

Parashat Korach, 2013:

*Korach and the Pursuit of Unlimited Power*

Rabbi David Etengoff

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, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Two words are commonly used in the modern lexicon to describe a state or a situation wherein two or more parties cannot agree. One word is “disagreement,” and the other is “conflict.” *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* defines the first as “difference; incongruity; discrepancy,” and as: “difference of opinion or sentiments [;] a disagreeing; a refusal to agree.” In addition, it is defined as: “a controversy; a contention; a quarrel; a difference.” In contrast, “conflict” is defined as: “a fight; battle; struggle.” Moreover it may be: “a sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests, ideas, etc.; clash.” In practical everyday terminology, when a student and teacher, for example, fail to see “eye to eye” it is usually a disagreement; whereas when groups of people or nation states are prepared to go to war, they are in the midst of conflict.

This week’s *parasha* begins with the words: “*V’yikach Korach ben Yitzhar ben Kahat ben Lavi v’Datan v’Aviram bnai Eliav v’On ben Pelet b’nai Reuven. V’yakumu lifnei Moshe v’anashim m’b’nai yisrael chamishim u’mataim...*” (“Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi separated himself, with Datan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, the offspring of Reuben. They stood before Moses with 250 men from the Children of Israel...” Translation, *Artscroll Tanach*). A few verses later in *Sefer*

*Bamidbar* 16:11 we find: “*L’chane atah v’chol adatecha hanoyadim al Hashem...*” (“Therefore, you and your entire assembly that are joining together are against Hashem...” *ibid.*)

Clearly, the above-related events are not merely some sort of disagreement. This was a full-blown conflict of the highest order. In other words, Korach did not rebel against the authority of Moshe and Aharon alone; instead, he rebelled against Hashem, Himself! (“*Sh’chilak al Moshe v’al haMakom,*” *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:1) How could Korach do this? What were the true motivational factors at play that drove him to relentlessly pursue his evil agenda?

My rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), described Korach as “a demagogue motivated by selfish ambitions.” (Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought*, p. 140) As such, even though he was blessed with a prodigious intellect (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 16:7), tremendous wealth (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim*, 119a and *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 31:2), and *nearly* everything that was associated with this brilliance and affluence, it was simply not enough. Korach wanted *everything*. When he was denied the leadership of his tribe and was passed over in favor of his cousin, Elitzafon ben Uziel (*Midrash Tanchuma, Korach* I), Korach’s need for power suddenly knew no bounds and expanded to include control of the entire Jewish people. Even this, however, was not enough. Instead, he wanted to be recognized as the source of *all* power. In short, he not only wanted to replace Moshe, he wanted to supplant the Almighty, Himself. Korach, therefore, incited and directed a rebellion against *all* authority both earthly and heavenly.

Korach's methodology (i.e., ruse) was deceptively simple. In place of the G-d-given commandments, and regulations associated with the grand and noble halachic process, he wanted to substitute "common-sense" logic and reason. Thus, Rav Soloveitchik stated: "Korach publicly challenged the halachic competency of Moses and ridiculed his interpretations of Jewish law as being contrary to elementary reason." (Besdin, p.139) The *Midrash Tanchuma (Korach, II)* brings the following two famous incidents that Korach used in his attempt to undermine Moshe's halachic authority, the halachic process, and Hashem, Himself:

Korach jumped up and said to Moshe [in front of the assembly]: "You have stated: 'And you shall place on the tzitzit [a thread of *techalet* – sky blue].' In the case of a prayer shawl [or four cornered garment] that is entirely colored *techalet* (should it not logically be exempt from the obligation of tzitzit altogether? Moshe responded: "It remains obligated in tzitzit." Korach then said to him: "A garment that is entirely composed of *techalet* does not make it exempt from tzitzit, yet four threads [of *techalet*] render it ritually acceptable? (See Rashi's version as well on *Sefer Bamidbar* 16:1)

[Korach continued his harassment and ridicule of Moshe and asked:] "A house that is completely filled with Torah scrolls [*sefarim*], is it not logically the case that it should not require a *mezuzah*?" Moshe responded to him: "It is obligated in a *mezuzah*." [Korach responded to him and said:] The entire Torah that is composed of 278 *parshiot* is unable to fulfill the necessary obligation; yet, two sections [of the Torah] that are found in the *mezuzah* fulfill the obligation! Korach then said to him: "**These things were not commanded to you! You have lied about them on your own!**" Therefore it says: "And Korach separated himself..."

Korach, in reality, represented consummate evil. He was an authoritarian personality, a would-be dictator, who tried, like so many others before and after him, to convince the people that he was a populist leader with their needs and desires first and foremost in his mind. To emphasize this point, Rashi (1040-1105) once again quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma* in his explanation of "*Vayakel aleyhem Korach et kol haeda...*" ("And Korach gathered together the entire assembly," *Sefer Bamidbar*: 16:19):

That entire night [before Hashem incontrovertibly proved who was truly chosen to lead the Jewish people] Korach went to each tribe and seduced them by saying: “Do you think that I am after my own self-aggrandizement? No! I am only so careful (*makpid*) on *your* behalf! These people [Moshe and Aharon] have come and taken all of the glory for themselves! He [Moshe] has taken the kingship, and to his brother he has given the High Priesthood!” In this manner, everyone was led astray [by Korach’s populist diatribe.]

What practical lessons can be gleaned from Korach’s rebellion? I believe Rabbi Zave Rudman offers us some fascinating insights:

And as for Korach, unfortunately we have many of those today. These are the ones who use sarcasm and ridicule to try to puncture the pure and altruistic motives of good people. They foster discontent. They clothe themselves in the guise of the populist who is worried about the little man. However, they are really out for themselves and their own ego. Judaism regards quarrelling as one of the gravest sins. Why? Because divisiveness contradicts the essential unity of G-d and undermines the harmony of creation. It was hatred, jealousy and infighting which brought about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And only through unconditional love will it be rebuilt. The Torah states: “Don’t be like Korach” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 17:5). This is a prohibition against quarreling. Know your place, and respect those who deserve it. This is the lesson of the rebellion of Korach.

<http://www.aish.com/jl/b/chumash/Chumash-Themes-19-Korachs-Rebellion.html>

May Hashem grant us the insight and wisdom to eschew Korach-like behaviors in our own lives, and pursue harmony and goodness. As the Torah states: “And you shall do what is proper and good in the eyes of the L-rd, in order that it may be well with you, and that you may come and possess the good land which the L-rd swore to your forefathers.” (*Sefer Devarim* 6:18, translation, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*). With Hashem’s guidance, may each of us foster peace and unity in our homes, families, and communities, and thereby help bring the *Mashiach* (Messiah) soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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