

TIMELESS TORAH

Korach - Rebels & Revolutions: Learning the Lessons

For the Sake of Heaven?

The episode of Korach, who rose up in rebellion against the leaders of the Jewish people, not only teaches us about the devastating consequences of quarrelling and strife but also allows us to examine some of the dynamics that lead to argumentative behavior. Indeed, the very first word of the parshah, *vayikach* — ‘and he took’, already points to one of the primary catalysts for Korach’s downfall. ‘And Korach took’, would presumably refer to the 250 important people he persuaded to join him, but Rashi contends that the word ‘taking’ never refers to persuasion of other people. According to Rashi, then, the verse means that Korach took himself to another place. While it is possible for us to be drawn after others and taken in all sorts of different directions, we are often our own worst enemy. Korach’s biggest problems were caused by his own internal issues. He ‘took’ himself on a path of division and negativity.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:11) contrasts Korach’s argument with the many halachic debates between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai in the Mishnah and Gemara. Korach is the paradigm of a debate that is described as ‘not for the sake of Heaven’. In his commentary to that Mishnah, the Rambam explains that the way we can discern whether our arguments and debates are indeed for the sake of Heaven and not driven by ulterior motives is by examining whether we are searching for the truth. For example, a defining feature of the debates between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai is that Beit Hillel would always quote the words of Beit Shammai before their own. However vehemently they disagreed with the other opinion, they were willing to hear it and discuss it again before finally rejecting it.

The verses from this parshah show a sharp contrast to this. After relating Korach’s initial claims, we find very little dialogue between him and Moshe, indicating that Korach was not actually prepared to hear the other side. This, then, is an example of a debate that leads to strife, and not a search for truth and harmony.

Adding to this, the Ramchal (d. 1746) demonstrates how, behind all of Korach’s claims, what really motivated him was a desire for honour. He had been willing to see the elders of his family, Moshe and Aharon, take the two top positions of the nation, but he could not bear to witness his younger cousin, Elitzafan, assume the position of Nasi of the tribe of Levi. In the face of this slight to his honour, Korach’s own noble status as a Levite from the House of Kehat paled into insignificance, and he made the fateful decision to challenge the leadership.

A Tragic Consequence

So pernicious is the influence of strife that it can affect even otherwise innocent bystanders. In verses 26 and 27, Moshe and Aharon are warned to turn away from the tents of the instigators of the rebellion while Datan and Aviram stood brazenly at the entrance of their tents together with ‘their wives, their children and their infants’. As Rashi immediately points out, the verse is explicit that not only were the older children punished together with their parents, but even the infants in the arms of their mothers. This seems extremely difficult to comprehend.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (Jerusalem, d. 1979) explains that there is a Torah principle whereby even an innocent person might be taken from this world if his or her downward



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trajectory is unavoidable. A classic example of this is the *ben sorrer u'moreh* in Parshat Ki Teitzei, for whom the Torah dictates the death penalty for the relatively minor offences of stealing money to finance his gluttonous desires. Of course, the punishment far exceeds the crime, but our Sages explain that it is a kindness to remove him before the degenerative spiral of his conduct brings him to far worse places. Here too, writes Rav Shmuelewitz, the argumentative atmosphere created by Korach and his followers would have introduced a rot that would have festered for generations. This was the reason for the wide extent of this tragic punishment.

Notwithstanding this explanation, however, the question, still remains. Why are innocent youngsters not given a chance to prove themselves? The Maharal (Prague, d. 1609) echoes Rav Shmuelewitz's idea and expands upon it. Ordinarily, children would never be held culpable before reaching legal adulthood, but that is only because Hashem will never bring punishment upon a minor. In the case of argument, however, things are different. The Maharal writes that strife and Gehinnom were both created on the same day, teaching that they are one and the same. Quarrelling and causing hostility has inevitable and tragic consequences, which may be unpredictable at the outset yet devastating in effect.

A Vision of Harmony

The final chapter of this episode relates the ultimate demonstration that Aharon was indeed Divinely chosen for the priesthood. Representatives of all twelve tribes placed their staffs inside the Mishkan and by the morning, only Aharon's staff had flowered with almond blossoms.

Moshe was delighted to have found this confirmation of his brother's position, as is hinted to in the verse's choice of the word *hinei* — behold (17:23). This word, the Kli Yakar (d. 1619, Prague) explains, denotes alacrity and happiness, and is reminiscent of Aharon's own delight in learning of Moshe's rise to greatness. In Parshat Shemot (4:14), after the vision at the burning bush, Moshe was instructed to return to Egypt and was told that Aharon would be coming to greet him: '*hinei ... v'samach b'libo* — behold ... he is joyous in his heart'.

This beautiful parallel illustrates the harmony with which our great leaders conducted themselves. Showing the exact opposite trait of Korach's jealousy, Aharon was overjoyed to hear that his younger brother had merited to become the leader of the nation, and Moshe was excited to find Aharon's position once again secure.

In fact, the image of an almond has special significance. An almond is a fruit that, although it grows quickly, is exceptionally bitter at first and sweetens only after a while. Used analogously, the almond represents bitter times through which we are assured that sweetness awaits us in the end. This perspective requires one to have the ability to see the bigger picture, a quality which was lacking in Korach, who could not remove himself from the centre of his vision. Aharon and Moshe, by contrast, were motivated by the ultimate goal of subservience and obedience to the Divine will. As a result, the success of another in this sphere was something to be celebrated rather than seen as a threat.

Next Week: Chukat - Forty Years
Wandering: The Immediate Aftermath