

*Korach's Rebellion and the Power of Jealousy*

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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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

They [Korach and his followers] assembled against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and the L-rd is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the L-rd's assembly?" Moses heard and fell on his face. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:3-4, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

At first glance, Korach's grievances and mutiny seem to be just another example of our acting as an *am keshay oref*, i.e. a stiff-necked and challenging nation. After all, this term is found four times in *Sefer Shemot* in reaction to the incident of the *Egel Hazahav* (Golden Calf), and twice in *Sefer Devarim* as a general description of our nation. As such, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself on Midrashic sources in his comments on our verse, cites our prior transgressions:

**and fell on his face:** because of the rebellion, for this was already their fourth offense. [When] they sinned with the calf, "Moses pleaded" (*Sefer Shemot* 32:11); by the episode of the complainers, "Moses prayed" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 11:2); with the spies, "Moses said to G-d, 'But the Egyptians will hear...'" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 14:13, underlining my own)

According to Rashi, however, there is a singular difference that obtains regarding Moshe's response to the Jewish people's first three acts of defiance and Korach's rebellion. Until this point, Moshe pleaded with and prayed to the Almighty in order to save our nation. Now, however, "Moshe heard and fell on his face." His silence is deafening. Where was the Moshe who had advocated so powerfully for his people? Rashi

addressed this aspect of Moshe's behavior in the continuation of his commentary on our *pasuk* (verse):

... now, at Korach's rebellion, he [Moshe] became disheartened [literally, his hands were weakened]. This is comparable to a prince who sinned against his father, and his [father's] friend placated the king on his behalf, once, twice, and three times. When he offended the fourth time, the friend became disheartened, and he said, "How much more can I trouble the king? Perhaps he will no longer accept my petition." - [*Midrash Tanchuma* 4, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 18: 6, underlining my own]

Rashi's comment focuses upon the number of times that the people revolted against Hashem, rather than the nature of Korach's uprising. A careful reading of the entire seditious act, however, leads us to conclude that it was qualitatively different than everything that had transpired prior to this time, since Korach's actions appear to have been personal, and motivated by anger and jealousy. Following this line of *parshanut* (exegetical Torah analysis), my rebbi and mentor, 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) Therefore, even though he was blessed with a prodigious intellect (Rashi on *Sefer Bamidbar* 16:7), tremendous wealth (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim*, 119a and *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 31:2), and everything that was associated with such brilliance and affluence this was simply not enough for Korach. He wanted *everything*. When he was denied the leadership of the tribe of Levi, passed over in favor of his cousin, Elitzafon ben Uziel (*Midrash Tanchuma, Korach* I), his jealousy suddenly knew no bounds. As *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:1 states: ["Korach] rebelled against Moshe and G-d" ("*she'chilak al Moshe v'al haMakom*").

Rav Nisson Alpert *zatzal* (1927-1986), the leading disciple and exponent of Rav Moshe Feinstein *zatzal* (1895-1986), in his posthumous work entitled *Limudei Nisson al HaTorah*, offers us a deep insight into the inherently destructive and insidious nature of jealousy. He asserts that regardless of one's intellectual ability, *kinah* (jealousy) has the ability to short-circuit man's cognitive structure and send him on a course of self-destruction: "It appears that when one feels that someone has violated their honor [such as in the case of Korach], then all of his intellect and acumen will fail to save him from the deepest depths of *Sheol* (Hell)." Perhaps, even worse, these self-same natural abilities will become the causative agents in such a person's undoing: "[These abilities] will become the grand agents of his destruction since he will utilize all of his great talents and natural endowments to rationalize (*l'ha'ashir*) his ignoble purpose." For Rav Alpert, this was precisely Korach's *modus operandi*:

He gathered many men and princes of the Jewish people that were embittered [by perceived slights] and pursuers of honor and glory – as he was – and speciously claimed before the Jewish nation that he was prepared to go to war on their behalf to rescue them from the "dictatorship" of Moshe and Aharon. Korach [seduced them into this mode of thinking,] by declaring to them that the entire nation was holy. [As Korach so craftily asked,] "Why did Moshe and Aharon raise themselves over the entire congregation of Hashem?" (Translation and brackets my own)

Given Rav Alpert's cogent analysis, we are now in a much better position to understand Rashi's original comment. In sum, Korach's rebellion was different in kind and degree than its three predecessors, for it was a jealousy-fueled moment of rage wherein Hashem, and His mastery of the Universe, was challenged and rejected. Little wonder, then, that this time, Moshe simply could not pray on behalf of the *mordim* (rebellious ones).

There are many lessons that we can learn from Korach's insurrection. Perhaps, first and foremost among them is the need for each of us to look deeply within ourselves

(*cheshbon hanefesh*) and ensure that we do not allow jealous drives for power, wealth and social prestige to lead us down self-destructive paths. If we can do this, we will be well on our way to fulfilling the essence of Ben Zoma's famous statement in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1):

Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated (*Sefer Mishle* 16:32), "Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city." Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot. As is stated (*Sefer Tehillim* 128:2): "If you eat of the toil of your hands, fortunate are you, and good is to you;" "fortunate are you" in this world, "and good is to you" in the World to Come. Who is honorable? One who honors his fellow man. As is stated (*Sefer Shemuel* I: 2:30): "For to those who honor me, I accord honor; those who scorn me shall be demeaned."  
([http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/682518/jewish/English-Text.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682518/jewish/English-Text.htm))

*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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