

Parashat Korach 5777, 2017:

Of Power and Glory

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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, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah sh'laimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the 16th chapter of *Sefer Bamidbar*. It tells the story of Korach and his followers, and their rebellion against G-d and His Torah, Moshe, and Aharon. There are countless explanations as to why Korach chose to rebel, including psychological, political, sociological, and economic rationales. In my view, however, Korach's mutiny was conceived, planned, and implemented to achieve one overarching goal: Power.

Many shades of meaning of the word "power" are found in the opening verses of our *parasha*:

Korach son of Yitz'har (a grandson of Kehoth and great-grandson of Levi) began a rebellion along with Dathan and Aviram (sons of Eliav) and On (son of Peleth), descendants of Reuben.

They had a confrontation with Moses along with 250 Israelites who were men of rank in the community, representatives at the assembly, and famous.

They demonstrated against Moses and Aaron, and declared to them, "You have gone too far! All the people in the community are holy, and G-d is with them. Why are you setting yourselves above G-d's congregation?"

When Moses heard this, he threw himself on his face...It is actually against G-d that you and your party are demonstrating! After all, who is Aaron that you should have grievances against him?' (Translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*)

A straightforward reading of these *pasukim* (verses) reveals the following:

- Korach instigated the rebellion.
- Korach, Datan, Aviram, On, and the 250 men of distinction had a direct confrontation (*machloket*) with Moshe.
- The content of the *machloket* was a direct challenge to the G-d-given authority of both Moshe and Aharon. The actual terms of this rebellion were couched in ostensibly altruistic language: “All the people in the community are holy, and G-d is with them.” Korach seemingly wanted to achieve a true populist democracy wherein everyone would be equal in his or her ability to serve Hashem.
- The rebellion’s professed focus was against Moshe and Aharon. In reality, however, it was much more. It was a mutiny against G-d Himself: “It is actually against G-d that you and your party are demonstrating!”

Midrash Tanchuma, Korach II provides us with two examples of Korach’s repudiation of Moshe’s halachic authority that portray his rebellion against Hashem. The first vignette focuses upon Korach’s derision of *Tzitzit*, while the second presents his repudiation of the *mitzvah* of *Mezuzah*. In both instances, the operative principle of Korach’s dismissal of Moshe’s (G-d’s) halachic hegemony is sarcasm and ridicule couched as common-sense logic:

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 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...” (Translation and bolding my own)

The depth of Korach’s rejection of G-d and His Torah are reflected in his cynicism regarding the *mitzvot* of *Tzitzit* and *Mezuzah*, whose G-d-given nature he dared to

challenge. In addition, it is crucial to note that Korach first assailed the obligation of *Tzitzit*, knowing full well that this *mitzvah* symbolically represents the entire Torah. As the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states in *Hilchot Tzitzit*:

A person must be extremely careful regarding the mitzvah of *Tzitzit* since the Torah [symbolically] makes it representative of all of the mitzvot. As the Torah states: “You will look upon it [*Tzitzit*] and you will remember all of the commandments of Hashem.” [*Sefer Bamidbar* 15:39] (3:12, translation and emphasis my own)

Korach attempted to undermine this commandment in the eyes of the Jewish people, since he understood that if they were to remain devoted to this mandate, his rebellion would surely fail.

What about *Mezuzah*? What is at the “heart” of this *mitzvah*? The Rambam suggests the following:

A person is duty-bound to be punctilious in the commandment of *Mezuzah*, since it is a continuous obligation that is incumbent upon us all. Each time a person enters and leaves his home he encounters the Oneness (unity) of Hashem, the name of the Holy One Blessed be He. [Then] he will remember his love for Him and awake from his “sleep” and the error of his ways [as a result of] following the foolish pursuits of his time (*hevlai hazeman*). He will then know and understand that there is nothing that remains forever, except for the knowledge of Hashem (*Tzur Ha’olam*). Immediately, he will return to the knowledge of Him and follow the proper and righteous path. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, u’Mezzuah, v’Sefer Torah*, 6:13, translation my own)

As Rashi (1040-1105) notes, Korach was blessed with a prodigious intellect (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:7). Accordingly, he recognized that if the Jewish people would remain loyal to the commandment of *Mezuzah*, their dedication to Hashem, Moshe and Aharon would never falter. Therefore, he sought to ridicule this precept in particular, in order to foment an attack upon the underlying rationale of the Torah.

Korach was a self-serving demagogue whose entire being was focused upon repudiating Hashem’s Dominion and the Torah. As such, his mutiny was doomed to fail from the

moment of inception. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) emphasized this idea in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)* 5:17:

Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure; one that is not for the sake of Heaven is not destined to endure. Which is a dispute that is for the sake of Heaven? The dispute(s) between Hillel and Shamai. Which is a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his company. (Translation as presented at <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=2099>, emphasis my own)

Chazal have a general rule of Torah analysis: “*M’klal lav atah shomeah hane*” (“From a negative formulation one can derive a positive idea;” *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 14a). If we apply this principle to Korach’s actions, we can deduce a very positive message: We must continuously strive to live lives that are authentically dedicated *l’shame shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven). In so doing, may we come to recognize that true power and glory belong to Hashem. As *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) so beautifully stated:

Yours, O L-rd, are the greatness, and the might, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and on the earth [is Yours]; Yours is the kingdom and [You are He] Who is exalted over everything as the Leader. And wealth and honor are from before You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is strength and might, and it is in Your hand to magnify and to strengthen all. (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* 1:29:11-12, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

May each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to recognize the eternal truth of these stirring words, and thereby grow in our dedication and devotion to the Almighty and His holy Torah.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

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