have spurned the LORD." 31Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, 32and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. 33They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. 34All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, "The earth might swallow us!"

35And a fire went forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

יְהוָה׃ 31 וַיְהִי כְּכַלֹּתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֵת כָּל־
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּבָּקַע הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר
תַּחְתֵּיהֶם׃ 32 וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ
וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת־בָּתֵּיהֶם וְאֵת כָּל־
הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקֹרַח וְאֵת כָּל־הָרְכוּשׁ׃
33 וַיֵּרְדוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׁאֹלָה
וַתְּכַס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ
הַקָּהָל׃ 34 וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֵיהֶם
נָסוּ לְקֹלָם כִּי אָמְרוּ פֶּן־תִּבְלָעֵנוּ הָאָרֶץ׃
35 וְאֵשׁ יָצְאָה מֵאֵת יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל
אֶת הַחֲמִשִּׁים וּמָאתַיִם אִישׁ מַקְרִיבֵי
הַקְּטֹרֶת׃ פ

17 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 2Order Eleazar son of Aaron the priest to remove the fire pans—for they have become sacred—from among the charred remains; and scatter

יז וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר׃
2 אֱמֹר אֶל־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְיָרֵם
אֶת־הַמַּחְתֹּת מִבֵּין הַשְּׂרֵפָה וְאֶת־הָאֵשׁ

you shall know Earthquakes were well known in the ancient world. The "unheard-of thing" was that this quake, like the plagues in Egypt, occurred precisely at the command of Moses.

the LORD But not me.

32. earth That is, the netherworld. It is equivalent to Sheol in verses 30 and 33.

households The families of Dathan and Abiram.

all Korah's people And Korah too was swallowed by the earth (26:10).

33. the earth closed over them This, and not the earth's opening, is what also constitutes the "unheard-of" creation.

vanished from the midst of the congregation All traces of the line of Dathan and Abiram were eliminated but, contrary to this text, not all traces of the line of Korah (see 26:11).

35. from the LORD From the tabernacle.

THE AFTERMATH OF KORAH'S REBELLION (17:1–18:32)

THE FIRE PANS AS REMINDERS (17:1–5)

2. Eleazar Eleazar attended to the tabernacle's interior appurtenances (4:16); and so he, not Aaron, was ordered to remove the fire pans.

remove That is, set aside or dedicate. Presumably, the fire pans were first handled by nonpriests, perhaps Levites. As a priest, Eleazar would not have been allowed to touch the pans before they underwent purification from having been in the hands of the slain chieftains.

sacred The fire pans became sacred by their use in the sacred precincts or because they were touched by the divine fire.

charred remains Of Korah and his followers.

scatter the coals abroad The coals must

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32. "The world exists on account of people who are able to restrain themselves during a quarrel" (BT Ḥul. 89a). Korah and his followers were not able to do that, so the earth gave way and swallowed them (Simḥah Bunem). The earthquake that swallowed Korah vindicated Moses as God's choice to be Israel's leader. The tribe of Reuben, however, was still challenging Aaron and the Levites. Here we see the contrasting personalities of Moses and Aaron. Moses destroys his opponents, calling down a divine miracle to bury them alive. Aaron disarms his rivals by outproducing them; his staff sends forth sprouts and blossoms, whereas the staffs of the other tribes cannot flower (17:23). Moses is the voice of justice; Aaron is the pursuer of peace.

זֵרֵה־הָלְאָה כִּי קָדֵשׁוּ׃ 3 אֶת מַחְתּוֹת
הַחַטָּאִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנַפְשֹׁתָם וְעָשׂוּ אֹתָם
רִקֻּעֵי פַחִים צִפּוּי לַמִּזְבֵּחַ כִּי־הִקְרִיבָם
לִפְנֵי־יְהוָה וַיִּקְדָּשׁוּ וְיִהְיוּ לְאוֹת לִבְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל׃ 4 וַיִּקַּח אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֵת מַחְתּוֹת
הַנְּחֹשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר הִקְרִיבוּ הַשְּׂרֻפִים וַיְרַקְּעוּם
צִפּוּי לַמִּזְבֵּחַ׃ 5 זִכָּרוֹן לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַעַן
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִקְרַב אִישׁ זָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזֶּרַע
אַהֲרֹן הוּא לְהַקְטִיר קְטֹרֶת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה
וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה כְקֹרַח וְכַעֲדָתוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר
יְהוָה בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה לוֹ׃
6 וַיִּלֹּנוּ כָּל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמָּחֳרָת עַל־
מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם הֲמִתֶּם

the coals abroad. 3[Remove] the fire pans of those who have sinned at the cost of their lives, and let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar—for once they have been used for offering to the LORD, they have become sacred—and let them serve as a warning to the people of Israel. 4Eleazar the priest took the copper fire pans which had been used for offering by those who died in the fire; and they were hammered into plating for the altar, 5as the LORD had ordered him through Moses. It was to be a reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider—one not of Aaron's offspring—should presume to offer incense before the LORD and suffer the fate of Korah and his band.

6Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You two have brought death upon the LORD's peo-

have come from a source other than the altar and hence did not have to be returned there.

3. hammered sheets The fire pans were hammered into thin layers.

4. copper Better: bronze. See Comment to Exod. 25:3.

plating for the altar According to Exod. 27:2 and 38:2, the altar was already plated with bronze. This second plating was to serve as a warning sign to encroachers.

5. him Eleazar.

outsider Any unauthorized person, a non-priest, a non-Levite, or even a disqualified priest.

Korah and his band Here it is stated that Korah died with his company in the incense trial.

OUTBREAK OF THE PLAGUE (vv. 6–15)

6. Next day This phrase connects the plague with the previous story of the fire pans.

You two Hebrew: *attem,* which is emphatic: It was you two who devised the incense test by which they lost their lives. Although the text attributes the test solely to Moses' initiative (16:6–7,16–17), he and Aaron are accused of collusion.

the LORD's people That is, the chieftains. The people at large, unconvinced by the incense test and continuing to believe that all are equally holy, pick up Korah's refrain: Moses and Aaron are lording it over everyone. Furthermore, they caused the deaths of the chieftains, who repre-

CHAPTER 17

2–3. The firepans used by the rebels to offer incense have become sacred and are to be used as plating for the altar. To some commentators, they have become holy simply because they had been consecrated by use in a ceremony. For Arama, they have become holy as mementos of the victory of truth over falsehood, like the trophies of a victorious army. For another commentator (*Ha·amek Davar*), they are holy because the men who offered incense in them were not really rebels and sinners, but people with a yearning for the opportunity to be close to God, to be of special service to God, a yearning that cost them their lives. Kook taught that the holiness of the firepans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy. Challenges to tradition, he taught, are necessary because they stand as perpetual reminders of the danger that religion can sink into corruption and complacency. Plating the altar with the firepans of the rebels is meant to remind us of the legitimacy, indeed the potential holiness, of the impulse within each of us to rebel against the stagnation and complacency that can infect religion.

ple!" 7But as the community gathered against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the Tent of Meeting; the cloud had covered it and the Presence of the LORD appeared.

8When Moses and Aaron reached the Tent of Meeting, 9the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 10"Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant." They fell on their faces. 11Then Moses said to Aaron, "Take the fire pan, and put on it fire from the altar. Add incense and take it quickly to the community and make expiation for them. For wrath has gone forth from the LORD: the plague has begun!" 12Aaron took it, as Moses had ordered, and ran to the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people. He put on the incense and made expiation for the people; 13he stood between the dead and the

אֶת־עַם יְהוָה׃ 7 וַיְהִי בְּהִקָּהֵל הָעֵדָה
עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיִּפְנוּ אֶל־אֹהֶל
מוֹעֵד וְהִנֵּה כִסָּהוּ הֶעָנָן וַיֵּרָא כְּבוֹד
יְהוָה׃
8 וַיָּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל־פְּנֵי אֹהֶל
ובייעי מוֹעֵד׃ פ 9 וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
לֵאמֹר׃ 10 הֵרֹמּוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת
וַאֲכַלֶּה אֹתָם כְּרֶגַע וְיִפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם׃
11 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קַח אֶת־
מַחְתָּה וְתֵן־עָלֶיהָ אֵשׁ מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
וְשִׂים קְטֹרֶת וְהוֹלֶךְ מְהֵרָה אֶל־הָעֵדָה
וְכַפֵּר עֲלֵיהֶם כִּי־יָצָא הַקֶּצֶף מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה
הֵחֵל הַנָּגֶף׃ 12 וַיִּקַּח אַהֲרֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר | דִּבֶּר
מֹשֶׁה וַיָּרָץ אֶל־תּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל וְהִנֵּה הֵחֵל
הַנֶּגֶף בָּעָם וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־הַקְּטֹרֶת וַיְכַפֵּר עַל־
הָעָם׃ 13 וַיַּעֲמֹד בֵּין־הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים

sented the Israelites in the national assembly and whose decisions may well have come from God.

7. the cloud had covered it When the tabernacle was stationary it was always covered by the divine cloud.

the Presence of the LORD appeared The pillar of fire within the cloud was visible only at night. To be seen by day, it probably increased its brightness, thereby signaling to Moses that God wished to communicate with him.

8. Moses' audiences with God were normally held inside the shrine, but when he was accompanied by Aaron or the people, the audiences were held in the courtyard that served as the entrance to the shrine.

9. Although Aaron was with him, only Moses heard God's voice.

10. Remove yourselves So as to escape the plague. Similarly, the people earlier had to distance themselves from Dathan and Abiram or the earth would have swallowed them too (16:26).

that I may annihilate them in an instant It had already been decreed that they would die in the wilderness; the only additional punishment left was their instantaneous death.

fell on their faces In prayer.

11. Moses said The lack of response from God compels Moses to attempt his own solution. His offering of incense outside the sacred precincts is an unprecedented act, improvised for the emergency.

incense The same incense that causes destruction when used by unauthorized persons averts destruction when used by those in rightful authority.

make expiation for them In the religions of the ancient Near East, incense served to appease and soothe the anger of the gods.

wrath Wrath is conceived as an independent entity, a destroyer, that acts as God's agent.

12. put on That is, on the fire pan.

13. Although Aaron, as high priest, is forbidden to come into close proximity with the

11–12. Once again, we see the greatness of soul that characterizes Moses and Aaron. They are the targets of the people's anger, but when God is about to punish the people and vindicate them, it is Moses and Aaron who intercede on their behalf. The two-pronged rebellion has been put down. The supremacy and legitimacy of Moses and Aaron as God's elect have been affirmed, but not without cost. Successive collisions have taken their cumulative toll on the people and on their leaders, as later events will show.

living until the plague was checked. 14Those who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of Korah. 15Aaron then returned to Moses at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, since the plague was checked.

16The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 17Speak to the Israelite people and take from them—from the chieftains of their ancestral houses—one staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house: twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each man's name on his staff, 18there being one staff for each head of an ancestral house; also inscribe Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. 19Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact, where I meet with you. 20The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you.

21Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. Their chieftains gave him a staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house, twelve staffs in all; among these staffs was that of Aaron. 22Moses deposited the staffs before the LORD, in the Tent of the Pact. 23The next day Moses entered the Tent

וַתֵּעָצַר הַמַּגֵּפָה׃ 14 וַיִּהְיוּ הַמֵּתִים בַּמַּגֵּפָה
אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר אֶלֶף וּשְׁבַע מֵאוֹת מִלְּבַד
הַמֵּתִים עַל־דִּבַּר־קֹרַח׃ 15 וַיָּשָׁב אַהֲרֹן
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהַמַּגֵּפָה
נֶעֱצָרָה׃ פ

חמישי 16 וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר׃ 17 דַּבֵּר |
אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאִתָּם מַטֶּה מַטֶּה
לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל־נְשִׂיאֵהֶם לְבֵית
אֲבֹתָם שְׁנֵים עָשָׂר מַטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ
תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מַטֵּהוּ׃ 18 וְאֶת שֵׁם אַהֲרֹן
תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מַטֵּה לֵוִי כִּי מַטֵּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ
בֵּית אֲבֹתָם׃ 19 וְהִנַּחְתָּם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד
לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אִוָּעֵד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה׃
20* וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֶבְחַר־בּוֹ מַטֵּהוּ
יִפְרָח וְהִשְׁכֹּתִי מֵעָלַי אֶת־תְּלֻנּוֹת בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מַלִּינִם עֲלֵיכֶם׃
21 וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנוּ
אֵלָיו | כָּל־נְשִׂיאֵיהֶם מַטֶּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד
מַטֶּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנֵים
עָשָׂר מַטּוֹת וּמַטֵּה אַהֲרֹן בְּתוֹךְ מַטּוֹתָם׃
22 וַיַּנַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמַּטֹּת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה
בְּאֹהֶל הָעֵדֻת׃ 23 וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּבֹא

חצי הספר בפסוקים *v. 20.*

dead (see Lev. 21:11), he does so in this case to save the living.

14. those who died on account of Korah The 250 chieftains (16:35) and probably also Dathan, Abiram, and their families.

15. since the plague was checked Moses' presence at the tent is repeated to emphasize the achievement of Aaron: It was not Moses' prayer but Aaron's ritual that placated God.

THE TEST OF THE STAFFS (vv. 16–26)

17. staff Hebrew: *matteh,* which also means "tribe." The staff was the official insignia of a tribal chieftain.

an ancestral house That is, the entire tribe.

each man's name But not the name of the tribe. The test was designed to choose God's priest from among the tribal chieftains; thus it was the individual who mattered, not the tribe.

18. Aaron's name on the staff of Levi The contest is between Aaron and the other chieftains who, like their 250 fallen colleagues, are still reluctant to see Aaron as the head of the priesthood.

19. the Pact Hebrew: *ha-edut;* short for "the Ark of the Pact" (*aron ha-edut*). The Ark's chief function was to serve as the receptacle for the Decalogue, the symbol of the pact or covenant between God and Israel (see Exod. 25:16, 40:20). Thus the staffs were placed in the Holy of Holies in front of the Ark (see also Num. 17:25).

20. the man whom I choose Either Aaron or one of the other tribal chieftains.

rid Myself God will settle the matter once and for all.

22. See Comment to 17:19.

23. A number of traditional commentators explain that when Moses entered the tent, the staff