

# BORN TO BE DIFFERENT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and take from them one staff for each father's house...*

Meshech Chochmah: What was the point? By this time, the Korach rebellion had been quashed, thoroughly and totally. Not one, but three different dramatic forms of death had been dealt to the participants. Some were swallowed up by the earth. Others met death through a fire that burnt them internally. Huge numbers died in a fast-moving plague. You would think that by now, people would have gotten the message. All the conspirators, representing different kinds of claims against Moshe, had been hung out to dry. Moshe and Aharon 3, rebels 0. What need was there for further confirmation of their authority? What were staffs that sprouted almonds going to prove to them that they did not already know?

The sprouting staffs provided the Bnei Yisrael with a dramatization of how they had fallen prey to Korach-and-company's argument through a fundamental error. They had seriously misunderstood the nature of the *kehunah*. They believed that the priestly role was given to those who most deserved it. At the time, those from the *shevet* of Levi could lay claim to spiritual achievement above and beyond other tribes. The balance of spiritual power, they concluded, could change with time. If other groups would rise in spiritual stature, they would supplant the *kohanim* from the tribe of Levi.

Hashem's choice of *shevet* Levi, however, was not conditioned upon its spiritual superiority. Rather, the *kohanim* shared some sort of property – whether discernable or not – that related them organically to the position of masters of the *avodah*. The *kohanim* were rather like the Jewish people as a whole, in a fixed position of specialness, even when seemingly undeserving of distinction.

Twelve staffs were selected. Their very selection pointed to a relationship that was innate, rather than earned. The “natural” first-born – Reuven – had lost his prominence because of his mercurial temperament. His distinction was carted off by Yosef, whose two sons – Ephraim and Menasheh – split the trophy, with each elevated to the position of a quasi-*shevet*. Yet in the selection of the staffs, Ephraim and Menasheh were treated as one group, not two. Reuven, in turn, was back on an equal footing with all his brothers. It was as if Hashem had turned back the clock, and treated them according to their “natural” qualities, rather than according to how they had used their talents.

With the staffs of the *shevatim* thus arrayed according to their “natural” qualities, it was Aharon's which sprouted fruit. Aharon emerged as the victor not only at that moment, but his selection quieted all complaints “for all time.”<sup>[2]</sup> In the “timeless” hierarchy of the people, Ephraim and

Menasheh became one again, as they will be in the future.<sup>[3]</sup> (Chazal<sup>[4]</sup> have this in mind when they teach that Aharon's covenant was greater than Dovid's. Aharon would have righteous and evil offspring – but they would all be *kohanim*. Dovid, however, was told that his descendants would hold on to the throne only when they remained true to their commission.)

The people learned that any hope of the *kehunah* passing to others on the basis of merit was ill-founded. Aharon's selection was a Divine statement about an inalienable quality in Aharon and his descendants – one that would be a permanent fixture for all time.

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bamidbar 17:17
2. Bamidbar 17:25
3. See Rashbam and Tosafos to Bava Basra 122A
4. Sifrei Bamidbar 119

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