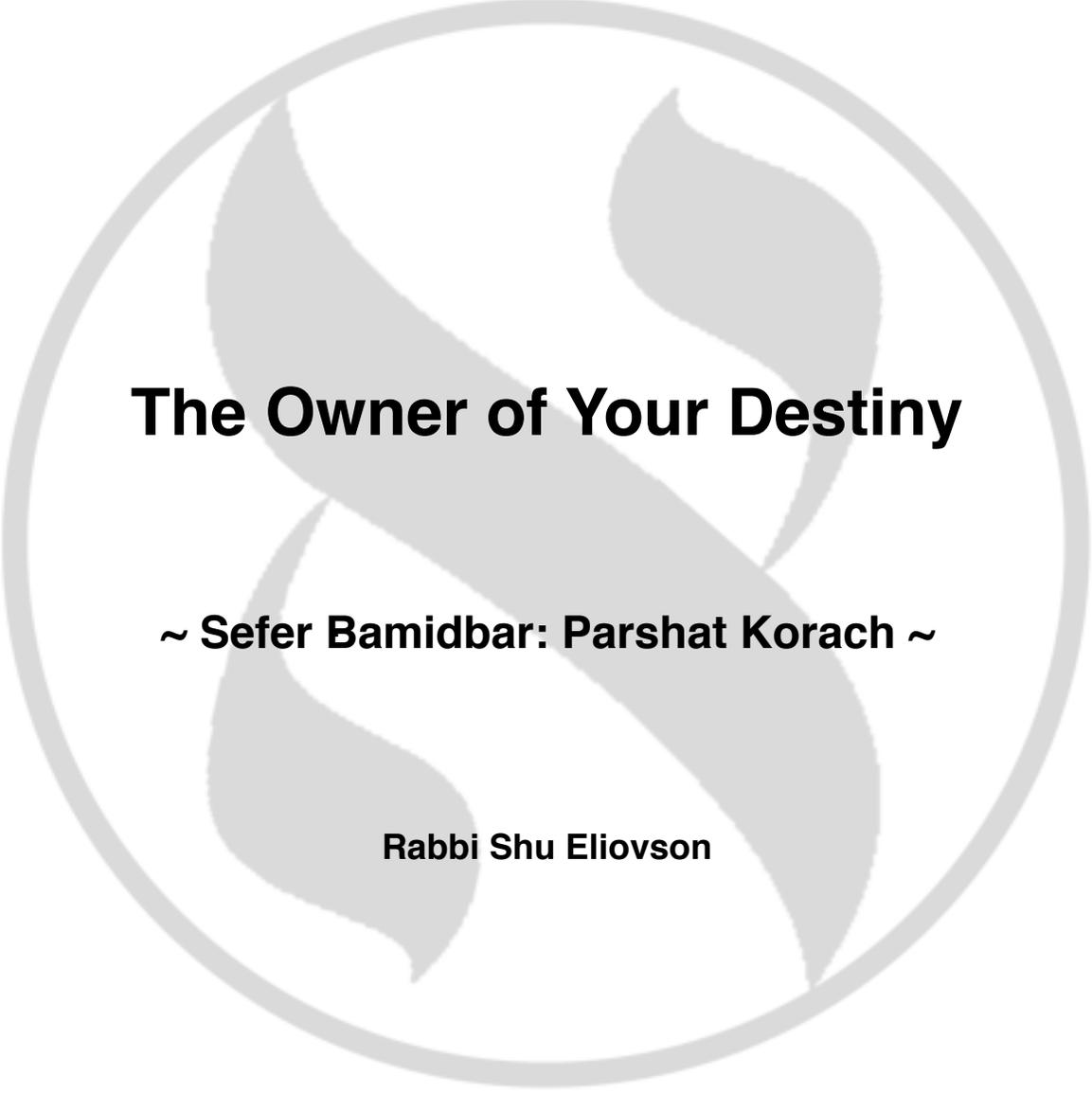


**שיחות מעיני הישועה**  
**ספר במדבר**



**The Owner of Your Destiny**

**~ Sefer Bamidbar: Parshat Korach ~**

**Rabbi Shu Eliovson**

*Transcribed from audio by Josh Fleet*

There's a bunch of weird things in this week's Torah portion.

One, it's just this weird full circle thing we go through here, where it starts out with everyone being really angry that they can't all be priests. They all wind up saying, "Why does only Aaron get to be the priest, and Moses gets to be the leader. Everybody's holy, and there shouldn't be any separation." And it wraps up with everyone being really afraid of being priests, and kind of pulling back, saying, "Oh, this is too intense. We'd really prefer that you guys be the priests because this is a little overwhelming and it's freaking us out."

So I guess you could call it catharsis. But it seems so crazy how they go through all this ordeal only to end up right back where they started. It's kind of like, well, I hate to say I told you so — but I told you so. We could have really avoided all that if you just hadn't freaked out to begin with.

The other thing that's really strange here is Moshe's reaction. He seems to get bent out of shape about all the weirdest things.

Korach comes, and he organizes a whole bunch of leaders of the nation of Israel. And they come and they say to Moses and Aaron, they say, "You've gone too far!" They say, "We're all leaders, and we should all be allowed to be priests! And everybody here is holy! You set yourselves apart, and you grabbed the reins of leadership..."

And with this, Moshe's very calm. He says, "OK." He says, "Listen, you're complaining against us, but we didn't appoint ourselves. This was G-d's decision, and the situation is as it is. G-d decides who does what. We're all officers in the same army, and you actually have a very prestigious rank. You're members of the Levites, and that really ought to be enough for you." Moshe's cool about this. It says that he falls on his face, so he shows a real level of humbleness. And he says, "Listen. What we'll do tomorrow is we'll all bring some incense pans, we'll all bring an incense offering, and we'll let G-d show who's chosen. You think you're appropriate to serve and you're saying that Aaron and I have grabbed the reins and muscled our way in — that it's a control thing. So let's see. We'll all bring incense offerings, and we'll see: Whoever's incense offering G-d chooses, then we will know, we've clarified this, and this is G-d's choice. Nobody's muscling in or trying to do anything to grab power."

Moshe's taking it in stride.

It is what it is.

Let's see what it is.

And then he calls Datan and Aviram to come. They're part of this rebellion. And they refuse to come. And now they seem to attack Moshe on, well, at first it seems on the same thing. They say, "Isn't it enough that you brought us out of the Land of Egypt, which was a land flowing with milk and honey..." (so apparently they really loved it in Egypt) "...just to kill in the desert?! What right do you have to set yourself above us?! You didn't bring us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or give us inheritance of fields and vineyards! If you think you can pull the wool over our eyes your crazy! We're

not coming!” So here they’re going on and on: Now you’re trying to set yourself above us, and you took us out, apparently, to be on a power trip...

And all of a sudden, Moshe freaks out! And he does something which seems really really dirty, too. He set up a loaded contest! He says, “Listen: We’re gonna do this trial with the incense pans and we’ll see who G-d chooses.” And now he uses his inside track with G-d, and he says to G-d, it says that he gets really angry and he says to G-d: “When they bring their offerings tomorrow, ignore them! Don’t judge us objectively. Just so you know, I set up this little contest, but you’re picking me, right? You know that, right? You’re not picking those guys. Let’s not pretend for a second this is meant to be a fair contest.” And Moses goes on to G-d, he says the weirdest thing. He says, “And I never even stole a single donkey from them! I never did anything wrong to them...”

So...

Number 1: I’m not really sure where the whole donkey thing came in. That just seems to be a complete non sequitur.

Number 2: Who’s Moshe trying to rope into a fixed contest here? He seems to be loading the contest in a very unfair way, using his inside track with G-d.

Number 3: Who are you getting all defensive with, Moses? I think that G-d knows whether you stole people’s donkeys. So, not really sure what you’re telling G-d that G-d doesn’t already know. And it also seems strange because he’s reacting toward G-d and not towards the guys who are attacking his integrity. It’s not like he’s saying to his accusers, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never even took your donkeys.” Well, they didn’t say anything about taking donkeys. They said, “You’re ruling over us.” I guess maybe it had something to do with a donkey, I’m not really sure. But he’s not responding to them. He’s going behind their back to G-d. It’s really troubling.

OK, Moses: G-d knows. Maybe *they* don’t know. Maybe they have a distorted view of reality. But G-d doesn’t. So why are you arguing with G-d about this? And why are you fixing the contest? And why these weird references? It’s just strange.

So now they bring their offerings, and all of a sudden G-d comes and G-d says to Moshe and Aaron: “Separate yourselves from this whole community, and I’m gonna destroy them in an instant!”

And now, Moshe and Aaron fall on their faces and they pray and they say, “Look, G-d, don’t destroy everyone just because of some people’s mistakes. That wouldn’t be fair.”

Wait a minute. First, you call for a contest. Then, you fix the contest, you taint the results, make a private deal with the Judge. Then, when the Judge takes your side, all of a sudden you’re acting like, “No! G-d! Don’t be so harsh! Please have mercy...”

G-d's got to be looking at Moshe now, like, "Dude, seriously?! Just make up your mind what you want to do here. I've got your back. But you're starting to make me a little bit crazy here! *"Let's make it peaceful. Let's make a side deal. Oh, don't be so mean, G-d."* Really, really confusing. Moshe's going back and forth, back and forth.

And then God says, "OK, well then, tell everyone else to move away from Korah, Datan and Aviram."

So Moshe and the Elders of Israel, they tell everyone, "Get away from these evil people so you won't get swept away because of their sins."

So everyone moves away, and Datan and Aviram stand outside very defiantly with their wives and their children and even their babies, and they're being very defiant standing there by, whatever appears to be, their own little temple that they've created.

And then Moshe says—and this is where it gets strange again—he just prayed on their behalf to intercede. So G-d says, "Alright, we'll separate the bad from the good. We'll separate the people from the real rabble-rousers here, and I'll just take care of the rabble-rousers."

And now Moshe turns against Datan and Aviram and their families and Korach, and he conjures up this crazy thing. To the people he says, "Now you're gonna see that I never made any stuff up. That G-d sent me to do this, and I didn't choose any of this. It wasn't of my own making. It's all from G-d. And how will you know that? Because these people will die a very unnatural death. And that way you'll know it's from G-d." He says, "G-d's gonna do something totally new. He's gonna make the earth open up underneath them and swallow them and everything that's theirs. Alive. And then you will know that everything has come from G-d."

Well, exactly what Moshe says happens. The land opens up, swallows them alive.

Now, let's think. You're among the people, and you're looking at this guy Moshe, and he says, "I'm gonna prove to you that this has nothing to do with me and it's all G-d's choosing. And now I call upon heaven and earth that something completely supernatural will happen that you've never seen!! The ground will open and swallow them alive!!" And as he utters the words the ground opens up and swallows them alive.

You're the people standing there. Who do you think made that happen? Are you thinking, well, clearly that was an act of G-d? Or are you thinking: "Whoa, this dude, Moses, he's like really deadly dangerous! He saying, 'It's not me, it's G-d,' but he just conjured up a crazy spell right in front of us!! I'm not debating that it might be the power of G-d. But clearly Moses is the invoker of this power! This is scary business!!"

And sure enough, now the people freak out. They start running away screaming, and they're scared. And then the next day, they say to Moshe, they say, "You killed all those people! You killed all those people of G-d! All they wanted was to be servants of G-d, and you murdered them all!" Right?

And then all of a sudden G-d's glory comes down again in front of them, and this disease—this something—starts killing every body.

And Moshe says to Aaron, "Quick! Take an incense pan and get between the people who are dead and the people who are still alive. We have to stop this plague." And he does. But in the meantime, it happened so quickly, that almost 15,000 people died. Just like that.

And so now the people are freaked out again.

So let's think about this:

Moshe wanted to prove that all of this had nothing to do with him, right? So why didn't he just say *nothing*?? A more logical approach would have been for him to say, "Now we'll see who it is. I'm gonna stand here on the side. Let's see what happens here with Korach and these people, and how God reacts when they bring their offerings. That was the deal. That was what was supposed to be. And now G-d said separate, so let's separate. Fine. We'll now step aside and separate from the people who brought these incense offerings and their followers..."

Right? Moshe should have just stood on the side and said, "Look. Now you can see. We all brought our offerings, and now, as we said, it's up to G-d." And then Moshe should have just let G-d do His thing. If G-d wants to swallow people alive, He'll swallow them alive. If G-d feels it's enough to just not accept their offering, then He won't accept their offering.

But Moshe has to go and call for some supernatural wonder, which then takes place! So what did he do? He just kind of muddied the waters all over again. And you're just looking at Moshe and you're saying, 'What is going on with you, man? What are you doing here? If the people are confused, it's not hard to imagine why! Because you seem so discombobulated! You don't seem to know which way you want to go...'

And so now here we are and the people now are completely terrified of Moshe. They don't know what's going on. So they take all the incense pans that Korach and his people used, and they make it into some covering that they put inside on the altar so that they can always remember that nobody who's not invited should ever come to the Temple. But they were really really freaked out. And they say to Moses, "You just killed all these peoples, and all they wanted to do was serve G-d."

So then we have the plague, and then, G-d says to Moshe: "So, listen. I've got an idea now. OK? We've done your ideas for a little bit. I've got an idea here. Why don't we just have the leader of each tribe take a staff. Each one. Take a walking staff. Take a stick. Take a rod. Take a pole. Whatever it is. And I want each one to take it, and I want them to write the name of the leader of each tribe. And

Aaron will be on the staff of Levi, etc. And put all the staffs inside the Temple, inside the *Ohel Moed*, right in front of the Holy Ark, which holds the Ten Commandments.”

And so G-d says, “And the one whom I choose, his staff is going to blossom. Even though it’s just a detached piece of wood, it’s gonna blossom. And now, everyone will know.”

So they do this, and they come out, and sure enough, Aaron’s staff, representing the Levites, it’s blossomed. And not only does it have leaves, but it’s actually got almonds ripening on it. It’s bearing fruit. And so now the people saw it, and each took their staff. And so, then the people are like, “Listen, OK. Fine. We get it. You’re chosen, but bottom line is: This has all been a little bit too crazy, a little bit too nuts, and we’re still not really sure what happened here. Bottom line is, Moshe: We don’t want to be anywhere near the Temple, the power, the priesthood. One thing you’ve certainly done is you’ve scared the patooties out of us!”

And then we get into seeing the duties of the Levites—the Kohanim and the Levi’im—and then we go on to the end of the Torah portion.

And you look at this Torah portion and you’re like: Whoa. Crazy drama. So much insanity. What was going on here? What was Moshe thinking? And the things he reacts to. So they come and they say, “You’re not the rightful priest, and we’re the priests.” He’s like, “Oh, OK. It’s chill. It’s all good. We can figure it out. Let’s all just bring a little bit of incense. We’ll all bring some nice-smelling yumminess, and G-d will choose who He’ll choose.” They’re making a play for the ‘throne’, and Moshe is totally cool.

But then Datan and Aviram say, “You took us out of a really nice land. You just wanted to be in charge. And you didn’t bring us into a nice land.” And then Moshe starts freaking out. It’s like, wait a minute, this is what gets you upset, Moshe?? These guys aren’t trying to get your power, like Korach’s crew. They’re just being nasty. They’re just being obnoxious jerks. They’re sitting there and they’re going on and on and on and *that* is what sets Moshe off??

The first ones want the priesthood. They’re trying to muscle in, grab the spiritual reins, a designated role from G-d. Moshe’s response: “Well, we’ll see. OK, we’ll figure it out.”

And the second guys are like, “You know, Moshe, you’re a jerk. Yeah! And it was better in Egypt. And you didn’t really bring us anywhere anyway.” And Moshe’s like: “Whoa! Hey! It’s not true! Everything they said isn’t true! I didn’t do anything against them!” He cries to G-d, “Don’t listen, don’t listen!! I didn’t do anything! I never stole their donkey!”

*That’s what gets Moshe upset?!?*

And then again, G-d’s coming down on everybody, and Moshe and Aaron are like, “No, no! Stop stop stop!” And then G-d stops. But then they say, “But Korach and his family... Let’s bring down the

supernatural doom upon them!” And then again the people complain. And then another plague. And then Moshe and Aaron again with, “No—stop stop stop!”

And then, flowers growing from walking sticks...

What. Does it. All. Mean?

What are we meant to learn from all of this? What does it teach us?

First of all, there is a simple layer here. Simple deep, but on the simplest level, one thing you have to look at is just relationships are complicated. We're sitting here. We're going into our 40 years, right? The whole thing with the spies has happened. People are looking at a long relationship. Now we're married. Until now, we were dating. Maybe the marriage was gonna be moving to Israel. Maybe the marriage was gonna be in the wilderness. But we're married now. We're in a long-term relationship. This is it now. Whatever came after that moment of almost entering Israel—now we're here. You're dating... I don't know... But one big thing that changes after you get married is, suddenly, it's not OK to be living in your parents home anymore. This is it. You're in your own home. This is *your* reality. This is *your* future.

So now we're married. And guess what: When you get married, the fighting starts. People who've lived together for a long time and then they get married—they don't know why it gets harder. The only reason it gets harder is because the commitment is much more intense. When you're living together and you want to go off with your friends for a few weeks on a hike or traveling around the world, you just tell your partner, “Yeah, I'm gonna be going off with my buddies...” Or, “...my girlfriends...” And that's that. When you're married, you don't pull stuff like that. It's got to be a decision together. There's something that's unique to marriage that not even living together has, where that commitment—that decision to live a life together, to make a decision to run toward infinity together forever—it changes the dynamic in a real way. And one of the first things that you teach a bride and groom, one of the first lessons, when you learn with them, is you teach them that the first year—really the first several years—but especially the first year, you're gonna fight like crazy. And it's not an “if.” It's a “when.” You're going to fight like crazy. And they are going to be big fights. And every time you fight, you're gonna feel like it's all over. And you're gonna be like, “Oh my gosh...”

But the most important thing to know is that it's normal. Because big fights are hard enough when you know they're normal. But if you don't think they're normal, you're gonna think something's wrong and you're gonna abandon, G-d forbid, the relationship. But if you know it's normal, alright.

So the first thing you're seeing here, more than anything, is just the intensity of committing to a forever relationship. We're past the dating stage. We're on the other side now. We're looking at 40 years together. A lifetime together really, because 40 years until they're gonna pass away and the next generation will have emerged. And so it's time, it's time to move forward. And in that first year, there's

a lot of uncertainty, there's a lot of insecurity, there's a lot of trying to find your way. And it's hard and it's rough. But you gotta keep going. Don't give up.

So the first level is just to realize the tumultuousness here and understand that if you've got a relationship and you decide to get married and you decide to build a life together, and even in your friendships, relationships can be tumultuous.

Rule No. 1 is: Don't give up on them.

Don't give up on them.

But now, obviously, this is a little bit different because most of us aren't invoking heaven and earth and making the earth swallow up from underneath each other and having to ward off divine plagues that are striking down 15,000 people at a time. So, obviously, the analogy only goes so far.

But let's get down now to the deeper depths: What's going on here with Moshe?

Moshe's no simple dude. He is a pretty powerful leader, and he has seen a lot and he has been through a lot—in his own personal lifetime before he ever became the leader of the Nation of Israel and as the leader of the Nation of Israel. So we have to first just say that it's not for nothing. If Moshe is chill over here and freaking out over there, there's something profoundly different going on, and we've got to look for it.

And maybe if we look for that, we can get the key to the whole puzzle and understand what this all was really about.

And here's what it is all really about. It's about one of the deepest truths in the world. Something we've talked about before. It's about the fact that life answers you in your own journey. It's about understanding that the results you experience in life from life itself are a reflection of you. That there is a story, that there is a rhythm, that there is a song, and that good choices produce good results. And bad choices produce bad results. Good choices, good consequences. Bad choices, bad consequences. And I'm not talking about the idea of struggles and that not everything you want is going to work. I'm talking about a much a deeper level—on the level where you're really feeling the Vibration of Life. So these things are hard, but you know that your doing what you need to be doing. That's OK. We're talking about that feeling sometimes where you just feel like everything is going wrong. Or sometimes you feel like everything is going right. That's what's really going on here.

Let's take a closer look: When Korach comes and says, "Why are you priests? Why can't we be priests, too? Why not us?" Moshe says, "Alright, you aspire for a greater level of spirituality? I can dig that. I'm not in your way." So he bows down. He says, "I'm not in the way of any person reaching for higher levels of spirituality. That's a beautiful thing. So let's come tomorrow. Let's all bring incense pans. Let's see. Let's let G-d choose. I'm telling you, I can tell you right now, that I think you're

overstepping. I can tell you, as Moshe Rabeinu, as your teacher, I can tell you that I think that G-d has already given you a very meaningful role and if you're looking for meaning, look into the role you've been given. There's a lot to draw out of the space you're already in, and I don't think you've tapped that to it's fullest. I can tell you that I think that the way to get to a richer level in life is to maximize the space you are in and see what blossoms..."

Which is our final symbol: Take your staffs and see what blossoms. You don't have to go far to find greatness. Greatness is what happens when you maximize the moment and the space you're in.

I had this friend and his father was a great, great leader during the birth of the State of Israel—from coming out of World War II until the birth of the State of Israel—did incredible things: rescued thousands, tens of thousands of people from the Holocaust, helped create the foundations of the State of Israel. Unsung hero. Not in the history books. He did incredible things. But his family knows. And his son was a computer programmer for a company in New York, and he could never feel good about himself. And little by little, he self-destructed his own life. And one day I said to him, "What's going on?" And we started talking, and I finally looked at him and said, "You know what the problem is? You have as great a spirit as your father. You truly do. But history has not afforded you the opportunity to be as great a hero as he was. But you can only imagine yourself doing such great and grand things. And everything else to you feels so inadequate, so empty, so meaningless relative to the things that your father did for the world. And you have the same spirit, and it's making you crazy, and it's destroying your life."

And he looked at me for a long few minutes, and he said, "You're right. You're right." He said, "What do I do, then? And what did I do?"

I looked at him and I said, "Even greater than being an awesome spirit doing awesome things, it is an even larger achievement to be an awesome spirit and to accept that you're only called upon to do humble things. Little things. Simple things." I said, "To be a hero doing heroic things, that comes natural, that's easy, for certain people. But to be a hero having to live an everyday life, going to work, supporting your wife, feeding your children, playing hide-and-seek with them, tickling them, laughing, going to the movies—that requires you to be giant."

The heartbreak of the story is: He's never been able to find happiness. He's never been able to channel his spirit into his *Daled Amot*, his six-feet of self, that half a circle before you which is you in the moment.

So what Moshe was saying in the beginning to Korach and the leaders of Israel who were rebelling with him was: Look, your spirit is yearning for more? I'm the last person to get in your way. So he falls down. He says. Let's bring incense pans. We'll see what happens. Let's see. But I can tell you as a teacher, you are making a mistake, because the way for you to find greatness in your lives is not by looking at what the other guy's doing and coveting bigger roles. It's being big in your roles. Being big in the space you are right now.

But then comes Datan and Aviram, and he calls them. And here's the thing. You gotta look at that answer—"I didn't even take a donkey from them"—because what did they say? They said, "You took us out of a wonderful place." And the point here is not that they then said, "And now you think you're in charge of us, and you never brought us to this beautiful land. You never gave us our vineyards. You never brought us our farmlands." And that's the poison that sets Moshe off. Because this isn't people aspiring for more now. This is people blaming other people for what they don't have. They're blaming Moshe saying, "Our life sucks now. Our life is for crap. We were once living large, and now we're living small, and you never brought us this and you never gave us that and YOU never did this and we don't have all this and it's all your fault."

And Moshe's saying to G-d: "This is where I call upon you." Because this is a deeper spiritual illness. Because the point here is "I never stopped them from getting anywhere. Did I take away their donkey? Did I stop them from going into Israel?" The message of the donkey is: "I never was the force preventing them from moving forward in their lives. I didn't stop them from plowing their fields. They want a field, they can go plow a field. We're gonna be here for the next 40 years. They want to live in a beautiful land, let them do something to go make it beautiful."

This isn't the same as Korach and the previous complaint. They were saying, "We want to do more."

And Moshe's saying, "I'm the last guy to get in your way. Doesn't mean you're called upon for more. But you can reach." There's nothing wrong with reaching, but just be ready for the answer. Be ready for "No." Just because you think you're meant for greatness, doesn't mean you'll be called upon for it. Be ready for "No." That's all he says there. Go ahead and reach, but be ready for "No."

But Datan and Aviram aren't trying to do anything. They're not even leaving their tent. They are refusing to even come to the incense offering. They're blaming Moshe for their crappy little lives.

And Moshe is saying, "Did somebody take away your donkey? Did someone take away your plow?"

And so for that he says to Hashem: "These guys, even if they come, don't give them." Moshe's saying, "These guys, I need to teach them." So, he's saying to Hashem: "I need to draw a separation here when we do this contest. People are reaching, that's between you and them. But these guys? I'm taking this on. These guys have got to learn something. They've got to learn not to blame other people for their problems."

This is a human lesson. This is "*Lo bashamayim hee*." This is not a lesson between heaven and earth, about who are the priests and who are meant to be the spiritual leaders. This is about people who sit in a society and blame everyone else for their problems, but they don't get up and do something themselves. This we're gonna solve here.

So now the people come and G-d is ready to strike down at everybody. And Moshe says again to G-d, he says, "No, listen. The lesson here that I want to draw out for the people is that there's nothing wrong with reaching, but that ultimately people are responsible. The Datan and Aviram thing is complicated here. It's a complicated lesson. The lesson here has got to be that we are responsible for our own destiny. We don't get to blame others. So my intention with these people who are bringing the incense offerings was just that they bring an incense offering. But if you're ready to come down and strike down and this and that, we have to separate the people who are leading the rebellion from the people who are following the rebellion. They can't be in the same boat."

So G-d says, "OK." Because Moshe's message now has become: We control our destiny.

And so he says to the people, "Look, these people are going to die now, which G-d has indicated. It was almost all of you a second ago. I want you to notice something. The death will be unnatural. How do I know this? Because they've taken an unnatural pathway in life. They've turned away from their potential. They have failed to fulfill the space they are in. They have warped their path. And to such a degree that the world is gonna come crashing. Things are gonna go horribly wrong. Horribly wrong."

And you say, what does that mean for us today? What's Moshe trying to teach us?

How many people do you see, when things go horribly wrong in their lives, has anyone here ever known somebody who suffers from alcoholism or addiction? Has anyone ever known someone who has an eating disorder? Has anyone ever known someone who's self-destructive in their relationships? Have we never met, even in ourselves, the ability to be blind to the fact that we are the cause of our own problems? And that what's between us and happiness is our own choices? Is our own willingness to admit and to confront that we may have certain habits? That our unwillingness to overcome them, to look them in the eye, to deal with them, to take ownership is everything between us and a greater, happier, more joyful self?

Because when we let certain kinds of habits take over our lives, when we let certain kinds of habits own us, the kind of harm they bring us...

In the beginning it's little lessons, but over time they carve holes under our feet. Over time, life literally swallows us alive. We just fall into a pit alive with everything around us and everyone around us, anyone who is attached to us, we pull in with us. We all, sadly, know people who are so unhappy that life literally swallows them. And we've all known that if we're close to those people to some degree, we get pulled into their hole with them at some times. The metaphor of what Moshe is saying will happen to these people—what happens to them in the warning that at a certain point you have to detach from people who've entered that kind of self-destructive cycle.

And it's interesting because Korach's children also fell in, but yet they come out. And on Rosh Hashanah, when we blow the shofar, which is this most powerful moment, literally when our soul lifts up from the pits ourselves, the Psalm we read is a Psalm by the sons of Korach. The children of

Korach wrote this beautiful song, and we read it at this moment of great awakening at Rosh Hashanah right before we blow the shofar.

Just because someone falls in the pit doesn't mean they won't hit bottom and come back out again. The question of who comes out of the pit is just if they find their bottom. But sometimes we have to hit a bottom before we're ready to start climbing back up, before we're ready to start climbing back up and we're ready to really break through and make some real changes in our life. And everybody's bottom is different. We can never imagine what it is for someone else.

Moshe's letting the people know: These people, they're going down. They're in trouble. They don't see how their habits, their greed, their looking at the other guy, their making themselves miserable by looking at what everyone else has rather than realizing that the joy has to be found in focusing on their own lives. He realizes that Datan and Aviram's disease and Korach's disease is the same disease. This isn't Korach wanting to be a priest when he says that he wants to be a priest. These are people who are miserable with their own lives and are looking for someone else to blame. And Moshe says: That's a pit. That's unnatural. That's when life gets unnatural. And that's something that we all can learn from.

So then, they take the incense pans and they make a covering on the altar because to bring an offering, we should never forget. Because there's a message here that I heard from Rabbi Shain in Tenafly. Why do we keep the incense pans? So Rabbi Shain brought down this teaching: Because it wasn't wrong to reach, and we want to remember that. There's nothing wrong with reaching. But we've got to reach in the right ways. It can't be about blaming. And the nature of putting it on the altar is that's where we're reaching higher in the best ways. Because an altar is not about blaming. An altar is about taking responsibility. So when we take these pans we connect them with the altar, saying, "There's nothing wrong with reaching. But we have to reach with a sense of responsibility, with a sense of ownership of our lives. Not with a blame and an unwillingness to accept that we are the owners of our own destiny."

But the people don't understand this. And they say, "You killed people of G-d." And the disease starts to kill them too. Because if you can't see the difference between the blamers and the strivers in life, that means you've got that destructive disease too.

Don't make excuses for people who make excuses.

It's a very deep thing. We're seeing the next layer now. There's the people who make excuses, and then there's the people who make excuses for the people who make excuses. You have, G-d forbid, the abusive husband. And then you've got the wife who makes excuses for him. We've got the addict, and then we've got the family. There's a term in all forms of addiction, called enablers. Enablers are the people who make excuses for the people who are making excuses. And that's a disease, too.

And so that's the next thing Moshe has to address here. We got rid of the people who were making excuses, and who were blaming everyone else. And now we have another problem, which is: There

are people who make excuses for those people, who can't see the difference between people who take responsibility and people who just cast blame. And so he sends Aaron to run with his incense pan in between them. Right? And this is the right kind of incense. This is the incense of reaching because the incense represents the idea of *re'ach nichoach*, a sweet fragrance. A fragrance that, as I walk into the room I go: \*inhales deeply\* "Mmmmm, smells like Shabbos in here. Something good is cooking. Mmmmm." What's that smell? Must be Thanksgiving. "I smell home cookin'. It's only Thanksgiving. It's only the river." Right?

So, *re'ach nichoach*, the sweet smell—it's a sign of things to come. And Moshe is showing them the idea of reaching, of bringing out the best. That's what Aaron's doing with the incense pan. He's drawing a line there. He's trying to stop this plague. No more blaming, only reaching.

No more blaming, only reaching.

And finally the people say to Moshe, "Look, we get it all. Be we're just too scared. This has all been too overwhelming."

So then, G-d says, "Let me get this message across to the people who don't understand now." And they take the staffs, and the staff has a message: Your life doesn't have to be big. You can take a simple walking stick...

It's like Rabbi Mandelcorn from Neve Tzion said, and I know we've said this before, but it fits so beautifully here so we're gonna say it again: A guy comes and says he has to drive a thousand miles but he can't see his hand in front of his face and he's so upset. His friend says, "What's the matter?" He says, "I have to drive a thousand miles tonight! It's so dark, I can't see my own hand in front of my face!" So his friend says to him, "So get in your car and turn on your lights, and then you'll be able to see the road in front of you!" The guy is so happy with this solution. So he gets in the car, and he turns on the car and the lights. But then he turns off the car, and he comes out. And now he's even more upset! So his friend says, "What's the matter now?" And the guy replies, "I told you I have to go a thousand miles, but those headlights only shine 12 feet. How am I gonna go a thousand miles if I can only see 12 feet!?" And so his friend replies, "Don't worry about it. Get back in your car and turn on your lights." He says, "If you just go the 12 feet you can see in front of you, and keep on doing that and only that, then you're gonna see that you can go a thousand miles."

What's the message? There's a deep teaching in Jewish spirituality that some people have forgotten. But we have what's called *Daled Amot* in front of us. And *Daled Amot* is actually 6 feet, and it extends like a half moon. It goes to your right and to your left, 6 feet out. It extends around you like a half circle. Imagine drawing a line to your right and your left out 6 feet, and straight ahead 6 feet, and imagine drawing a half moon that connects all three. That's your *Daled Amot*.

Now, the thing is: Those six feet are sacred space and you know that when someone is davening the silent meditation, when they're praying the silent meditation at synagogue, the Shemona Esrei, you're

not allowed to enter that half-moon radius. Forbidden. Because that's where the divine presence rests around that person. That is their divine space. And it stops with the line of our body. So it's not behind us. It's only to our right, left and that half moon ahead of us. That's our divine space. And the thing in life is that we have to learn to live in that divine space.

Sometimes we get weighed down with, like: How can I save the world? How can I fix everything?

And the answer is: G-d's not asking you to fix the world. G-d wants you to pay attention to what falls within that divine space.

You meet a poor person and they ask you for some help, they ask you for a little bit of money. You say, "I'd love to give this person a dollar, or five dollars. I'd love to. But how could I? I can't feed every poor person in New York. I can't feed every poor person at the Kotel, at the Western Wall."

The answer is: What you can do is go there and make sure the next time you go to the Western Wall you have a bunch of five shekel coins in your pocket. When you walk down in the middle of the street and you have a bunch of dollars, a bunch of fives, you don't have to give to everyone. Just give to the people who enter your *Daled Amot*, enter your divine space.

You know, I once did an experiment—briefly, but for many years working in New York—but it started as an experiment. I got my paycheck. I went and I deposited but I took out \$200 in five dollar bills. So I had all these fives in my pocket and see, from one paycheck to another, how many I'd go through. I didn't even go through 50 bucks worth of fives. I didn't go through 10 fives from one paycheck to another. You'd think that they would be gone.

But once we really start to pay attention, we realize G-d's not asking us to save the world. He's just asking us to fulfill our *Daled Amot*. He's not asking us to see a thousand miles. He's asking us to pay attention to what we see in our immediate six foot radius.

And that's the message of the branches, when they bring the branches: Just start walking. You don't have to be a big man. You don't have to be a prestigious man. Aaron, what's he doing? He's walking. And so his staff blossoms.

You want to see you staff blossom and bear fruit? You want to see the fruit of your journey? Look in your own *Daled Amot*. Stop worrying about everyone else.

So many people I know tell me—I was talking to somebody this past week—he was telling me about how there at this stage of life and they feel like they're behind the curve. At this stage they should be here and they should be there and they should be...

You gotta get out of that prison. There's no should. Do you think Rabbi Akiva was in a space like that? Forty years old, hadn't even started learning Torah. If he was like, "You know where I should have been

by now? Look at all the other Tanaim.” He never would of started. He would have gone to the Beit Midrash, felt like crap and never been able to learn a page of Gemara, a page of the Talmud. Rabbi Akiva comes back and when he came back seven years later he wasn’t being followed by all his students yet. Then he goes away for another seven years. He never could have done that if he would have been beating himself about where he should have been yesterday. He was in the now. He wasn’t blaming anyone. He was trying to figure out how to go forward. And that’s the key.

The first message in the parasha of Korach, the first message is when Moshe says, “I’m the last one to get in your way. There’s nothing wrong with reaching.”

Another part of that message was, “But don’t be afraid of ‘No.’” Don’t be afraid to find out that the real heroic thing for you to do is to be where you are right now. Be a student. Be a friend. Be a parent. Be a kid. Be you. Even if it’s simple. Even if it’s humble. Even if it’s modest.

When it’s time to be a hero, you’ll know. It will enter your *Daled Amot*. And until then, be at peace being you. Dayenu. It’s enough.

And so I give us all the biggest blessing: that we should be able to look in the mirror and be proud of the person looking back at us, and we should never for a moment imagine that there’s somebody else out there who’s keeping us from being all that we can be, and to believe that wherever we are right now, it’s where we’re meant to be, and that wherever we’re meant to be next that the answer to that lies in the moment, in the *Daled Amot*, in the divine space that’s before us right now.

