

# *Parshas Korach*

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## ***1. Korach's Misperception of Truth***

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 thus 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 this order, 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 appointment. However if they were based on one's personal worthiness and qualifications, then he should have received (minimally) the appointment of High Priest rather than Aaron. Thus, Korach concluded that the basis for Aaron's appointment as High Priest was an act of nepotism. He did not believe that the word of Moshe was the Word of G'd but rather that it was his own. Korach's difficulty with Moshe's decision to appoint Aaron as the High Priest was actually rooted in his perception of himself.

Chazal tell us that there were two individuals who because they had followed the advice of their wives, were ultimately destroyed – one was Haman and the other was Korach. Because Haman had complied with his wife's advice to build gallows of fifty *amos* (*cubits*) in height to hang Mordechai, he himself met his fate on those gallows. The Midrash tells us that when Korach returned home after studying Torah with Moshe, his wife had asked him, "What did Moshe Rabbeinu teach you today in the *bais ha'midrash*?" Her objective in asking this question was only to point out to her husband how he was following Moshe blindly without understanding where he was being led. She wanted to demonstrate that the teachings of Moshe were irrational. Korach responded that he was taught the laws that pertain to *tzit tzis* (fringes). If one has a four-corned garment, one must put fringes on each corner. One string of each of the fringes must be dyed with *techeilis* (blue/green).

When Korach had related this information to his wife, she dismissed it as being utter nonsense. Although she offered Korach no reason for her position, her criticism was enough to affect Korach's perception of Moshe. Korach already had a latent feeling of being undervalued by Moshe, since he was not chosen to be the High Priest. However, this was exacerbated by his wife's criticism. Until Korach's wife deprecated Moshe, he had no difficulty acknowledging him as G'd's spokesman (the communicator of the Torah). However, after his wife's critical comment, Moshe's credibility came into question and thus Korach began to question why at a minimum, he was not chosen to be the High Priest. If the decision was based on the laws of inheritance, he

should have been chosen for the third appointment. If it was based on qualification and capability, he believed he was the most qualified. Korach had believed, because of his sense of importance and self-centeredness, that he was even more qualified than Moshe Rabbeinu.

Many problems that we experience in life are based on our own perception of reality, which are rooted in our own conflicts of interest. The Gemara tells us that if one suspects another of wrongdoing without a sufficient basis, he deserves to be punished. The only basis for Korach's perception of Moshe was rooted in his own self-perception and ego. Korach's wealth was one-of-a-kind. Chazal tell us that in the history of the world there was never a Jew (who was a commoner), who was as wealthy as Korach. In addition to being wise and of a prestigious pedigree, the Midrash tells us that he believed that he could not fail in his stance against Moshe because Samuel the Prophet, (who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron), was to be his descendent. Chazal tell us, "His eye misled him." Seeing into the future that Samuel the Prophet was to be born was only a confirmation to Korach that he would not die when he was to take the fire pan with the incense. The Midrash tells us that he was so set in his position that he was not willing to engage in debate with Moshe on this subject. Because of his intense conflict of interest and not being able to perceive himself in any way other than being the most qualified, he brought destruction upon himself and his entire community.

## ***2. The Basis for Korach's Mutiny Against Moshe***

The Torah tells us that Korach attempted to usurp Moshe's authority claiming that it was nepotism for Moshe to choose his brother Aaron as the High Priest. He did not believe that this was G'd's choice. Korach claimed, "the entire congregation is holy" and would therefore qualify for that position.

Rambam, writes in the *Laws of Yisodei HaTorah (the Fundamentals of Torah)* that at Sinai (at the time of the giving of the Torah) every Jew witnessed G'd openly communicating with Moshe – thus designating him as His spokesman. Rambam cites the verse in Shemos that states after the Sinai event G'd said to Moshe - "They (the Jews) will believe in you (Moshe) forever." Meaning that the word of Moshe will be uncontested forever and accepted as the Word of G'd. Korach and his group of detractors (two hundred and fifty of the most advanced Torah sages from the tribe of Reuven, who were qualified to be the head of the Sanhedrin - the High Court of Israel) were part of the generation that witnessed G'd openly communicate to Moshe, "Go tell the Jews such and such." After witnessing this reality in which Moshe was chosen as G'd's spokesman, how could they have possibly suspected that the Laws of the Torah was the word of Moshe and not the Word of G'd?

The Torah tells us that on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan, Aaron began officiating as the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). After he had completed the service of the sacrifices in the Mishkan, the heavenly fire (which was meant to come down and consume the sacrifices) did not. The heavenly fire would have been a confirmation that Aaron was qualified to be the High Priest. Rashi cites Chazal, "Aaron performed the service but the Fire/Shechina (Divine Presence) did not descend. Aaron was pained by this. He said to his brother Moshe, 'I know G'd is angry with me. It is because of me that the Fire did not descend. Moshe, my brother how could you have embarrassed me (by choosing me as the High Priest when I am seemingly not qualified).' Moshe

then said to Aaron, 'Let us enter into the Tent of the Meeting and beseech Hashem to respond.' Consequently the heavenly fire did descend and consume the offerings." What was the basis of Aaron's claim against Moshe? Why did Aaron consider that Moshe had embarrassed him? Moshe's designation of his brother Aaron was in fact G'd's designation and not his own.

Apparently, Aaron's understanding was that his being qualified and chosen to be the High Priest was purely Moshe's own choice. This understanding is similar to that of Korach. By stating that Moshe had "embarrassed" him by choosing him as the Kohen Gadol, Aaron was clearly suggesting that it was Moshe's decision and not G'd's. G'd only had agreed with Moshe's choice. It was only after Moshe entered together with Aaron to pray for the heavenly fire to descend that Aaron understood that his appointment was in fact G'd's choice. However, he also learned from this that one must take the initiative through tefillah (prayer) to actualize that choice. This incident could have been the basis for Korach's misunderstanding of Moshe's communication.

Korach believed that Aaron's appointment was in fact Moshe's choice; however, G'd endorsed and agreed to establish this as part of His Word. It was only because Moshe had a special relationship with G'd that He acquiesced to Moshe's wishes. Thus, based on this understanding, Korach's claim was – since the entire congregation was "holy"/qualified – why did Moshe select his brother to be the Kohen Gadol?

Initially Aaron had believed that Moshe wanted him to be the Kohen Gadol and G'd merely agreed. This is why Aaron said to Moshe "you embarrassed me by choosing me despite the fact that I am not qualified." Moshe entered into the Tent of the Meeting together with Aaron in order to dispel this misconception. Aaron understood that it was in fact G'd's choice and not Moshe's.

Moshe had no input in the Torah whatsoever. As the Ramban explains in his introduction to his commentary on the Torah, that he was only a scribe committing to writing the Word of G'd.

### ***3. Moshe's Refusal to Forgive Dasan and Aviram***

The Torah tells us that Dasan and Aviram were the compatriots of Korach in discrediting Moshe as the communicator of G'd's Torah. Together, with Korach, they sought to remove Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people. In an attempt to reason with Dasan and Aviram, Moshe summoned them for discussion; however, they responded, "**Even if you would gouge out our eyes we shall not go up (to meet with Moshe)!**" Dasan and Aviram had such intense hatred for Moshe Rabbeinu that they would prefer to have their eyes gouged out rather than meeting with Moshe.

While in Egypt, they had informed on Moshe to Pharaoh that he had killed an Egyptian. Throughout the period of the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent trek in the desert, whenever there was a conflict or breach, Dasan and Aviram were involved. G'd had allowed them to continue their adversarial role with Moshe until they had expressed their intense hatred for him -

**“Even if you would gouge out our eyes we shall not go up (to meet with Moshe!)”**

The Torah tells us that after Moshe was informed of their response he became enraged, **“He said to Hashem, ‘Do not turn to their gift-offering! I have not taken even a single donkey of theirs, nor have I wronged even one of them.’”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that although every Jew has a share in the communal offerings that are brought daily (minimally twice a day), Moshe was requesting that Hashem reject Dasan and Aviram’s portion in those offerings so that they should not have any merit. Moshe made this request of G’d because of their intense baseless hatred for him.

One would think that Moshe should have been more forgiving. Rambam writes that if one fails in the area of *“bein adam l’chaveiro – between man and his fellow”* one is only atoned when he is forgiven by the individual who was wronged. If the individual does not want to forgive him, he must come with three acquaintances of the wronged party to persuade him to grant forgiveness. This process is repeated three times with three different groups of acquaintances. Rambam writes that if after all of these attempts to gain forgiveness the individual is not willing to extend it, then he is considered the sinner and the one who had sought forgiveness is forgiven and thus fully atoned. Rambam writes that withholding forgiveness from one’s fellow is considered a characteristic of cruelty – which is not a characteristic of the Jew. However Rambam states that if one wrongs his rebbe/spiritual mentor he is not forgiven until his rebbe forgives him – despite the number of attempts that he has made to be forgiven (even if he asks for forgiveness a thousand times.) Why does Rambam/Gemara differentiate between the rebbe/spiritual mentor and the ordinary individual?

Regarding an ordinary individual, if after the three attempts of communicating remorse he is not agreeable to forgive his fellow, since there is no basis for his withholding of forgiveness, his fellow is absolved. However, when the rebbe/spiritual mentor is not willing to forgive, he does so based on his understanding of the individual’s lack of remorse/deservingness. Thus, the individual must approach his rebbe for forgiveness even a thousand times until the rebbe feels he is deserving.

Sforno explains Moshe’s request of G’d to reject the offerings of Dasan and Aviram – “Moshe said to G’d, “Do not accept their offerings and grant them forgiveness because I am not willing to waive my disgrace. You (G’d) cannot forgive them until I release them. As it is written - in the area of *bein adam l’chaveiro* (between man and his fellow) - not even Yom Kippur can provide forgiveness until the individual himself extends forgiveness.” Why was Moshe not willing to forgive them?

The Gemara in Tractate Shavuos tells us that the king of Israel is not permitted to waive his honor. However, if a Torah sage chooses to waive his honor, he may do so. The Sage is permitted to waive his honor, although he is waiving the honor of the Torah, because after studying the Torah it is considered “his Torah.” This is based on a verse in Tehillim (Psalms). Thus, it is his prerogative to waive his honor.

Moshe understood that when Dasan and Aviram had said **“Even if you would gouge out our eyes**

**we shall not go up (to meet with Moshe)!”** that they were beyond remorse. It is the equivalent of the rebbe not willing to forgive his student – even if he beseeched him a thousand times.

Until this moment (except for the initial informing of Pharaoh), Dasan and Aviram’s affront was directed against G’d Himself. However, their last retort which was an expression of intense hatred of Moshe himself, was a failing in the area of “*bein adam l’chaveiro* – between man and his fellow.” Although their animosity against Moshe was rooted in their hatred of what he represented (which was G’d Himself), nevertheless, because the Torah is considered “his” (Moshe’s) it is his prerogative to forgive or not. Since Moshe is the link between G’d and the Jewish person for all eternity, the attempt to usurp his authority was jeopardizing the spiritual lifeline of the Jewish people.

The Remah, in his glosses on the Code of Law, writes that if one were to perform a mitzvah in a setting that would antagonize people, one should perform that mitzvah in a more inconspicuous manner. However, Bais Yosef (author of the Shulchan Aruch – Code of Jewish Law) states that if those individuals’ feelings of antagonism are rooted in their animosity towards the Torah, then one should perform the mitzvah even in an open setting. That situation would be classified as *Milchemas Hashem* (waging a war for G’d). One must do everything within his power not to allow the Torah to be in jeopardy. Thus, Moshe’s withholding of forgiveness was not a characteristic of cruelty, but rather, an understanding of their evil.

#### **4. Aaron’s Level of Self-Negation**

The Torah tells us that after the earth swallowed up Korach and his assembly, the Jewish people complained to Moshe saying, **“You have killed the people of Hashem!”** As a result of this complaint, G’d unleashed a plague upon them in order to consume the entire people. Moshe said to Aaron, **“Take the fire-pan and put on it fire from upon the Altar and place incense (*ketores*) - and go quickly to midst of the assembly and provide atonement for them, for the fury has gone out from the presence of Hashem; the plague has begun!”** The Torah then states, **“Aaron took as Moshe had spoken and ran to the midst of the congregation...He placed the incense (*ketores*) and provided atonement for the people.”** The plague ceased. Why is it necessary for the Torah to tell us that Aaron “ran” to burn the *ketores* as he was instructed by Moshe? Is it not obvious that if Aaron understood that by burning the incense the plague would cease that he would hurry to do so? Nevertheless, the Torah needs to tell us that he “ran.” Evidently, there is reason to believe that he would have done otherwise.

The sons of Aaron were struck down in the Sanctuary because they brought an incense offering outside of its proper setting. After their death, Aaron was commanded, “You are not permitted to enter into the Holy when you chose to do so.” Korach and his group of detractors (two hundred and fifty of the most proficient Torah sages, who were qualified to be the heads of the Sanhedrin - the High Court of Israel) were killed when they burnt the *ketores* (*incense*). *Ketores* is the most special of the offerings and has proven to be lethal if not brought in the proper context. Aaron understood that if one is not careful regarding *Ketores* he could die. One would think that Aaron would have hesitated when Moshe had instructed him to burn the *Ketores* in the midst of the camp because this is not the manner in which the Torah prescribes it to be burnt. Nevertheless, the Torah informs us that when Moshe instructed him to “go quickly” and burn the *ketores* to stop the

plague, he did so without a moment's hesitation. As it is stated - "he ran."

The Torah reveals to that despite all the reasons for hesitating, Aaron did not waiver, but rather was totally negated to the Word of G'd. The past events involving *ketores*, although they had proven to be lethal were irrelevant to Aaron.

It is interesting to note that the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) rules that regarding *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life) the individual who should violate the Shabbos in order to save the life of another should be the greatest Torah sage in the community. If the Torah sage violates the Shabbos to save a life all will understand the value of life and to what degree the Torah wants it to be preserved. There is a type of individual who is referred to in the Talmud as a *chassid shoteh* - one whose scrupulous piety is rooted in ignorance - and therefore behaves like a fool. The example that is given in the Talmud of *chassid shoteh* is a situation in which a woman is drowning and he does not attempt to save her because he does not wish to touch her - thus allowing her to drown. Therefore, the most respected Jew, who is the Torah sage, must be the role model for the community.

Aaron understood that the word of Moshe was synonymous with the Word of G'd. If Moshe had commanded him to act in a certain manner, he did so without hesitation or consideration for himself. A person, who is conditioned to be negated and subsumed by the word of his rebbe/spiritual mentor, will adhere to the dictates of the Torah without hesitation - despite his personal conflict. It is difficult to revere and fear a Being who is abstract and not tangible. However, when one is conditioned to fear his spiritual mentor/rebbe (who communicates the Word of G'd), he will be thus conditioned to fear and revere Hashem. One must be conditioned to follow the Word of G'd regardless of one's own self-interest and concerns.

We read in Prophets that King Shaul spared the life of Agog who was the king of Amalek. It was a sin for him to do so. When Agog was brought before Samuel the Prophet, he took a sword and severed him horizontally and vertically. Samuel the Prophet (in his spiritual standing) was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron. His level of piety, purity and gentleness was unique. However when he struck down Agog with his sword it was done with a vengeance and without hesitation. Malbim explains that when Agog saw Shmuel the Prophet, he could not believe that this seemingly meek individual could do him any harm. Killing Agog was fulfilling the Positive Commandment of obliterating Amalek. The personality and character of Samuel the Prophet did not interfere with the fulfillment of the mitzvah. His essence was totally negated to G'd. Thus, despite his temperament he was not deterred.

## ***5. Preserving Kiddush Hashem***

The Torah tells us that before Korach and his community were about to be destroyed, Hashem informed Moshe that He was going to destroy the entire Klal Yisroel. Moshe said to G'd, "Since You know the intent of every man, why should everyone perish for the sins of the one who sinned?" Hashem responded that He would only destroy those who sinned against Him. Thus, only Korach and his followers were destroyed. Why did Hashem initially consider eliminating the entire Jewish people when He knew that only Korach and his community were contesting Moshe's authority?

Rashi cites the Midrash that explains what Moshe had said to Hashem. If a group of people rises up against their king and attempts to usurp his authority, the reason that he destroys the entire community is because he does not know who was involved in the rebellion. Rashi continues, You Hashem, that You know who is usurping Your authority, You should destroy them and not the entire Jewish people. It seems from the Torah that if it were not for Moshe's intervention and plea, Hashem would have destroyed all of the Jewish people. How do we understand this? If they are not guilty why do they deserve to be destroyed?

After acquiescing to Moshe's plea, the land opened its mouth and swallowed-up Korach and his entire community. The Mishna tells us that the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach and his followers was created at the end of the Sixth Day of Creation during the twilight period. It was formed specifically to bring Divine retribution upon Korach and his entire community. This miracle was intended to convey to the Jewish people that Moshe's word is the Word of Hashem. Having witnessed this tragic event, one would think that the Jewish people who survived would have proclaimed Moshe as the communicator of the Word of Hashem. However the Torah tells us differently.

The next day the Jewish people approached Moshe and Aaron with a complaint saying, **"You killed the people of Hashem. You were too harsh with them."** After witnessing such a revealed and undisputable miracle demonstrating the Attribute of Justice, how could the Jews react in such a manner? As a result of their insolence, Hashem caused a plague to come upon them and over 14,000 people perished. How do we understand this?

The fact is that although the Jewish people themselves did not attempt to usurp Moshe's authority, there was nevertheless a degree of culpability on a communal level. When Korach and his followers openly confronted Moshe with a disgraceful accusation (contesting his word, which is synonymous with the Word of Hashem) the entire Jewish people remained silent. If they had truly understood and appreciated Moshe Rabbeinu, the Jews would not have tolerated Korach's attack. The fact that they remained silent was an indication that the Jewish people themselves were not entirely convinced of the authenticity of the Torah. The silence of the Jewish people in this situation was a desecration of Hashem's name (*Chilul Hashem*). The liability of Chilul Hashem is so severe that one can only be atoned for it through death. This is the reason Hashem initially was going to destroy the entire Jewish people. However, Moshe came to their defense and Hashem acquiesced to Moshe's request.

When the Jews accused Moshe of being too harsh with Korach and his community, Hashem brought a plague upon them. This accusation against Moshe revisited the issue of Chilul Hashem. Their complaint against Moshe was a clear indication that they did not fully grasp the gravity of the wrongdoing of Korach and his cohorts. Therefore they were struck with a devastating plague.

Moshe could not intervene on behalf of Klal Yisroel to stop the plague. If this is the case, then how did it come to an end? Rashi cites the Midrash, which explains that after the death of Korach and his followers, the Jewish people believed that the incense offering had the ability to kill those who burned it. The Jews believed that the reason Korach and his group were killed was because there was something lethal in the incense offering that they brought.

When Moshe was in heaven at the time he was receiving the Torah, the Angel of Death gave him a gift, which was the secret of how to stop a plague – the burning of the incense. Moshe therefore

told Aaron to go immediately into the midst of the camp and burn the incense, thus causing the plague to cease. Observing this, the Jewish people understood that the incense was not at all lethal but that it was in fact one of the most exalted types of offerings. Through this action, Moshe brought about a sanctification of Hashem's name (Kiddush Hashem) by having Aaron burn the incense in the midst of the camp to demonstrate its value. Fourteen thousand people died as a result of the plague because of Chilul Hashem and only after the burning of the incense did it come to an end because of witnessing Kiddush Hashem.