



Pretended Perfection

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The most insidious part of Korah's claim is that it is a lie we desperately want to believe:

במדבר טז:

וַיִּקְהֲלוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב לָכֶם כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קֳדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכָם ה' וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קְהֵל ה'?

Bemidbar 16:3

They gathered against Moshe and Aharon and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?”

It's a lie that is startlingly close to the truth. The Jewish people is indeed a holy nation, designated by God for a covenantal relationship, God affirms this truth throughout the Torah, referring to the Jewish people as an “*am kadosh*.”¹

But Korah does not simply talk about the nation as a whole, a corporate entity chosen by God. Instead, he talks about the nation as a mass of individuals: “the whole congregation **are** all

¹ Mostly in Devarim (e.g., 7:6, 14:2, 28:9), but also implied or expressed differently elsewhere (e.g., Vayikra 20:26).



holy” rather than “**is** holy.” The use of the plural, seemingly innocuous, changes the meaning of Korah’s claim: he is not merely making a claim about a people chosen by God, but that all Jews, as individuals, are holy. That somehow the character of each of our individuals—our behaviour, our wisdom—is by nature better than those of others.²

But Korah is wrong: we are not all holy, at least not in the way that he means. Our behavior, as much as we try, falls short. Our wisdom is limited. And it is precisely the job of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest), the station Korah is trying to attain, to recognize that fact.

The *kehunah* (priesthood) is not simply an ancestral privilege: it is, first and foremost, a responsibility to the Jewish people. It is a responsibility to risk his life to protect the Jewish people from the consequences of their own sins. Each Yom Kippur, at risk to his own life, the Kohen Gadol enters the *kodesh ha-kodashim* (holy of holies) to offer the blood of the Jewish people’s *hatat* (sin offering), meant to cleanse the *mishkan* of the accumulated sins of the Jewish people. The Kohen Gadol carries the *ketoret* (incense) with him for protection as he risks his life for their sake:

ויקרא טז:ג, יא-יג, טז

³בזאת יבא אהרן אל הקדש...¹¹... וישחט את פר החטאת אשר לו:¹² ולקח מלא המחתה גחלי אש מעל המזבח מלפני ה' ומלא חפניו קטרת סמים דקה והביא מבית לפרכת:¹³ ונתן את הקטרת על האש לפני ה' וכסה ענן הקטרת את הכפרת אשר על העדות ולא ימות: ...¹⁶ וכפר על הקדש מטמאת בני ישראל ומפשעיהם לכל חטאתם וכן יעשה לאהל מועד השכן אתם בתוך טמאתם:

Vayikra 16:3, 11-13, 16

³Thus only shall Aharon enter the *kodesh*....¹¹...He shall slaughter his bull of sin offering,
¹²and he shall take a panful of glowing coals scooped from the altar before God, and two
handfuls of finely ground aromatic incense, and bring this behind the curtain.¹³He shall

² See the Abarbanel’s comments to this verse.



put the incense on the fire before God, so that the cloud from the incense screens the cover that is over [the Ark of] the Pact, lest he die....¹⁶ Thus he shall purge the *kodesh* of the impurity and transgression of the Israelites, whatever their sins; and he shall do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which abides with them in the midst of their impurity.

Aharon knows who the Jewish people are. And yet, his knowledge of the true people does not prevent him from fighting for us. Shortly after Korah's rebellion has been defeated, the Jewish people rail against Moshe and Aharon. God instructs Moshe and Aharon to remove themselves from the rest of the Jewish people to protect themselves as God destroys them:

במדבר יז:ח-י

⁸וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל פְּנֵי אֱהֱלֵ מוֹעֵד: ⁹וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ¹⁰הֲרִמּוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶכְלָה אֹתָם
כְּרָגַע וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם:

Bemidbar 17:8-10

⁸When Moshe and Aharon reached the Tent of Meeting, ⁹God spoke to Moshe, saying,

¹⁰“Remove yourselves from this community, that I may annihilate them in an instant.”

They fell on their faces.

Moshe immediately instructs Aharon to take the incense to the people to protect them from the plague.

¹¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל אַהֲרֹן קַח אֶת הַמִּחָתָה וְתֵן עָלֶיהָ אֵשׁ מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשִׂים קִטְרֶת וְהוֹלֵךְ מִהֵרָה אֶל הָעֵדָה
וְכִפֹּר עֲלֵיהֶם כִּי יֵצֵא הַקֶּצֶף מִלִּפְנֵי ה' הַחֹל הַנֶּגֶף:

¹¹Then Moshe said to Aharon, “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 God: the plague has begun!”

Moshe's command defies God's instructions. Instead of separating from the people, he tells Aharon to go towards them in order to protect them.

Aharon, however, does far more:

¹²וַיֵּקַח אֶהָרֹן כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּרֶץ אֶל תּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל וְהָיָה הַחֹל הַנֶּגֶף בָּעָם וַיִּתֵּן אֶת הַקֶּטֶרֶת וַיִּכְפֹּר עַל הָעָם:
¹³וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין הַמֵּתִים וּבֵין הַחַיִּים וַתֵּעָצֵר הַמִּגָּפָה:

¹²Aharon took it, as Moshe 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 living until the plague was checked.

While Moshe only instructs Aharon to take the *ketoret* to the people, allowing him the option, perhaps, to remain on the periphery, Aharon runs "into the midst" of the people. He stands between the living and the dead, using his body as a shield to protect the people from God's anger. This act of heroism is a direct defiance of God's command: Aharon is prepared to sacrifice everything, including his piety, to protect the Jewish people.

Far from being angry with Aharon's defiance, God is appeased. The plague stops, and God publicly reaffirms Aharon's appointment as Kohen Gadol.³ God's reaffirmation of Aharon in this moment is not coincidental, nor is it simply a response to Aharon's rivals for the position. Instead, it is a confirmation: in running towards the Jewish people when God told him to step away, in using his own body to protect them from harm, Aharon has proven that he is worthy of being the Kohen Gadol.

³ Bemidbar 17:16-26.

This is what Korah^h did not understand when he protested Aharon's appointment. The Jewish people are not, in fact, all holy. We are a difficult nation, a nation that stumbles and sins. A leader who denies this, who instead pretends that we are entirely holy, does the Jewish people no favors.

What is different about Aharon—what makes him worthy of being Kohen Gadol—is that knowing all of our flaws, he still loves us: more than his own life, and, when we are in danger, even more than God's commands.

Leaders who tell us attractive lies about who we are the most dangerous kind of false friends. By convincing us that our flaws are not flaws, that we are already blameless, they make it impossible for us to actually engage in the work of holiness. Korah's claim is poison, not only because it is wrong, but because it makes it impossible for us to actually become the holy people he claims we already are.

We are the nation that Aharon knows us to be: we defy, we complain, and we sin.

But day after day, we strive to be worthy of God's election.

And perhaps it is in that striving, more than any pretended perfection, that we truly become an *am kadosh*.

