

Parashat Korach, 5772, 2012:

*Understanding the Motivations Behind Korach's Rebellion*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah sh'laimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Korach's rebellion is very difficult to understand. At first blush, it seems that anyone with the least bit of G-d-consciousness should have been able to recognize that this revolt was, in fact, an uprising against Hashem. The mutiny against Moshe and Aharon, while crucial and fundamental, was actually a ruse. It was merely the human terms in which Korach couched his insurrection against G-d. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon several *Midrashim*, makes this point quite clearly in his commentary to *Sefer Bamidbar* 16:11:

**Therefore:** Because of this, “you and your entire company who are assembled” with you “**are against the L-rd,**” for I acted as His messenger to give the kehunah (priesthood) to Aaron, and this rebellion is not with us [**but with the L-rd**]. - [*Midrash Tanchuma Korach* 6, *Numbers Rabbah* 18:9] (This, and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own)

Rashi further notes that Korach was blessed with a prodigious intellect (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:7). Why then did Korach repudiate G-d's authority and rebel against Him? Rashi answers this, as well, in his trenchant analysis of Korach's motives:

But what did Korach, who was astute, see [to commit] this folly? His vision deceived him. He saw [prophetically] a chain of great people descended from him: Samuel, who is equal [in importance] to Moses and Aaron. He [Korach] said, “For his sake I will be spared.” [He also saw] twenty-four watches [of Levites] emanating from his grandsons, all prophesying through the holy spirit, as it says, “all these were the sons of Heman” (I Chron 25:5). He said, “Is it possible that all this greatness is destined to emanate from me, and I should remain silent?” Therefore, he participated [in the rebellion] to reach that prerogative, for he had heard from Moses that they would all perish and one would escape [death]: “the one whom the L-rd chooses - he is the holy one.” He erred in thinking that it referred to him. He, however, did not “see” properly, for his sons repented [and thus did not die at that time]. Moses, however, foresaw this. - [This is found in *Midrash Tanchuma*, Korach 5, *Numbers Rabbah* 18:8] (Emphasis my own)

Rashi's explanation of Korach's seemingly inexplicable behavior goes a long way toward providing us with a conceptual framework for understanding these actions. It also fills in an essential detail that is the "real story behind the story." Korach was blessed with *nevuah* (prophecy); i.e. G-d vouchsafed His glorious visions to him. Therefore, Korach's view of the future was an accurate one – Samuel the prophet would, indeed, be his heir. Little wonder then, that Korach erred and mistakenly believed that the future belonged to him, rather than to Moshe. He misinterpreted his prophetic vision as representing the eclipse of Moshe's sun and the catapulting of his own star to the highest heights of the firmament. As we know, however, nothing could have been further from the truth. Korach's sons did *teshuvah* (repented) and ultimately were the progenitors of future generations. Thus, they had a brilliant future, while Korach was literally buried alive as a result of his actions.

In my opinion, a major question begs to be asked: "How did Korach err so grievously if he was so wise and capable of receiving *d'var Hashem* (G-d's direct words)?" Stated quite simply, how did Korach "not get it?" In my view, his *gaavat halev* (arrogance) blinded him to the realities with which he was presented. No matter how brilliant and far-seeing he was, his ego and blind ambition prevented him from perceiving the truth. This is precisely why the Rambam (1135-1204) warns us so insistently regarding the insidious trait of arrogance:

There are some moral qualities wherein it is forbidden to take the middle approach. Instead, one should adopt one of the extremes of such temperaments. One of these is the temperament of arrogance. It is not good [enough] for one to be just modest, but one should be meek, and one's spirits should be low. Therefore, concerning Moses our Teacher it is written, "...very meek," and not just, "meek." Therefore, the Sages commanded that one should be exceedingly meek. They said further that anyone who raises his spirits [in a haughty fashion] is denying G-d's essence, as it is written, "...then

your heart be lifted up and you forget the L-rd your G-d.” They also said that all those with arrogant airs should be excommunicated, even if they are only slightly arrogant. (*Hilchot Deot* 2:3, O’Levy translation with my emendations)

Korach simply did not understand the crucial nature of *anivut* (humility). Therefore, he did not, and perhaps could not, appreciate that Moshe’s greatness was a direct product of his *anivut*. Korach’s woefully inadequate perception of Moshe’s true qualities was his the cause of his ultimate downfall.

In a very real sense, Korach’s story is a truly tragic one. It is the tale of squandered spiritual potential, misunderstanding, arrogance, and unfettered ambition. Korach rejected humility, and embraced *gaavat halev*. Like a malevolent worm, this *gaavah* burrowed deep into every fiber of his being and prevented him from achieving even a part of what he could have become. In short, Korach was his own worst enemy.

Korach’s motivations and actions are, in reality, a study in what we ought not to do if we are to be true *avdei Hashem* (G-d’s servants). *Dovid Hamelech* (King David), in Psalm 45:5, a psalm from the sons of Korach (*b’nei Korach*), depicts the greatness and humility that is a singular trait of true Torah scholars: “And in your [i.e. the Torah scholar’s] majesty ride prosperously on in the cause of truth and righteous humility (*v’anavah tzedek*), and it shall instruct you so that your right hand shall perform awesome things.” (Emendations my own) King David connects *v’anavah tzedek* directly to Korach’s children and all his future offspring. In doing so, the Psalmist is teaching us that they recognized and understood how to serve Hashem. In truth, *b’nei Korach* were wiser and more prescient than their father – even if they did not receive prophecy directly from the Master of the Universe.

May Hashem give us the wisdom to be like *b'nei Korach*, rather than Korach. May He give us the ability to choose *anavah tzedek* and reject *gaavat halev*. If we can achieve this lofty, but accessible goal, we will be on the path to being authentic *avdei Hashem*.  
*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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