

TIMELESS TORAH

KORACH: POWER, PRESTIGE & THE PURSUIT OF HONOUR

Out of This World

The series of parshiyot that make up the middle of Sefer Bamidbar contain a particular focus on human failings. One overarching message of these episodes is how unchecked character flaws can cause the downfall of even exceptional individuals. When analysing the story of Korach, the well-known Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (4:22) seems apposite: ‘Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said, “Envy, desire and honour remove a person from the world.”’ The classic commentator on Pirkei Avot, Midrash Shmuel, quotes his colleague Rabbi Moshe Almosnino (Salonika, d.1580), who explains vividly what this means. These three traits are the dominant factors that can lead to the overpowering of a person’s clear-sighted intellect. However wise and sensible a person may be, once they have been tempted by one of these vices, they are in danger of losing their ability to think rationally and objectively. Lacking a lucid outlook on life itself can quite literally lead to a person existing in a state of ‘removal from the world’.

Looking at the first words of the parshah - ‘*Vayikach Korach* (Korach took) – the Sages (Midrash Tanchuma and Gemara Sanhedrin 109b) offer three interpretations as to what Korach ‘took’ and how this led to his rebellion against Moshe. Firstly, the Midrash says that ‘taking’ connotes divisiveness. Korach ‘took himself’ into a position that was opposed to the accepted leadership structure. Secondly, although the verse does not indicate whom or what Korach took, the Midrash understands the ‘taking’ as a general statement of his impact upon others. Korach spoke persuasively to people around him, drawing them towards his viewpoint.

Thirdly, and perhaps most penetratingly, the Gemara highlights the fact that Korach ‘took’ a bad deal for himself. Whatever the outcome, even had Korach won some of the honour he desired, he would have been the loser because of the way he went about it. This, then, is the basic anatomy of Korach’s conflict: he made a bad choice that had a negative impact on himself and those around him.

Clear Light of Day

The verses continue to describe how the rebellion unfolded. Although they were pitting themselves against the two most respected men of the nation, Korach and his followers ‘stood before Moshe’ (16:2). This means, explains the Ibn Ezra (d.1167), that they brazenly positioned themselves in open defiance of Moshe’s authority. This requires explanation. Until this point, the leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu had been completely undisputed. Although there might have been mutterings of discontent after the disappointment of the Spies, no one had denied Moshe’s Divinely given authority.

According to the Chatam Sofer (d.1839), focusing on an unusual description of the 250 men who had gathered around Korach, helps to understand this. The verse states that they were esteemed personalities, described as ‘princes of the congregation’. They were also ‘*anshei shem* – men of renown (literally, ‘men of name’)’. According to the Chatam Sofer, the insinuation here is that they were princes in ‘name’ alone but not in actual fact. When the selection was being made for the seventy men who would lead the Sanhedrin (Parshat Behaalotcha), these 250 princes were prime candidates. These were the men whom the



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people in the street expected to be given positions of authority but were not chosen through the selection process. Thus, the people who gathered around Korach were men who were indeed renowned for their leadership qualities but had not in fact been chosen for leadership. The Kli Yakar (d.1619) echoes this idea, adding that one of the demands that these people made was that there should be a rotating leadership, which would, of course, include themselves.

This is perhaps the surest recipe for disaster. Korach's rebellion was fuelled by a group of people who already carried a perceived slight to their honour. But this is a suspended problem in any society. It is impossible to appoint certain people to positions of authority without others feeling that they are left out, and this is what Moshe attempted to convey with his next words: '*Boker, v'yoda Hashem* – In the morning, Hashem will let it be known' – how the leadership of the nation should be run. Rashi interprets the emphasis of the word '*boker* – in the morning' as a pointed message to Korach. Just as it is impossible to upend the distinction between day and night, so is it impossible to upend any order that Hashem has placed in this world. In any society, many people may display qualities of leadership, but ultimately, it is necessarily only selective individuals who can actually undertake that role. This fact is immutable, and without acceptance of that, the discussion will always be pointless.

The Humble Staff

The same message lay behind the choice to use the *ketoret* (incense) as a test between Aharon and Korach. As the commentators point out, the service of the *ketoret*, although it was considered the most cherished of all the Beit HaMikdash services,

was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it carried great blessings with it; the Gemara (Yoma 29a) relates that this service was so coveted that no kohen would be allowed to perform it more than once in his lifetime. On the other hand, when abused, the results were fatal. The national memory of Nadav and Avihu's demise when offering unauthorised *ketoret* was still fresh, serving as a stark warning as to how any position of authority or prestige must be balanced with humility. Leadership in Judaism is always underpinned by a bedrock of accountability.

This lesson seems to have eventually been learned by the nation as a whole. In the epilogue to this narrative, the prince of each tribe placed his staff inside the Mishkan overnight, and in the morning, only Aharon's staff miraculously grew blossoms and almonds. But while all the other staffs remained simple wooden sticks, the verse stresses that the princes each took their own staff back home. Clearly, there was a lesson to be learned not only from the staff that had flowered but also from the ones that had not. The miracle of Aharon's staff demonstrated that greatness can emerge suddenly from unexpected places. But the lesson that the princes learned from the entire episode was equally important. If one's potential for greatness has not yet been realised, that is also Divinely ordained. The simple staff of the runner-up therefore becomes a powerful symbol of acceptance of the order that governs our lives – and the potential it carries to yet blossom on a future occasion.

CHUKAT - BALAK: The Power of Words: From Moshe to Bilaam

Next week's Timeless Torah is at the one off earlier time of 6.45 - 7.30pm