

# *Numbers*

## *Lesson #6*

### *Discipline in the Desert*

*“The only easy day was yesterday”*

*(15: 1 – 17: 28)*

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# Review

In Lesson #5 the march began. And so did the complaining.

Moses had counted on Hobab, his Midianite father-in-law who knows the wilderness terrain intimately, to lead the march, but Hobab refused and returned home. Within days, the people hated the bland, tasteless manna God provided, remembering the *“fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic”* (11: 5). Miriam and Aaron, Moses sister and brother, rebelled against him, saying: *“Is it through Moses alone that the Lord has spoken?”* (12: 2). The twelve scouts Moses sent into the land of Canaan returned with a negative report: the land is good, but its towns are fortified, and its people are like giants! As a result, the people rebelled and cried out, . . . *“If only we had died in the land of Egypt!”* and *“If only we would die here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land only to have us fall by the sword? Our wives and little ones will be taken as spoil. Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?”* (14: 2-4).

Having walked less than 30 miles of the 245-mile journey, the Israelites began singing the desert blues. It’s going to be a very long 39 years!

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# Preview

Rebellions escalate, and the punishments are severe. God states flatly:

*“Anyone who acts defiantly, whether a native or an alien, reviles the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. For having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, he must be cut off entirely and bear the punishment.”*

(15: 30-31)

After this statement Kohath and a group of Levites—Moses and Aaron’s tribe—lead a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, while Dathan and Abiram lead a rebellion of 250 community leaders against Moses and Aaron; as a result of the latter, Dathan and Abiram—and their entire families, *“their wives, their children, and their little ones”* (16: 27)—are swallowed alive by the earth: *“They went down alive to Sheol with all belonging to them; the earth closed over them, and they disappeared from the assembly”* (16: 33).

And this is only the beginning.

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After the series of rebellions in Lesson #5, the Lord reminds the Israelites to make the proper offerings at the proper times and in the proper ways. His commands apply equally to the Israelites and to any resident aliens living among them:

*“All the native born shall make these offerings in this way, whenever they present a sweet-smelling oblation to the Lord. Likewise, in any future generation, any alien residing with you or anyone else in your midst, who presents an oblation of pleasing aroma to the Lord, must do as you do. There is but one statue for you and for the resident alien, a perpetual statue throughout your generations. You and the resident alien will be alike before the Lord; you and the alien residing with you will have the same rule and the same application of it.”*

**(15: 13-16)**

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Furthermore, when the Israelites enter the land and produce crops from it, they shall *“offer the Lord a contribution . . . a round loaf from [their] first batch of dough”* (15: 19b-20a).

If the Israelites *inadvertently* fail to do this, they shall make the proper sin offering and burnt offering as a consequence.

*“[However] anyone who acts defiantly, whether a native or an alien, reviles the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. For having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, he must be cut off entirely and bear the punishment.”*

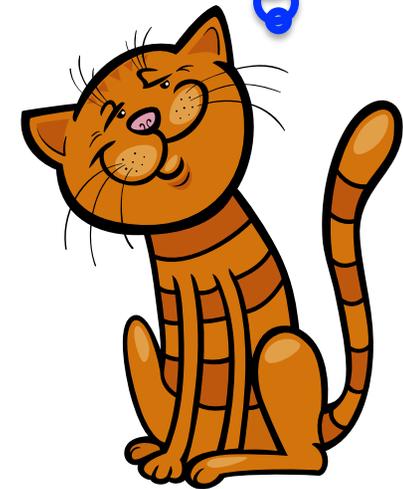
(15: 30-31)

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Recall the distinction between inadvertent sin and deliberate, “high-handed” sin in Leviticus 4-5. Deliberate sin, of course, is much more serious than inadvertent sin, which leads us into the story of the man who gathers wood on the Sabbath.

This story seems unfair to me!

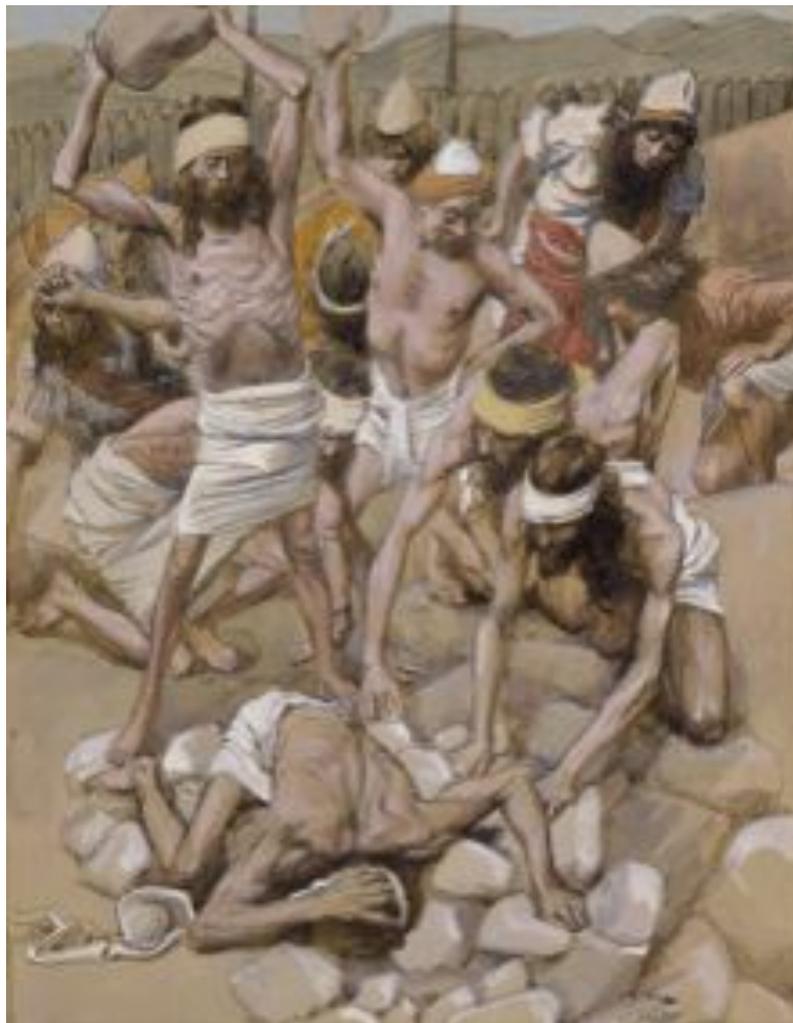


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“While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was discovered gathering wood on the sabbath day. Those who caught him at it brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole community. But they put him in custody, for there was no clear decision as to what should be done with him. Then the Lord said to Moses: This man shall be put to death; let the whole community stone him outside the camp. So the whole community led him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord had commanded Moses.”

(15: 32-36)

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**James Tissot. *The Sabbath-Breaker Stoned* (Watercolor), c. 1896-1902.  
The Jewish Museum, New York.**

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From one perspective, this is a very difficult call. The Israelites are not to work on the Sabbath, but is gathering wood “work”? And if it is, did the man gather wood inadvertently or deliberately?

I think he needed a good lawyer!



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**Yes, but from another perspective it is quite simple. If the man and any doubt whatsoever, he should have conferred with Moses or Aaron; barring that, he should have erred on the safe side and not gathered the wood at all, lest he break the Lord's law.**

**Stoning him may appear harsh, but it serves as a vivid lesson for others.**



I understand! Thus, the next section makes sense: wearing “tassels” on the four corners of one’s garments reminds people constantly of the Lord’s laws, lest anyone break them inadvertently.

I bet the tassels are fun to play with!

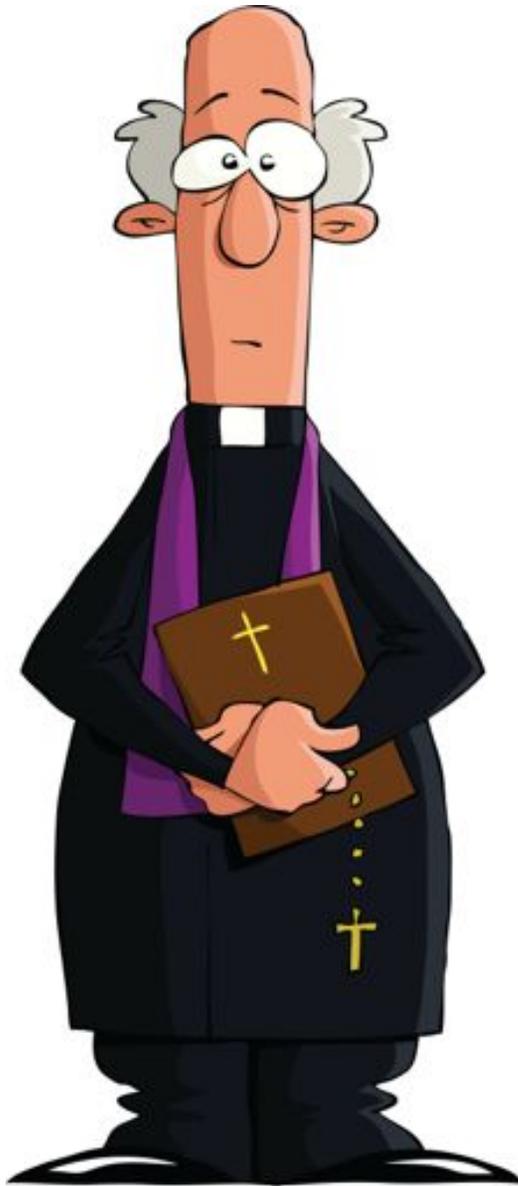


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**“The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites and tell them that throughout their generations they are to make tassels for the corners of their garments, fastening a violet cord to each corner. When you use these tassels, the sight of the cord will remind you of all the commandments of the Lord and you will do them, without prostituting yourself going after the desires of your hearts and your eyes. Thus you will remember to do all my commandments and you will be holy to your God.”**

**(15: 37-40)**

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The “tassels” are called *tzitzit* in Hebrew. As you may recall, Jesus wore them himself:

*“A woman suffering hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind [Jesus] and touched the tassel [kraspedon] on his cloak. She said to herself, ‘If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be healed.’”*

(Matthew 9: 20-21)

However, Jesus also criticized the scribes and Pharisees, those “hypocrites” who:

*“. . . tie up heavy burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels . . . [all for show].”*

(Matthew 23: 4-5)

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Today observant Jews tie the *tzitzit* to the four corners of their *tallit* (the prayer shawl) or their *tallit katan* (the everyday undergarment).



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**We have seen the rebellion escalate from:**

- 1. complaining about the food;**
- 2. to the jealousy of Miriam and Aaron,**
- 3. to the bad report from the scouts on the reconnaissance mission;**
- 4. to the people wanting to oust Moses and Aaron and return to Egypt;**
- 5. to the man stoned for gathering wood on the Sabbath.**

**The last was the straw that broke the camel's back. Korah, a Kohathite of the tribe of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben gather 250 community leaders in open rebellion against Moses and Aaron, confronting them directly.**

**“Korah, son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and the Reubenites Dathan and Abiram . . . took two hundred and fifty Israelites who were leaders in the community, members of the council and men of note, and confronted Moses. Holding an assembly against Moses and Aaron, they said, ‘You go too far! The whole community, all of them, are holy; the Lord is in their midst. Why then should you set yourselves over the Lord’s assembly?’”**

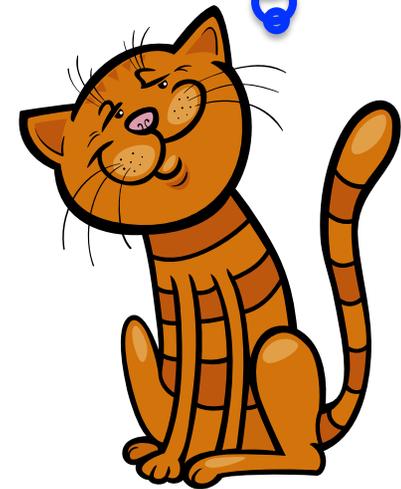
**(16: 1-3)**

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This is, indeed, open rebellion, not by a rag-tag mob, but by a Kohathite, one of Moses' own tribe, and two of the Reubenites, along with 250 community leaders and men of note. This is serious!

I wouldn't want to be Moses right now!



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“When Moses heard this, he fell prostrate. Then he said to Korah and to all his faction, ‘May the Lord make known tomorrow morning who belongs to him and who is the holy one and whom he will have draw near to him! The one whom he chooses, he will have draw near to him. Do this: take your censers, Korah and all his faction, and put fire in them and place incense in them before the Lord tomorrow. He whom the Lord then chooses is the holy ones. [No, it is] you Levites [who] go too far!’ Moses also said to Korah, ‘Hear, now, you Levites! Are you not satisfied that the God of Israel has singled you out from the community of Israel, to have you draw near him to maintain the Lord’s tabernacle, and to attend upon the community and to serve them? He has allowed you to approach him, and yet you seek the priesthood too[!]

(16: 4-10)

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**Remember that of the three clans of Levi—the Koathites, Gershonites and Merarites—the Kohathites are the ones who transport the holy items contained within the tabernacle.**

**Only Aaron and his sons are priests; the Kohathites, Gershonites and Merarites are not.**

**It seems that it's not enough to transport the holy items; the Kohathites want the priesthood, too.**

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**But when Moses summons Dathan and Abiram, they refuse to come to him!**

*“Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliah, but they answered, ‘We will not go. Are you not satisfied that you have brought us here from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us perish in the wilderness, that now you must also lord it over us? Far from bringing us to a land flowing with milk and honey, or giving us fields and vineyards for our inheritance, will you gouge out our eyes? No, we will not go.’”*

**(16: 12-14)**

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*“Moses [then] said to Korah, ‘You and all your faction shall appear before the Lord tomorrow —you and they and Aaron too. Then each of you take his own censer, put incense in it, and present it before the Lord, two hundred and fifty censers; and you and Aaron, each with his own censer, do the same.’ So each of them took their censers, and laying incense on the fire they had put in them, they took their stand by the entrance of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron. Then, when Korah had assembled all the community against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting, the glory of the Lord appeared to the entire community, and the Lord said to Moses and Aaron: ‘Stand apart from this community, that I may consume them at once.’”*

**(16: 16-21)**

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**Holy cow!  
God's going to  
kill 'em all!!**

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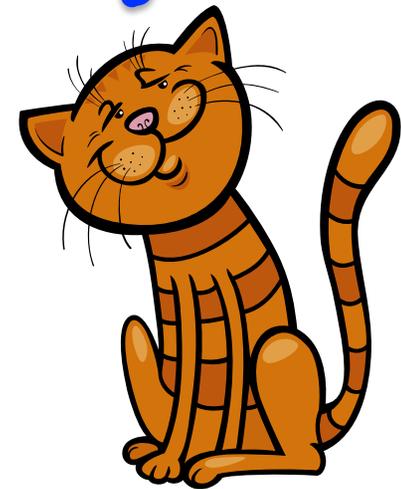
**Sandro Botticelli. *The Punishment of Korah and the Stoning of Moses and Aaron* (fresco, detail), 1481-1482. Sistine Chapel, Vatican.**

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But once again, Moses intervenes, as he did when Miriam appeared leprous.

I'd run away—  
fast!



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**“But they [Moses and Aaron] fell prostrate and exclaimed, ‘O God, God of the spirits of all living creatures, if one man sins will you be angry with the whole community?’”**

**(16: 22-22)**

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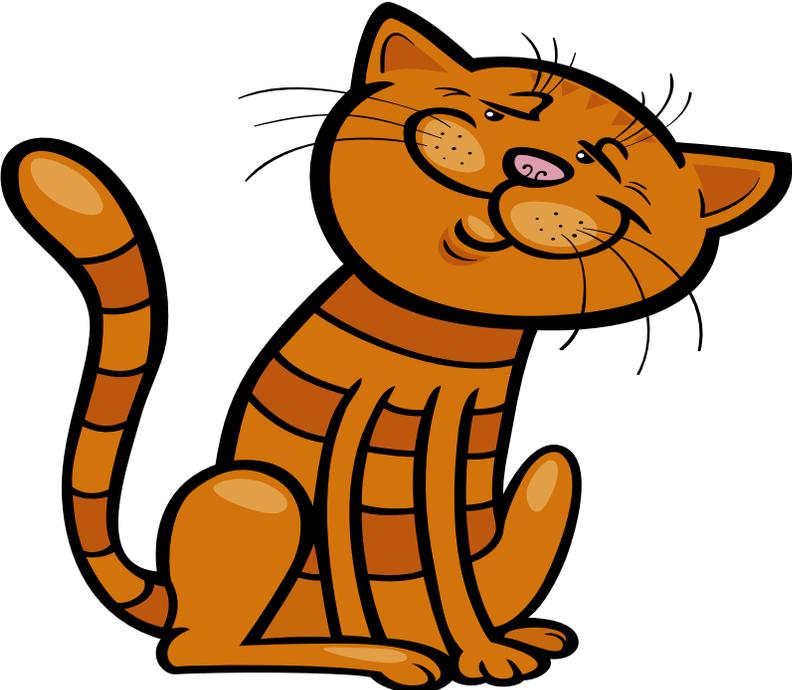
“The Lord answered Moses, ‘Speak to the community and tell them: Withdraw from the area around the tent of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’ Then he spoke to the community, ‘Move away from the tents of these wicked men and do not touch anything that is theirs: otherwise you too will be swept away because of all their sins.’ So they withdrew from the area around the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. When Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing at the entrance of their tents with their wives, their children, and their little ones, Moses said . . .

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“This is how you shall know that the Lord sent me to do all I have done, and that it was not of my own devising: if these die an ordinary death, merely suffering the fate common to all humans, the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord makes a chasm, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them with all belonging to them, and they go down alive to Sheol, then you will know that these men have spurned the Lord.”

(16: 28-30)

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I've got a really  
bad feeling about  
this!



Me, too!

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“No sooner had he finished saying all this than the ground beneath them split open, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their families and all of Korah’s people with all their possessions. They went down alive to Sheol with all belonging to them; the earth closed over them, and they disappeared from the assembly. But all the Israelites near them fled at their shrieks, saying, ‘The earth might swallow us too!’ And fire came forth which consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.”

(16: 28-30)

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**“Hell Mouth,” *Apocalypse* (illuminated manuscript, fol. 021r), c. 1250-1260.  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.**

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I've got a BIG ash pile this time!





**Well, that should solve the problem of the Kohathites wanting to be priests! In fact, we read:**

*“So taking the bronze censers which had been presented by those who were burned, Eleazar the priest had them hammered into a covering for the altar, just as the Lord had directed him through Moses. This was to be a reminder to the Israelites that no unauthorized person, no one who was not a descendant of Aaron, should draw near to offer incense before the Lord. lest he meet the fate of the Korah and his faction.”*

**(17: 4-5)**

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**“The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You have killed the people of the Lord.’ But while the community was assembling against them, Moses and Aaron turned toward the tent of meeting, and the cloud now covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared. Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the Lord said to Moses: Remove yourselves from this community, that I may consume them at once. But they fell prostrate.”**

**(16: 28-30)**

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**Yet again, Moses and  
Aaron intervene on  
behalf of the Israelites!**

**This is getting old.  
About now, I'd just  
stand back and  
watch!**



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“Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take your censer, put fire from the altar in it, lay incense on it, and bring it quickly to the community to make atonement for them; for wrath has come forth from the Lord and the plague has begun.’ Aaron took his censer just as Moses directed and ran in among the assembly, where the plague had already begun among the people. Then he offered the incense and made atonement for the people, while standing there between the living and the dead. And so the scourge was checked. There were fourteen thousand seven hundred dead from the scourge, in addition to those who died because of Korah.

(17: 11-14)

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**After the plague in which 14,700 additional people die, the Lord establishes once and for all who will function as intermediaries between God and the people.**

**One staff from each tribe is placed before the Lord, and in the morning Aaron's staff blossoms:**

***"The next day when Moses entered the tent of the covenant, Aaron's staff, representing the house of Levi, had sprouted. It had put forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne ripe almonds!"***

**(17: 23)**

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**Gerard Hoet. "Aaron's Rod Budding," *Figures de la Bible* (illustration), 1728.  
P. De Hondt, The Hague, Netherlands.**

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In Christian typography, Aaron's staff that blossomed is a type of the Incarnation of Christ and of the Virgin birth, as well as of life from death in the Resurrection.

Jewish legend holds that Aaron's staff was made from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that was in the garden of Eden.



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**“Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation,” *Book of Hours* (illuminated manuscript), c. 1500.  
The Morgan Library, New York.**

**This is a very nice illustration from a 16<sup>th</sup> century Book of Hours that originated in the Netherlands.**

**The enclosed garden with its watchtower, a symbol of virginity, contains the Virgin Mary in the center; a unicorn, a symbol of male procreation—in this case the Holy Spirit; and the angel Gabriel announcing Jesus’ incarnation, accompanied by two greyhounds, symbols of nobility, Jesus as “king of kings.”**

**Also in the garden is Gideon’s fleece, with the dew descending upon it, as the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary, and an altar with Aaron’s staff that blossomed, a type of the Annunciation.**

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**The Israelites still have not traveled more than 30 miles from Mt. Sinai. If you were among them at this point, what might you be thinking?**

***“Then the Israelites exclaimed to Moses, ‘We will perish; we are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who approaches the tabernacle of the Lord will die! Will there be no end to our perishing?’”***

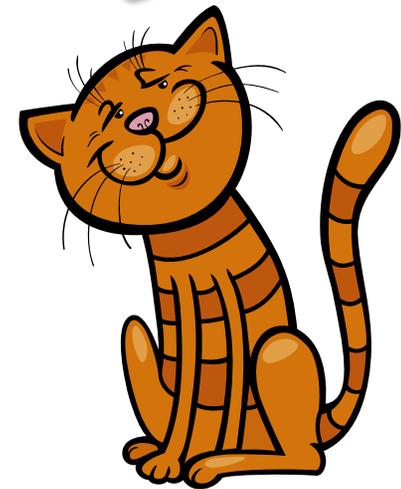
**(17: 27-28)**

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Not to be disrespectful, but  
the Israelites must feel like  
they are caught in a  
nightmare, helpless victims of  
a capricious and vengeful  
god, led by a madman.

It would seem  
that way!



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# Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. What is the difference between an inadvertent sin and a deliberate sin? Is there a parallel in the New Testament?**
- 2. Why did Kohath rebel against Moses and Aaron?**
- 3. Why did Dathan and Abiram rebel against Moses and Aaron?**
- 4. How does God punish those who took part in the rebellion?**
- 5. How does God confirm the legitimacy of the priesthood exclusively in the line of Aaron?**

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