

Bamidbar Chapter 17 - Transcript

Shiur Overview

Summary: Bamidbar Chapter 17 — The Aftermath of Korach and the Test of the Staffs

1. The Fate of the 250 Men's Fire-Pans (17:1–5)

Text: The opening verses complete the Korach narrative from the previous chapter.

Key Explanations:

Korach, Datan, and Aviram were swallowed by the earth — they vanished entirely from the community. But the 250 men who offered **ketoret** and were consumed by fire still had their bodies present. They remained "part of the community" in death, much as the concept of being "gathered to one's people" (**vaye'asef el amav**) implies burial among family. Their argument, in a sense, was still present.

Hashem commands Moshe to tell **Elazar** (not Aharon) to collect the fire-pans (**machtot**). This detail reflects how Elazar was already assuming priestly functions — a marker that this narrative belongs to the third section of Sefer Bamidbar, where Elazar transitions into the role after Aharon.

The fire-pans became **holy** (**ki kadashu**). Critically, the men were not killed because their offerings were rejected as profane. The opposite is true: because the **ketoret** was holy, they were consumed. The **machtot** therefore retain sanctity and must be repurposed.

The sin was personal (**chatai ha'anashim ha'eleh b'nafshosam**) — they sinned against themselves, not against the entire congregation. Yet the holy vessels must still serve the Mishkan.

The **machtot** are hammered into thin plating (**rikuei pachim**) to cover the outer altar (**mizbeach hachitzon**). The altar stood in a public space visible to all, making this covering a permanent **sign** (**ot**) and **memorial** (**zikaron**) — a warning that no non-Aaronide (**ish zar**) should offer **ketoret**. The chapter should logically have ended here.

Insight: Nearly every story of this type leaves behind a physical remnant as a sign. The narrative itself is a sign, but the tangible memorial reinforces the lesson across generations.

2. The People's Complaint and the Plague (17:6–15)

Text: The congregation complains the next day; a plague breaks out and is stopped by Aharon's **ketoret**.

Key Explanations:

Despite Korach's dramatic destruction, the people were **not convinced**. They accused Moshe and Aharon: "You have killed Hashem's people" (**atem hamitem et am Hashem**). This echoes Korach's original claim — **kol ha'edah kulam kedoshim** — the entire congregation is holy, so killing some of them for wanting **kedushah** or **kehunah** seemed unjust.

A crucial principle emerges: killing opponents does not prove you are right. Even miraculous deaths (**bri'ah yivra Hashem**) are insufficient proof — people can rationalize that a **tzaddik** like Moshe simply has the power to perform miracles. Something more is needed.

Hashem again threatens total destruction (**heromu... va'achaleh**). Moshe and Aharon fall on their faces, but this time Moshe **cannot pray** with his previous argument (**ha'ish echad yecheta**) because the complaint comes from the entire congregation, not one instigator.

Instead, Moshe employs a **segulah** — he tells Aharon to take a **machtah** with fire **from the altar** (pointedly not **eish zarah**), add **ketoret**, and go among the people to atone. The same **ketoret** that killed the 250 men now **saves** the rest. The difference: when Aharon performs it in the correct manner, it heals rather than destroys.

Aharon literally **stands between the dead and the living**, creating a barrier with the **ketoret** that halts the plague's spread — described almost as a contagion moving person to person. 14,700 die, in addition to Korach's group and the 250.

3. The Test of the Staffs (17:16–24)

Text: Hashem commands a new test — twelve staffs placed in the Ohel Moed.

Key Explanations:

Even after the plague, the people's argument persists. Hashem therefore devises a **positive** demonstration rather than a punitive one.

Each tribe (**shevet**) provides a staff (**mateh**) — the wordplay is significant, as **mateh** means both "staff/stick" and "tribe," since a tribe is symbolically represented by the leader's staff. Each leader's name is written on his staff; Aharon's name goes on the staff of Levi.

The staffs are placed overnight **lifnei Hashem** in the Ohel Moed. In the morning, Aharon's staff has **sprouted, flowered, and produced almonds** (**shekedim**) — three stages of growth. Almonds are chosen because they grow quickly, reinforcing the miraculous speed and vitality of the sign.

The text alternates between the names **Ohel Moed** and **Ohel Ha'edut** — Moshe places the staffs in the **Ohel Moed** but enters the **Ohel Ha'edut** the next morning. This alternation is a recurring feature worth noting.

The core insight: Killing people is a poor sign of divine favor. Making flowers grow — demonstrating life and creativity rather than destruction — is a far more compelling proof of chosenness. This is the sign that will finally quiet (**v'hashikoti mei'alai**) the people's complaints.

4. The Staff as a Permanent Memorial (17:25–26)

Text: God's instruction to preserve Aharon's staff.

Key Explanations:

Just as the fire-pans of the sinners were hammered onto the **Mizbeach** as a **zikaron** and permanent sign, Aharon's staff is also placed back **lifnei Ha'edut** as a lasting memorial — but this is the **nicer** sign, a sign of life rather than death.

The other staffs are returned to their owners, but Aharon's miraculously sprouted staff is kept **l'mishmeret l'ot livnei**

meri* — preserved as a sign for the rebellious ones.

The purpose is explicitly protective: so that they will not complain again *v'lo yamutu* — and they will not die. God is helping the people avoid future fatal complaints. Approaching the *Mishkan* without authorization is deadly, as has been demonstrated repeatedly, so this sign serves as both a warning and a confirmation that Aharon was chosen.

Moshe carries out God's instructions exactly.

5. Structural Notes

The chapter division is misplaced in two respects. First, the natural break should come after the fire-pan episode (17:5),

| Full Transcript

Bamidbar Chapter 17: The Fire-Pans, the Plague, and the Flowering Staff

The Continuation from Korach's Rebellion

As we've discussed yesterday, this is really a continuation of the story. So let me finish off the last part of the story of the previous and then there's another part which really if someone would have wanted to make a cut then he should have cut after this part.

So what we have is like this. Remember that Korach and his family and Datan and Aviram and their families, all of them were swallowed into the earth. The earth opened up and swallowed them. So that's one thing and that seems to be the end of that. So they're lost from the community. They're not part of the world anymore. In some sense you could say it's very obvious. You look around, you see that he's not here. So you see that that's what happened with Korach.

But now the 250 people who tried to be *kohanim* [priests] and were burned, they're still here. Their bodies are still here. They didn't go alive into *Sheol* [the grave]. Their bodies are still here. So they're still part of the community in some sense. As we see, when you get gathered to your people, to your family, that's what happens when you die, when you get buried with your family and so on. So these people were buried with their family. It doesn't say that they were buried but we assume they were buried wherever the people did with their families, bodies in the *Midbar* [wilderness]. They're not lost. So they're still around. In some sense their argument is still here.

The Command to Collect the Fire-Pans

So therefore there's a special *mitzvah* [commandment], a special continuation, not a *mitzvah* but really the end of the story to show what happens with this, that we make this into some kind of signpost, into some kind of very important message, the *devarim* [words], for all the generations to know that these people lost. And this is a special *mitzvah*.

Vayedaber Hashem [And Hashem spoke] to Moshe and he tells him to tell to Aharon, sorry to Elazar, the son of Aharon. Aharon is the *Kohen Gadol* [High Priest]. He doesn't get involved but Elazar, as we see later, is also one of the things in which this story is already part of the third part of *Sefer Bamidbar* [the Book of Numbers] where Elazar becomes the *Kohen* [priest] after Aharon. Aharon was old already, maybe

which concludes the Korach story proper. What follows — the complaint, plague, and staff test — constitutes a new narrative arc, though it is thematically continuous. The progression is: (1) punishment of Korach, (2) memorial of the fire-pans, (3) the people remain unconvinced, (4) plague and *ketoret* rescue, (5) the positive proof of the flowering staff. Each stage escalates because the previous demonstration was insufficient.

Second, the last two verses of chapter 17 actually belong thematically with the next chapter, as they pose a question that the following chapter answers. They will be treated with the next chapter's discussion.

Elazar was already taking over functions, functional things, at least things that we need work. Elazar was taken care of.

The Sanctity of the Fire-Pans

He says, take the *machtot* [fire-pans], take the vessels, the things in which they brought their *ketoret* [incense], throw away the fire. Fire means here, not literally fire, right? It means coals or whatever the fire is in. Throw it away, scatter it, because these *machtot* became holy, they were sanctified, they were made *kodesh* [holy], they were given to the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle], they were given to the *ketoret*.

So the fact that they got burned is because they were holy. It's not that these *kodesh* were not accepted and therefore their *kodesh* is sort of secular, it's not holy. It's the opposite. It's because they were holy that they got burned. So therefore we need to take these *machtot*, although they've sinned on themselves, right? In other words, they're not sin of the *kahal* [congregation], they're sin of their person, they're personal sins. But Hashem is saying these *machtot* are still part of the *Mishkan*, they're still kosher.

Creating a Memorial on the Altar

So therefore we should take it, we should make out of it a covering, a sign, kind of a *rikvei pachim* [hammered plates], you cover it, you bang it down until it's thin and it becomes a cover, a nice cover for the *mizbeach* [altar]. The *mizbeach* wasn't covered until then so nicely, apparently, or they just added to the covering. It doesn't say what these *machtot* were made out of, were they gold, probably copper, because the *mizbeach* was covered in copper.

And this is because they brought it for Hashem and they became holy. And then, but the main point is, this would be a sign for the *Bnei Yisrael* [Children of Israel]. So besides for the fact that it's a *machtot*, it could just be used in some way. It was particularly put on the *mizbeach*, the *mizbeach* is in a public place, the *mizbeach* is something where everyone can see, it's not inside where nobody can see, it's an outside thing. And every time someone goes to the *mizbeach*, you will see, this is weird, this covering of the *mizbeach*, this plating on the *mizbeach*, is part of the sign, it's saying, look what happens to people that try to take away the *kehunah* [priesthood] from Levi, from Aharon and his children.

So in other words, this is not just like some weird thing where it became holy, so therefore it has to be part, but it's like a lesson like this, and this is something we see in all of these

stories, there's almost always something that's left over to be a sign, even the story itself is a sign, but the fact that this was left over is a sign to show us the message, the lesson of this story.

And he did it, so this was the command, and Elazar does it, he makes it, and it becomes a memory, and here in the action, and when it gets done, the *pasuk* [verse] explains this better, it becomes a memory for the *Bnei Yisrael*, a signpost, a piece of memory, so that a stranger, someone who is not from the children of Aharon should not take it away, and he should not be like Korach and his people, and he did this as Hashem told Moshe to do.

Now, this is the end, here is the end of this part of the story, that's how I cut it up, and that's where the chapter should have been.

The People's Complaint the Next Day

Now, apparently this was not enough, so obviously Moshe won this fight, Korach was killed, there was 250 people killed, but it seems like the people still thought that they had a good argument, people still thought that they had a point, so the fact that they died wasn't enough.

Killing Is Not Proof Enough

So here we see something very important, killing people is not a proof enough that you're right, you have to also show that you're right, you have to at least bring a better sign, of course even they were killed miraculously as Moshe said, all of that is still not enough, apparently Moshe, he can do miracles, he can get miracles to happen too, that doesn't prove much, so we have to show something more.

So we have the complaint, so this is like another step of the story, really another story, it's like many stories you just start with a complaint, the stories could have started here, but of course it's complaining about what happened before, about the story of Korach. The congregation again, the people complain on Moshe, the next day on Moshe and they say, you have killed Hashem's people, remember, this was Korach's argument, we are Hashem, and now you killed them, you killed some of us, just for wanting to be *kodesh* [holy], just for wanting to be *kohanim*, it seems not fair, it seems like they didn't prove their point yet.

Hashem's Anger and the Threat of Destruction

And now again, Hashem is very upset, so this is just like in every complaint, Hashem is upset, they all gather together on Moshe, they come to the *Ohel Moed* [Tent of Meeting] and again, the cloud is there, the cloud has covered the *Ohel Moed*, the glory of Hashem is there, Moshe and Aharon go into the *Ohel Moed* and Hashem speaks to Moshe the same thing that he spoke before, **Heromu** [Separate yourselves], separate yourself from this, and then I will destroy all of them.

And what did Moshe and Aharon do? The same thing they're doing all this time, they fall on their faces, it doesn't say that Moshe does something, and here there's a new thing, a very interesting story, instead of Moshe coming and saying, he couldn't say that, because this is *kol ha'edah* [the whole congregation], again, at least all the representatives, there isn't really someone saying, and of course, as we explained yesterday, it's still Moshe could have claimed that Korach instigated everything, but it seemed like it didn't help, the fact that Korach was destroyed, Korach lost very clearly, didn't help that the rest of the people, or some of the rest of the people still were on his side, still were complaining about, not

only on his side, they were complaining about what Moshe did to him.

Aharon Stops the Plague with Ketoret

So therefore, they have to do a lot more, they have to, Hashem is still very upset, and he wants to destroy all of them, and now Moshe cannot pray, he doesn't have an argument left, but he has a way, he has a way, it's very interesting, of course, the same *ketoret* that killed the 250 people is going to save the rest of the people, so something very curious is going on here.

The Command to Bring Ketoret

But Moshe tells Aharon, I have a solution, take the *machta* [fire-pan], put fire from the *mizbeach*, so very important, this is not *eish zarah* [strange fire], fire from the *mizbeach*, and go to the people and atone to them, so apparently *ketoret* is something that atones for a sin, atones for a *magefah* [plague], it might have some medicinal properties in some way, some people might say that, but in any case, it's something that can solve this problem, there's a *negef* [plague], it started a *magefah*, a plague started, go put *ketoret* there, it will stop it.

Standing Between the Dead and the Living

And that's what Aharon did, he runs, immediately, into the congregation, into the gathered people, and he sees that's true, the *negef* started, the *magefah* started, he puts *ketoret*, he stands between the dead and the living, in other words, until where Aharon came, people died, and from the *ketoret* and on, maybe literally, like he was standing, and there's like a plague spreading, like in a contagious way, right, so it spreads, it kills one, the next, and then wherever Aharon stands, he made like a *mechitzah* [partition] with his *ketoret*, and that's where the *magefah* has stopped, and the *magefah* has stopped.

And we have at the end of the sentence that says how many people were killed in *magefah*, 14,700 people were killed in the *negef*, besides for Korach and the 250 people that killed, and Aharon comes back to Moshe and sort of reports to the *negef*, and that's sort of the *negef* stopped.

So this is the end of this second story, there was a *negef*, and it was solved by the *ketoret*, the same *ketoret* that killed everyone, when Aharon did it, that's really probably the simple reasoning, when Aharon did it, it was in the correct way, and therefore was not something that killed anyone.

The Test of the Staffs

But now again, this is not enough to show, people still have an argument, they still have some problem, so Hashem is trying to do something to show some, that Aharon is the one that is chosen, apparently they didn't, the fact that he can kill his people that are against, that challenge him, is not enough, so he's saying something else, he's saying something new.

The Command to Bring the Staffs

And he says this, Hashem speaks to Moshe, and he tells them, tell each of the *shevatim* [tribes], each leader of, or each *shevet*, 12 of them, to take a stick, *mateh* [staff], it's interesting because *mateh* is a stick, and *mateh* is also the image, the simile, right, that is used, simile that is used to represent a *shevet*, right, a *shevet* is literally also a stick, or a *mateh* sometimes means something like what we call a *shevet*, a tribe, but it's called a tribe, because the tribe is led by someone with a stick, something like that.

So now they take this stick, which is like literally symbolic of the *shevet*, put each person's name on his stick, Aharon on his stick, or the stick that represents Levi, and you'll put all these sticks in the *Ohel Moed*, and now it will be a new way of showing who is chosen, whoever is chosen, his stick will flower, so a stick of course is made out of wood, it's an artificial thing, it's used just as a stick, but if it's made out of wood, then it can be, it can sprout, something can grow on it.

A Better Sign: Life Instead of Death

So Hashem is going to show, miraculously, but in some way, that Aharon's stick has sprouting, it sprouts, it's growing, it's alive, and this will show that Aharon was chosen, and I will quiet down, I will quiet from me the complaints of the people, so this is very nice, I think it's a very simple point, to kill people is not a very good sign, but if you can make flowers grow more than other people, that's sort of a better sign.

The Miracle of the Flowering Staff

And that's what they do, Moshe speaks to the people, they each give him a *mateh*, he puts the *mateh* Aharon together, he puts it all in the *Ohel Moed*, and he leaves it there overnight, then in the morning, Moshe comes to the *Ohel Ha'edut* [Tent of Testimony], again *Ohel Ha'edut*, *Ohel Moed*, change names, and here we see, of course, that the *mateh* Aharon has flowered, it has *tzitz* [blossoms], it has some more level of flower, maybe like the pointy parts that come out, the almonds, and some almonds, it's actually having fruit, it's coming to grow, *shekedim* [almonds] is something that grows quickly, so that's the kind of image.

And Moshe brings it out, and he shows them, look, this is the one that sprouted, and now this becomes also a memory, just like we had—

The Staff Preserved as a Lasting Memorial

The matah [staff] also gets put back and becomes a memory forever, the nicer sign. That Aharon's stick sprouted and that's what God tells Moshe to bring back the matah and all the other ones they gave back. But the Aharon [staff] which was miraculously sprouted, put back in front of Edut [testimony], will be the **I'mishmeret** [for safekeeping] for something saved. It's going to be saved. It's going to be watched. It's going to stay there so that they not complain about that.

In other words, this is God helping them not to have complaints. If they die, then they will go to the Mishkan and they will die. As we see all the time, you can die from going close to the Mishkan when you're not authorized. So this will be a sign to show them that the Aharon [staff] was chosen and they should not do anything. Moshe, this is what God says and that's what happens.

A Note on Chapter Division

Now, the story continues in a third level and the chapter here was cut off in actually the wrong place here. I'm not going to follow them. We'll start the first Pesach [verse], the last Pesach, or the last pesukim [verses] of this chapter. We will do tomorrow in the next chapter because that's really the question, I think, that answers. There's a question and answer there.