe who pleaded on their behalf for forty days and forty nights. They thus loved him as they loved themselves and obeyed him, and if someone had rebelled against Moshe at that time the nation would have stoned him. Korach therefore tolerated Aharon's stature and the firstborn tolerated the stature of the Levi'im, as well as everything Moshe did. But when they arrived in the wilderness of Paran, and they were burned by the fire of Tav'eira and many people perished in Kivrot Ha-ta'ava, and when they sinned in the incident of the scouts Moshe did not pray for them and the decree was not annulled, and the leaders of all the tribes died in a plague before God, and it was decreed that the entire nation would perish in the wilderness and die there, then the nation's soul was embittered. They felt in their hearts that mishaps would result from Moshe's orders. Korach thus found an opportunity to oppose Moshe's actions, figuring that now the nation would listen to him. This is the meaning of, 'to kill us in the wilderness.' They said, look, you have brought us to this place and have not fulfilled your promise to give us a land flowing with milk and honey, for you have not given us land at all. We are rather going to die in the wilderness and be

destroyed there, for even our children will never leave the wilderness, and your promise will be annulled with regard to the children just as it was with regard to us. This is the reason why their complaint occurs at this point, immediately following the decree of the scouts."

Netziv (He'amek Davar, Numbers 16:1)

"We must realize and understand, from the entire discussion in the parasha, from the progression of the dispute and the punishment that befalls them, that **Korach, Datan and Aviram, and the two hundred and fifty men were not equal**, neither in terms of their merit nor regarding the intent behind their struggle. For we see that only Korach and the two hundred and fifty men, not Datan and Aviram, participated in the taking of the incense-pans. Also, the Almighty dealt with the two hundred and fifty men honorably, as we will explain, but not with Korach, Datan and Aviram. We must therefore understand that **the two hundred and fifty men were actually spiritual giants of Israel** in every detail, even in fear of God, and the inaccessibility of the priesthood, which brings closeness and love of God, was like a burning fire inside them. **Their intentions were** not for power or imaginary honor, but rather **to become sanctified** and achieve this level through the *avoda* [sacrificial rituals]. They also knew that God truly spoke in Moshe's mouth, and that one may not suspect it, Heaven forbid. They rather questioned in their hearts the will of God, and they gave over their lives to die for the love of God, for love is as powerful as death... Since they did, after all, intend for the sake of God, they were therefore punished by being burnt by the fire that came from the innermost sanctum, which involves honor, as we will explain. **Not so with regard to Datan and Aviram.** They were far from this sublime yearning, and were rather by nature quarrelsome people who despised Moshe already in Egypt... They were therefore punished by being devoured by the ground, like animals."

Netziv (Rinah shel Torah, Song 6:5)

In the generation of the wilderness, there were **250 men** involved in the dispute of Korach, Dathan, and Aviram. They were all righteous and pious and they did not enter into a disagreement with Moshe over the Torah, God forbid, as did Korach, Datan, and Aviram. Rather they knew that they were prohibited from offering incense, but they were anxious to be able to provide incense before God and thereby achieve the love of God even though they knew that they would be punished and they would be killed as Moses had warned them... The meaning of "these sinners at the cost of their lives" (17:3) is that they committed suicide to achieve this love that is "fiercer than death" (Song 8:6) ...

Similarly, regarding **King Solomon**, it states that Solomon “loved God to follow in the ways of his father David, however, he continued to sacrifice and bring incense upon the platforms (*bamot*)” (1 Kings 3:3). Rashi interpreted this as disparaging him since **he delayed the construction of the temple** for four years. It is ostensibly difficult, however, why would Scripture detail this criticism as sacrificing on the platforms when [prior to the construction of the Temple] it was permissible, rather than making it explicit that he had delayed its construction? Rather it is certainly not on account of laziness that he delayed the construction of the Temple; rather, because he knew that after its construction it would be prohibited to sacrifice on the platforms as a result of which the love of God would be diminished among Israel since sacrificing before God leads to His love and attachment. When it was permissible to sacrifice on the platforms, it was easy for someone who wished to attach himself to the love of God to bring a sacrifice on a platform wherever he chose; whereas, after the construction of the Temple it was impossible until he made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. That is why king Solomon delayed the construction of the Temple for four years, and this was to his detriment because he was so immersed in his love of God that on account of it he was lax in constructing the Temple in order to continue sacrificing and bringing incense upon the platforms...

In the Book of Judges, it states regarding **Micah's idol**, that it stood “all the days that the House of God stood in Shiloh” (Judges 18:31). This is remarkable; what is the connection between it and the Tabernacle in Shiloh? Rather, it signifies that **when it was then prohibited to sacrifice on altars** and they were distant from spiritual attachment to the love of God, that is why **they came to make Micah's idol**--despite the fact that it was a form of idolatry--and yet it was associated with the name of God, as indicated, **so that they would be able to offer sacrifices wherever they choose**. However, once Shiloh was destroyed and platforms were again permissible, they did not stray from the worship of God prescribed by the Torah.

So, regarding **the golden calves of Jeroboam**. Initially, Jeroboam was not intent upon inciting Israel to idolatry. Rather, he misled them by saying that it was in God's name as it is explicit in his words: “You need not ascend to Jerusalem” (1 Kings 12:28). He did not say “you do not need to serve God.” It is so understood in Sanhedrin (101 B): “Is it conceivable that a great man like Jeroboam worshipped

idols?” It was their understanding that **the matter of the golden calves was not idolatrous** but was intended for the sake of God and that it was permissible for them to sacrifice on platforms wherever they chose. Jeroboam induced them by arguing that just as the divine presence rests upon the cherubs, which is one of the forms of His chariot, so can the presence rest upon the calves, which represent the ox, another of the forms of the chariot.

Only in Jerusalem, God's chosen place, were we warned against platforms; however, when we are separated from it--and that was His blessed will by dividing the Kingdom at the instruction of the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite--**then we revert to the sanction of platforms**. Because of Israel's longing for this, they were seduced, and erected the calves. At the outset it states: “This was to their detriment” (1 Kings 12:30), it does not say “to the detriment of the House of Jeroboam leading to the destruction its destruction from upon the face of the earth,” as it would be written later (13:34), after the incident involving the prophet at Bethel. This is remarkable: What caused the arrival of a prophet in the name of God to transform Jeroboam's calves into a source of destruction more so than it was prior to his arrival? Rather, as we have explained, the people believed it is not idolatry, rather a violation of the law of platforms, and it met with the approval of all Israel. **They believed they were performing a righteous act** and such a sin is not sufficient cause for exile--although it is punishable by excision. In any event, it certainly is not sufficient cause to have them destroyed and removed from the face of the earth.

God's relationship to the Jewish people during the time of the Temple can be compared to that of a woman and her husband... One who marries a woman wants her to love him with all her heart and soul. However, he also wants her to be the lady of the house and to see to all of its timely needs. It is well known that some worldly matters cannot be attended to while one is immersed in love and attachment. Therefore, a wise woman, in order to do the will of her husband, does not immerse herself in his love at those times that she needs to see to the needs of their household. Only at an appropriate time does she allow the love to awaken and at such a time he, too, does not abstain from seeing to her happiness...