

Korah - The Flowering of Aaron's Staff
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 20, 2026 5 Tammuz 5786

One afternoon, when Naftali went out to check on his beloved Sus, he saw that Sus was dead. Naftali couldn't hold back his tears. Sus had been part of his life. Naftali dug a grave for Sus not far from the old oak where Sus had died, and he buried him there. As a marker over the grave, he thrust into the ground the whip that he had never used. Its handle was made of oak. Oddly enough, several weeks later Naftali noticed that the whip had turned into a sapling...and it began to sprout leaves. A tree grew over Sus...In time young branches grew out of the tree and birds sang upon them and built their nests there. Naftali could hardly bring himself to believe that this old dried out stick had possessed enough life within it to grow and blossom. Naftali considered it a miracle...

From Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Naftali the Storyteller and His Horse Sus*.

When Singer wrote that beloved children's story, he was borrowing a folklore motif - the **dry-rod-that-blossoms**.¹ That motif is at the center of an important story in Parashat Korah: the validation of Aaron as High Priest. Now that the rebellion was over; now that the earth swallowed the rebels; now that the fire that consumed them was out; now that the deadly plague had subsided,² there was a need for calm. All of Israel's tempestuous complaints against its leadership - specifically the choice of Aaron as High Priest - were to be put to rest. To do so, God would enact a stunning miracle. He tells Moses to take the staffs of all the tribal chieftains:

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. דבר אל בני ישראל וקח מאתם מטה מטה מטה לבית אב מאת כל נשיאיהם לבית אבתם שנים עשר מטות איש את שמו תכתב על מטהו. ואת שם אהרן תכתב על מטה לוי כי מטה אהד לראש בית אבותם. והנחתם באהל לפני העדות אשר אנועד לכם שמה. והיה האיש אשר אבחר בו מטהו יפרח והשפתי מעלי את תלנות בני ישראל אשר הם מלינים עליכם. (במ' 17:16-20)

Now God spoke to Moses, saying: **Speak to the Children of Israel, take from them a staff, a staff [each] per Fathers' House from all their leaders, for their Father's House: twelve staffs, each-man—his name you are to write upon the staffs. And the name of Aaron you are to write upon the staff of Levi, indeed, one staff for [each] head of their Fathers' House. You are to put them in the Tent of Appointment, before the Testimony, where I appoint-meeting with you. Now it shall be: the man whom I choose, his staff will sprout; thus will I pacify from upon me the complaints of the Children of Israel that they set complaining against you.** (Num. 17:16-20)

But here is how the story unfolds. Moses does things slightly different from what God instructed:

וידבר משה אל בני ישראל ויקחו אליו כל נשיאיהם מטה לנשיא אחד מטה לנשיא אחד לבית אב אחד לבית אבתם שנים עשר מטות ומטה אהרן בתוך מטותם. וינח משה את המטות לפני ה' באהל העדות. ויהי ממחרת ויבא משה אל אהל העדות והנה פרח מטה אהרן לבית לוי ויצא פרח ויצא ציץ ויצא ציץ ויצא ציץ ויצא מטה את כל המטות מלפני ה' אל כל בני ישראל ויראו ויקחו איש מטהו. (במ' 17:16-20)

Moses spoke to the Children of Israel, and they gave him, all the leaders, a staff per [each] one leader, a staff per [each] one leader, for their Fathers' House, twelve staffs, among these staffs was that of Aaron. Moses de-posed the staffs before God, in the Tent of the Pact. The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds. Moses then brought out all the staffs from before God to all the Children of Israel; they saw [them], and each-man took his staff. (Num. 17:21-24)

When we compare what God instructed Moses with what happened, we discover another story:

WHAT GOD SAID	WHAT MOSES DID
God tells Moses to take the staffs from each tribal chieftains. וקח מאתם .	The tribal chieftains give their staffs to Moses. וינתנו אליו .
God refers to the staffs as: staffs per Father's House (=tribes) מטה מטה לבית אב meaning, that each staff is the property of each tribe.	Moses refers to each of the staffs as: the staff of the tribal leader . מטה לנשיא אחד מטה לנשיא אחד לבית אבתם Each staff is property of each tribal leader.
God tells Moses to inscribe their names on the staffs.	This detail is omitted. Did Moses inscribe the names? If not, why not?
Moses was to place the staffs: inside the Tent of Meeting והנחתם באהל מועד before the Testimony- לפני העדות	Moses laid out the staffs before God . וינח משה את המטות - לפני ה' in the Tent of Testimony- באהל העדות
The person whose staff sprouted was the one elected by God.	The staff of Aaron brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms and bore almonds .
...thus, will I pacify from upon me the complaints of the of the Children of Israel that they set complaining against you.	Moses then brought out all the staffs from before God to all the Children of Israel; they saw [them], and each-man took his staff.

What we have here is a formal ceremony for the validation of Aaron. Nu, do the tribal chieftains really believe that they have an equal chance to be High Priest? Really? After witnessing the earth swallowing up the Korahite rebels vindicating Moses and Aaron, and then the terrible plague which Aaron thwarted with his incense pan, did any of the tribal chieftains really think they had a chance of being elected? Everyone knew that Aaron's election was a **fait**

¹ In the Stith Thompson catalogue of folklore motifs, it is motif F971.

² Num. 16:32-33, 35, 17:11-14 respectively.

accomplis.³ God sets up the miracle, but Moses embellishes God's instructions. • *Moses validates the honor of each of the tribal chieftains by allowing them to hand over what they regard as their own personal staffs to him.* Moses already knows that Aaron will be selected, therefore, • *in order not to humiliate the other leaders, he conspicuously does not inscribe their names on their staffs.* By *placing* the staffs *before God* and not simply *inside the Tent*, • *Moses is giving them a measure of honor and conciliation.* The overnight⁴ flowering and ripening of the almonds • *ought to be seen as a moment of revelation⁵ that the tribal chieftains could share.* Not only did it validate Aaron, but it elicited awe in the other leaders, inviting them to rejoice in Aaron's election. • *The miracle honored them and elicited their admiration.*

At the end of this story, Moses brings out all of their staffs. Each chieftain identifies his own staff and takes it. This is a fitting conclusion to the event. Recall that Moses was instructed to *take* their tribal staffs, but instead, each of the leaders *gave* their staffs to him. In that small detail, they were able to maintain a measure of dignity. Likewise, at the end of the story, each one *took* his staff individually, without Moses standing over them and rubbing Aaron's election in their faces. In this small detail there is a symbolic restoration of the tribal order in the nation. God's intent in this ceremonial exercise was to pacify the Israelites and calm their enmity. By changing the ceremony in a few subtle ways, Moses allows the chieftains to maintain their honor. And that is how the communal tempest eventually subsides. Rabbi Eliezer said: *לֵת הַחֹדֶם חֲבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשֶׁלְּךָ* - *Let the honor of your friend be as dear to you as your own.* (Pirkei Avot 2:10) This is crucial for collegial cohesion. We could restate it in the form of a commandment: *An associate, thou shalt not humiliate.*



Moses is attuned to their honor and there are no more rebellions. To return to the central motif with which we began, the *dry-rod-that-blossoms*. Like all rich symbols, this

³ Compare the process of ratifying a US presidential election. Everyone knows the result way before the official vote of the Electoral College. But that ceremonial vote ratifies the election and validates the choice for the nation.

⁴ A remarkable time-lapse sequence in which there is no magical incantation, no spell or flourish. The staffs are simply left *(not planted, by the way, contrary to Bashevis Singer, and the way that they are commonly depicted in illustrations of this story)*. Night means the staffs are off-limits to human contact. The flowering of the staff is a micro-creation. Like the refrain of the Creation story, which echoes ever so slightly here, everyone wakes up to a new reality: *בָּקֵר וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֵר* - *there was evening (just ordinary wooden staffs) and there was morning (an incredible sprouted almond branch)*.

⁵ Guess what? It takes an almond tree approximately 210 days to go from bud to flower to mature almond. 7 months. Is that a coincidence? I think not! The almond has a divine imprint on it because of the 7 months it takes for an almond to ripen! (Nice try REM!)

one has many different layers of meaning. • Some scholars identify this with an *ashera*⁶ - a stylized tree which was a cultic object, often banned, that was seen as a way to channel God's blessings. • Beyond its cultic function, *the flowering almond is a perfect antithesis to the spasmodic violence of the rebellion narrative.* What can be more



pacifying than a flower? What can be more conducive to tranquility than imagining its beauty and fragrance? What is more diametrically opposite to violence than beauty? • Flowers and fruits symbolize calm.⁷ • The almond tree is the first to blossom in the land of Israel and because of that it symbolizes vigilance, eagerness, hope and renewal. • The rapid growth mentioned above demonstrates God's generative power. We have seen God's destructive power emanate from the Tent of Meeting. Now we are seeing God's generative power from the same zone. • Aaron's authority is not symbolized here by a stick, a symbol of power, but by beauty, an attribute of God's creation. • The blossoming of the staff - a piece of dead wood - symbolizes the victory of life over death, one of the key themes in the ritual

drama of the Sanctuary. • In the political realm, rebellion is the ultimate manifestation of social chaos - *Tohu va-vohu*. As an antidote, God creates. He gives life to a dead piece of wood. Indeed, the rabbis link the staff directly to creation - order over chaos - when they claim that the miraculous staff was one of the ten things God created on the eve of Shabbat at twilight.⁸ • And lastly, it will become a sign to rebels. Presumably, when they see it, they will reflect on a compassionate God who has given them an opportunity to still their disquiet and discontent, bless them, sustain them and give them life. Could it be that this spellbinding staff is also a symbol of God's love? Perhaps indeed!

Shabbat Shalom!

This parasha sheet is sponsored by
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Yahrzeit of Stuart's mother Selma Feinblatt, z"l

⁶ See Raanan Reichler, *Aaron's Flowering Staff: A Priestly Ashera?* at www.thetorah.com/article/aarons-flowering-staff-a-priestly-asherah.

⁷ *If war has an opposite gardens might sometimes be it and people have found a particular kind of peace in forests, meadows, parks and gardens.* Rebecca Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*.

Interestingly, almonds are helpful in reducing stress. A poultice made from almond flowers soothes irritated skins and acts as an anti-inflammatory salve. A nice thought but probably a stretch. Was this part of folk-medicine in antiquity? Go know. But it is consistent with the theme.

⁸ Avot 5:6: *Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff, [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs.* (Admittedly, we can debate whether it was Moses' or Aaron's staff).