

Parshas Korach

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1. The Immutability of Torah

The Torah tells us that Korach attempted to usurp Moshe's authority by claiming that the Torah was "the Torah of Moshe" and not "G-d's Word." The basis for his claim was that Moshe had no right to choose his brother Aaron as the High Priest. It was a demonstration of nepotism. Rashi cites the Midrash, which states that Moshe's grandfather *Kahas* had four sons – the eldest was Amram (the father of Moshe and Aaron), the second was Yitzhar (the father of Korach), and the fourth brother was Uziel (the father of Elitzafon). Based on the laws of inheritance, the Torah states that the *bechor* (first born) receives a double portion of the inheritance. Korach understood that Moshe and Aaron (being the sons of the first-born) deserved to receive the first two appointments – Moshe as king and Aaron as High Priest.

If one would follow the order of inheritance, Korach was the next in line to receive the next appointment; however, the position to be the leader of the family of Kahas was given to Elitzafon Ben Uziel (the son of the youngest brother) rather than Korach the son of Yitzhar (the second brother). Because of his disappointment in not receiving what he believed to be rightfully his, Korach reacted and attempted to usurp the authority of Moshe. He had said that if the appointments were purely based on the order of inheritance he should have received the next one. However if they were based on one's personal worthiness and qualifications, then he should have received the appointment of High Priest rather than Aaron. Thus Korach's conclusion was that Moshe's choice to appoint his brother as High Priest was an act of nepotism. He did not believe that the word of Moshe was the Word of Hashem but rather that it was his own personal decision.

Rambam writes in the *Laws of Yisodei HaTorah*, (The Fundamentals of Torah) that the authenticity of Moshe's prophecy is not based on his ability to perform revealed miracles. If one's belief is predicated on miracles then it could be easily undermined and thus has no lasting value. Rambam states that the basis for the authenticity of Moshe being the prophet of G-d (authenticity of Torah) is that at Sinai every Jew heard Hashem openly communicate with Moshe saying to him, "Go and tell them (the Jewish people) such and such..." Rambam cites the verse, "Hashem had said, "In you they will believe forever." Meaning, that after the Sinai experience Moshe's word as the Word of Hashem will never be questioned. If Hashem had said that Moshe's prophecy would never be contested then how could Korach and his congregation attempt to usurp his authority by questioning the legitimacy of his word? It seems even more difficult because Korach and his followers personally witnessed the open communication between Hashem and Moshe.

Rashi cites Chazal who state that although Korach was a wise man, he was "misled by his eye." Korach had foreseen that Shmuel (Samuel) the Prophet, who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron, was to be one of his descendants and that many families who would officiate in the Temple as *Leviyim* would descend from him. Korach believed that he would be spared in this merit. Despite the fact that Korach was usurping Moshe's authority and going against the Word of Hashem, he believed that because of the special status of Shmuel he would be protected. If Korach needed the merit of Samuel to be spared, it is evident that he knew that he was doing something wrong. How do we understand this?

Moshe had a special relationship with Hashem. When the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem wanted to destroy them. Moshe beseeched Hashem that they should not be destroyed and that they should be forgiven. Hashem listened to Moshe. At the time of the incident of the *meraglim* (*the spies*), Hashem again wanted to destroy the Jewish people, but once again He was receptive to Moshe's plea and thus they were not destroyed.

Korach understood Moshe's special relationship with Hashem. He knew that because of Moshe's value in the Eyes of Hashem, He would support any request or decision made by Moshe. The point of contention that Korach had with Moshe was the appointment of Aaron to be the High Priest. Korach believed that Moshe chose Aaron and it was approved by G-d, rather than G-d choosing Aaron for that special position. Korach's claim against Moshe was that since all of the Jews were "holy" – thus qualifying them to be selected as High Priest – then why did Moshe choose his brother for that position. This was the basis for Korach questioning many of the laws. He thought that Moshe made the decisions and that G-d endorsed them.

According to Korach's perspective of the Torah, we are able to understand his view of the immutability of Torah. Since Korach believed that the Torah itself does not emanate from Hashem but rather is the word of Moshe (who is the finite and limited being), the Torah is limited and can be altered and changed with G-d's approval. Therefore, Korach believed that in the merit of his descendent, Samuel the prophet, (who is the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron), the Torah can be altered, thus, allowing Korach to be established as the leader of the Jewish people.

With the destruction of Korach and his congregation the immutability of Torah was established. The origin of the Torah emanates from an infinite Divine source – Hashem Himself.

2. Shame – the Prerequisite for Clarity

The Yalkut tells us that before the congregation of Korach was destroyed for attempting to usurp Moshe's authority and thus undermining the Torah, Moshe went to reason with Korach to relinquish his rebellious position. Moshe entered his tent where he and his sons were seated. The Midrash tells us that sons of Korach were in a quandary, "When Moshe walked into the tent they covered their faces with the ground (they were embarrassed to face him). If they were to stand for Moshe (as the law dictates they should) they would disgrace their father because it would be a dishonor to him to acknowledge their father's adversary. However if they were to remain seated, they would be in violation of the law which dictates that they must acknowledge the presence of a Torah sage by standing. They decided to stand for Moshe and acknowledge his presence regardless of the consequences. At that moment (when they made the decision to stand), they had stirrings of teshuvah (repentance) in their heart. In the merit of standing for Moshe they did teshuvah and were not destroyed with the congregation of Korach."

When Moshe first entered the tent, the Midrash tells us that the sons of Korach "covered their faces with the ground." Evidently, regardless of their father's claim against Moshe, Korach's sons felt shame when they saw Moshe enter their father's tent. Because they had *busha* (*shame*) they recognized the issues – whether they should stand or not – which ultimately caused them to make the right decision.

The Torah tells us at the beginning of the Portion of Devarim that Moshe

recounted all of the events that had transpired over the forty-year period that the Jewish people had spent in the desert. When referring to the time when the higher and lower courts were established, Moshe mentioned the criteria necessary to choose a qualified judge. Torah states that they needed to be, “*Chachamim* (wise) and *navonim* (perceptive/grasping concepts).” Rashi explains that the characteristic of “Chachamim” is referring to people who have shame. What is the connection between shame and wisdom?

An individual may be endowed with a great degree of intelligence but if he does not have shame/conscience, he will invest his intellect in any way he chooses – regardless of its consequence. However if one has shame/conscience his intellect will express itself in a proper context. The judges who were appointed to the lower and higher courts had to have clarity to qualify them to render judgments. That ability could only come forth if the intellect is complemented with conscience. The sons of Korach were able to have an understanding of the issues at hand because they had conscience and shame. Had they not had shame, acknowledging Moshe would not have been an issue for them whatsoever.

The Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos* tells us that that every Jew possesses the innate characteristics of “shame/conscience, mercy/compassion, and the ability to do acts of loving kindness.” The characteristic of mercy/compassion and the performance of acts of kindness are in actuality expressions of conscience. If one has conscience, one is not able to behave in an inappropriate manner or is compelled to do the right thing when conscience deems it so. Every individual is endowed with some degree of *chochmah* (wisdom); however, it is only with the characteristic of conscience that it can be applied properly.

The Sanhedrin Gedola (High Court of Israel) must convene in the Chamber of Cut Stone, which was adjacent to the Sanctuary on the Temple mount. Chazal explain that the Torah alludes to this through the juxtaposition of the Portion of Mishpatim (Judges) to the end of the Portion of Yisro (which discusses the building of the Mizbeiach (Altar)). What is the value of locating the Sanhedrin adjacent to the Sanctuary of the Temple Mount? The Sanhedrin was comprised of judges that had a special level of ordination, which was transmitted from Moshe Rabbeinu. These judges were proficient in every aspect of Jewish Law and had a level of genius that was one of a kind. Regardless of their genius, in order to render proper judgments, the members of the Sanhedrin needed to remain humble to maintain a sense of conscience. This was accomplished by situating the Sanhedrin in the Chamber of Cut Stone that was adjacent to the Sanctuary. By being located near the Sanctuary that contained the Divine Presence, the members of the Sanhedrin were able to invest their genius properly because they sensed the presence of G-d (which humbled them).

The Jewish people are the only nation that possesses the characteristics of “shame/conscience, mercy/compassion, and the ability to do acts of loving kindness.” They possess these special characteristics because they are the spiritual heirs of the holy Patriarchs who perfected and developed these characteristics within themselves.

Regarding teshuvah (repentance), Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his work *Shaarei Teshuvah* (The Gates of Repentance) that the prerequisite to do teshuvah is that one must first acknowledge that he had done wrong. One who has conscience recognizes the wrong that he had done. Contrastingly, one who does not have sufficient conscience will not. Thus the sons of Korach, because they had shame, were able to consider the inappropriateness of not standing for Moshe.

The Jewish people accepted the Torah unequivocally at Sinai by saying, “Naaseh

V'nishma – we will do and we will listen” because they possessed the characteristic of conscience, they were able to recognize the innate value of doing the Will of Hashem.

3. The Consequences of Being Self-Consumed

The Torah tells us that when Moshe sent for Dasan and Aviram they refused to come. The Torah states, **“Moshe sent forth to summon Dasan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said, “We shall not go up! Is it not enough that you (Moshe) have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the desert, yet you seek to dominate us, even to dominate further? Moreover, you did not bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey...”** Their claim was that Moshe had taken them out of Egypt which was “a land flowing with milk and honey” to cause them to die in the desert. Since the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt for a period of 210 years under the most difficult conditions, how do we understand the claim of Dasan and Aviram?

The Torah tells us that when Moshe had left the palace of the Pharaoh to see how his brothers were faring, he came upon an Egyptian who was beating a Jew to death. Moshe immediately responded by killing the Egyptian and thus sparing the Jew. Dasan and Aviram witnessed what Moshe had done and informed on him to the Pharaoh. As a result of this Moshe was forced to flee to Midian where he became a shepherd for his father-in-law Yisro. After many years, Moshe came upon the burning bush. Here, Hashem communicated to him that he needed to return to Egypt and assume the role of Redeemer because “the men who had informed on you are no longer alive.”

The Gemara in Tractate Nedarim tells us that the “men (who are no longer alive)” are Dasan and Aviram. Initially they were of the wealthy class in Egypt and therefore had access to the upper echelons of government. This is how they were able to inform on Moshe. However, when they became impoverished, their influence no longer existed and Moshe was able to return to Egypt without their interference. It is from this that we learn that an impoverished person is similar to the dead. Evidently, had they not lost their wealth, Moshe would not have been able to return to Egypt and redeem the Jewish people. Hashem caused them to lose their wealth so that Moshe could return to be the Redeemer.

We are able to make a number of observations. Since Dasan and Aviram claimed that Moshe had taken them out of a land flowing with milk and honey (Egypt), it clearly indicates that they did not have any compassion towards their fellow Jews who were suffering in a state of bondage. Because they were completely self-absorbed with their own state of affairs, to the exclusion of all else, they only noticed their own affluence. Additionally, Dasan and Aviram understood that the only reason Moshe was able to return to Egypt to be the Redeemer of the Jewish people was that they had lost their wealth/influence. Thus, they attributed the cause of their impoverished state to Moshe. They claimed that he had taken them out of a land flowing with milk and honey to die in the desert. If Moshe had not needed to return as the Redeemer, they would have retained their wealth/influence in Egypt. They initially appreciated the value of redemption because they would have been compensated with new wealth upon arriving into the Promised Land. However, now that Moshe had taken them into the desert (to die) the loss of their status was for naught.

All that remained for Dasan and Aviram was their position of leadership as elders of the Tribe of Reuvain. However even in this regard, they felt that they were being

denied their positions of honor by Moshe attempting to “dominate” them.

Shlomo HaMelech (King Salomon) states in Mishlei (Proverbs), “One should not attempt to rebuke a *letz* (scoffer/deprecator).” Regardless of how logical and rational one may be in his rebuke, the scoffer will not appreciate what is being told to him because he is completely consumed with his own point of view. Shlomo HaMelech concludes, “If one attempts to rebuke a scoffer he will hate you.” However, on the other hand, when one rebukes a *chacham* (wise person) he will appreciate the reprimand. As it is stated, “and he will love you.” It is written in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of our Fathers), “Who is a wise man (Chacham)? One who learns from everyone.” The chacham, because his focus is to advance himself through learning, will appreciate rebuke because through it he will understand where he has failed.

Initially when Moshe saw Dasan raising his hand to strike Aviram he said, “*Rasha* (evil one), why are you striking your fellow?” They responded by saying, “Who made you a minister and judge over us?” Dasan and Aviram, because they were self-absorbed, did not have the capacity to appreciate the rebuke of Moshe. Subsequently, they informed on Moshe regarding the killing of the Egyptian because they felt he had overstepped his bounds by rebuking them. Their ego and self-absorbed mindset continuously caused Moshe and the Jewish people great difficulty from the beginning until the very end when they were swallowed up by the earth with Korach. It was only because Dasan and Aviram could not accept criticism, which would have allowed them to repent, that they met their ultimate demise. As it is stated, “Glory (seeking), desire, and arrogance remove one from this world.”

4. The Pervasiveness of Korach’s Misunderstanding

The basis for Korach’s attempt to usurp Moshe’s authority was that he believed that the Torah that was communicated to the Jewish people was not the Word of Hashem but rather the word of Moshe. Korach believed that because of Moshe’s special relationship with Hashem, He merely endorsed/approved the words of Moshe and the Torah itself did not emanate from a Divine source (Hashem). This of course is not the case. As Ramban states in his introduction to the Torah, “Moshe was only a “*sofer* (scribe) committing the Words of G-d to writing.” Korach’s misconception was more widespread than one would think.

After Korach and his community were swallowed by the earth, Torah states, “**The entire assembly of the Children of Israel complained on the morrow against Moshe and Aaron saying, “You have killed the people of Hashem!”** The Jewish people had clearly witnessed G-d’s Attribute of Justice being meted out; nevertheless, they accused Moshe and Aaron of killing Korach and his community. After witnessing so clearly the Hand of Hashem, how could the Jewish people have believed that Moshe and Aaron caused the demise of those who attempted to usurp Moshe’s authority?

Chazal explain that Moshe had given Korach and his followers the test of the *ketoris* (incense), which would determine which individual was G-d’s choice to be the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). The Torah states, “**Moshe said to Korach, “You and your entire assembly, be before Hashem...Let each man take his fire-pan and you shall place incense on them...”** When the assembly of Korach brought forth the *ketoris*, they were burnt and swallowed up by the ground. Chazal tell us that the Jewish people believed that Moshe had told Korach to use the incense for the test because there was

something contained in it that had the inherent ability to kill. Thus, Moshe and Aaron were considered responsible for the death of Korach and his assembly.

Immediately after the Jewish people complained, a plague came upon them and they began to die. In order to demonstrate to them that the *ketoris* was not something that kills but rather their death was caused by their own failing, Moshe told Aaron to go immediately into the midst of the camp and burn the incense. As a result of Aaron burning the incense, the plague ended immediately. The Torah states, **“He placed the incense and provided atonement for the people. He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was checked.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain the verse, **“He stood between the dead and the living”** to mean that Aaron took hold of the angel of death and restrained him. The angel of death said to Aaron, “Why are you restraining me. Allow me to do my agency.” Aaron responded, “Moshe told me that I should stop you.” The angel of death said, “I am the agent of G-d and you are the agent of Moshe.” Aaron then told the angel of death, “The word of Moshe is synonymous with the Word of G-d. If you do not believe this to be the case, let us go to the Sanctuary and ask Hashem.”

We see from this exchange between Aaron and the angel of death that even within the realm of angels that the same misconception regarding the word of Moshe existed. The angels believed that the Torah in fact was the word of Moshe with the endorsement of Hashem. Thus, the word of Moshe was not the Word of G-d, but rather the word of Moshe was accepted by G-d. It was only after the plague came to an end after Aaron’s confrontation with the angel of death that the angels understood that the word of Moshe was the Word of Hashem.

This issue is more difficult when one considers the principle of *“Lo bashamayim he – Torah is not in heaven!”* The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia* tells us that Rebbe Eliezer and the Chachamim (rabbis) debated the status of an earthenware oven that had become contaminated and was subsequently severed into parts and reconstructed. The contamination of an earthenware vessel can only be removed if that vessel is broken and thus loses its status as a vessel. The question was if the vessel that was broken were to be reconstructed, would it contain the original contamination (because it is considered the original vessel) or would it be considered a new vessel, which is uncontaminated.

Rebbe Eliezer’s position was that the reassembled oven was considered spiritually pure; however, the majority ruled that it was spiritually contaminated. After a lengthy exchange between Rebbe Eliezer and the Chachamim, a *Bas Kol* (Heavenly Voice) declared, “The law is according to Rebbe Eliezer.” Rebbe Yehoshua stood up and said, *“Lo bashamayim he – Torah is not in heaven!”* Meaning, the definitive legal rulings of Torah were given to man to decide and not G-d. Thus, the declaration of the *Bas Kol* was irrelevant. Seemingly, this principle stated in the Gemara can perpetuate Korach’s misconception - is the Torah the word of G-d or the word of the rabbis?

The application of *“Lo bashamayim he – Torah is not in heaven!”* has no relevance to what had transpired with Korach and his assemble. It is not that the human mind has greater understanding (G-d forbid) than the Divine Mind (Hashem), but rather, Hashem wants that the Torah that was given at Sinai to be processed and elucidated with the human intellect within the context of the 13 methods of interpretation that were transmitted at Sinai. Regardless of one’s spiritual dimension one cannot go outside of the methodology of interpretation that was dictated by Hashem. However, Korach and the angels believed that the Torah did not emanate from G-d but rather from Moshe.

5. Merit comes to those who are Meritorious

Rashi cites Chazal who explain “**Vayikach Korach (Korach took)**” to mean that Korach persuaded the two hundred and fifty men who were qualified to be the head of the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel). The word “**Vayikach**” which means, “to take,” is used regarding the taking of an inanimate object or an unintelligible creature (animal), which does not have free choice to come or not to come, and therefore it is “taken.” However, regarding a human who is a being of free choice- to come or not to come – how is the term “**Vayikach**” used regarding Korach’s assembly? Rashi explains that when the term “**Vayikach**” is used in this context (regarding Korach), it means that Korach had “taken” them through the power of persuasion.

Although they were exceptional individuals who were qualified to be the heads of the Sanhedrin and were astute Torah sages, Korach rendered them helpless through his power of persuasion. Choice exists within the context of seeing both sides of the equation and choosing one of the two. However, these individuals were persuaded to such a degree that they only could see the position of Korach. Rashi elsewhere cites another example in which the term “Kach” (to take) is used regarding a human being. Hashem said to Moshe, “**Kach es Aaron (Take Aaron your brother)**” and persuade him to assume the position of the High priest. Hashem told Moshe that his words should be so convincing to Aaron that he would no longer have any choice other than to accept this appointment.

Rambam tells us in the *Laws of Teshuvah* that it is only because one exercises his free choice to do the right thing that he deserves to receive reward for that deed. However if one did not have choice, but is naturally compelled to do the good deed, one would not deserve any reward. If one were influenced and persuaded by the words of his rebbe (to the degree that Aaron was persuaded by Moshe to accept the High Priesthood) would that person deserve to receive reward for that decision? On the other hand, if one is negatively influenced and persuaded to such a degree as Korach influenced his cohorts – would one be held liable for punishment since his free choice was suspended as a result of this overwhelming persuasion? Korach’s followers were completely taken by his words. If this is the case- why were they deserving of punishment?

There is a principle that is stated in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers), “One mitzvah brings another mitzvah and a transgression or misdeed encourages and brings other misdeeds.” If a person is deserving of good deeds because of a good deed that he had done, Hashem will bring him the opportunity to perform other good deeds. Conversely, the principle states that if a person is undeserving because of his past transgressions, then Hashem will bring to him situations in which he can fail again. What makes a person deserving or undeserving? From a spiritual perspective meritorious acts present themselves to those who are worthy of merit.

Based on this principle, if a person is positively affected by his rebbe to grow in Torah, then it must be that he merited that level of relationship with his rebbe because of a positive choice that he had made in the past. However the two hundred and fifty members of the tribe of Reuven who were under Korach’s influence evidently deserved to be subject to that influence. This was a reflection of who these people actually were. Korach could have influenced anyone; however, it was specifically this group that was affected. There must have been something in their background that caused them to be brought into this predicament. For example, Dasan and Aviram (Korach’s compatriots) had already informed on Moshe in Egypt and were responsible for many other unconscionable acts.

The Gemara tells us that there were two great leaders who had a commonality between them vis-à-vis their generation: Shmuel the Prophet (who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron) and Yiftach. Although there is no comparison between them, they are

both referred to as “leaders” of their respective generations. As it is stated by Chazal, “Yiftach in his generation is as Shmuel is in his generation.” The Chasam Sofer z’tl asks – why did one generation merit to have Shmuel as their leader and the other Yiftach? The Chasam Sofer answers that Shmuel’s generation merited to have him as their leader because they were truly meritorious. However, the generation of Yiftach, which is not comparable to the generation of Shmuel, merited having a leader of lesser spiritual caliber (Yiftach).

We are continuously subjected to many influences- some positive and some negative. We must consider in each of these situations what brought about each of these opportunities – negative or positive. Evidently, based on the principle mentioned in Pirkei Avos that one good deed, like one misdeed, encourages another, there must be a valid reason why these situations present themselves.