

Parashat Korach 5774, 2014:

*The Wife of Ohn ben Peleth: A Heroine Without a Name*

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi took [himself to one side] along with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and Ohn the son of Peleth, descendants of Reuben. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:1, this and all *Sefer Bamidbar* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This *pasuk* (verse) contains the famous opening words of our *parasha*. Our *sidrah* (Torah portion) can be described as the section dedicated to the depiction of direct rebellion against Torah authority. Herein, Korach simultaneously revolted against the Almighty, and denied Moshe's role as Hashem's authentic messenger (16:3, 13, 30). Even the fabulously wealthy and brilliant Korach, however, could not act alone; the Torah teaches us that his lieutenants in this mutiny were "Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and Ohn the son of Peleth, descendants of Reuben."

As is well known, Hashem stopped the rebellion in its tracks through the miracle of the first earthquake in recorded history (16:32). Prior to this event, however, the Almighty had commanded Moshe to warn the congregation of the impending mortal danger:

[G-d said:] "Speak to the congregation saying, 'Withdraw from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.'" So they withdrew from around the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and Dathan and Abiram went out standing upright at the entrance of their tents together with their wives, their children, and their infants. (16:24, 27)

These two verses specifically reference Korach, Dathan, and Abiram, with the latter pair being mentioned no less than three times. Notably absent, and unaccountably so, is Ohn

the son of Peleth. After all, since he was one of the individuals who fomented the rebellion, why was he not mentioned as one of those to be punished by the approaching earthquake? Strangely enough, unlike Dathan, and Abiram and their families, there is no indication whatsoever as to what happened to Ohn ben Pelet and his family. Quite simply, he seems to have vanished from our story.

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 109b) noticed this lacuna in our narrative and developed an amazing and inspiring “story behind the story” explanation of what took place:

Rav said: **Ohn, the son of Peleth, was saved by his wife.** She said to him, “Why do you care whether the one [Moshe] remains master or the other [Korach] becomes master, you will still remain but a disciple.” He replied, “But what can I do? I have taken part in their counsel, and they have sworn me [to be] with them.” (This and the following translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my bolding, emendations and bracketed additions to enhance understanding)

After convincing Ohn of the irrational nature and utter futility of participating in the usurpation, his heroic, but ever-anonymous, wife developed the second part of her strategically brilliant plan:

She said, “I know that they [*klal Yisrael*] are all a holy community,” as it is written, “... for the entire congregation are all holy, and the L-rd is in their midst.” (16:3) [So,] she continued, “Sit here and I will save you.” She gave him wine to drink, caused him to become intoxicated, and laid him down within [the tent where he passed out]. Then she sat down at the entrance of the tent and loosened [and uncovered] her hair. Whoever came [to summon him to join the rebellion] saw her and retreated. [I.e. because she was in an immodest state]

Our passage concludes by noting that when Ohn finally awoke, Korach and his confederates were deep in the bowels of the earth. As a result, Ohn’s entire family survived. *Midrash Rabbah* (Vilna), Parashat Korach, 18, uses this opportunity to praise Ohn’s wife for saving her entire family: “ ‘The wisest of women - each one built her house’ [*Sefer Mishle* 14:1] – this refers to Ohn’s wife.”

Ohn's wife unquestionably followed in the footsteps of our *Emahot* (Matriarchs) when she embarked upon her wise journey to rescue her family from all but certain oblivion. Like Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, she knew what needed to be done in order to guarantee her family's future, and did not hesitate to act upon that knowledge. May our anonymous heroine serve as a role model for us, and may she be a *malitzah yesharah* (advocate) for all of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) as she was for her beloved family.

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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