

Parashat Korach 5778, 2018:

Korach and the Failure of Populism

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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 Yecheiel, 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, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

In the context of his analysis of Korach's rebellion, my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" to his students and followers, 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, *Commentary on the Torah to Sefer Bamidbar* 16:7), tremendous wealth (*Talmud Bavli, Pesachim*, 119a and *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 31:2), and all that was associated with such brilliance and affluence, this was simply not enough for Korach. He wanted *everything*. As such, when he was denied leadership of the tribe of Levi, having been passed over in favor of his cousin, Elitzafon ben Uziel (*Midrash Tanchuma, Korach* I), his demagoguery suddenly knew no bounds.

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), in his *Commentary on the Torah* on our *parasha*, maintains that Korach did not immediately foment rebellion when he was denied leadership of the tribe of Levi. Instead, he strategically waited for the most auspicious time to begin his machinations. The Rav follows this interpretation of events, and notes:

The opportune moment arrived sooner than Korach anticipated. It was the incident of the spies, perhaps the most tragic incident in Moses' life. The Almighty's decree that all the adults would die in the desert was a hard blow to Moses' prestige. For a short while, he lost his influence over the crowds... Suddenly all their hopes and dreams were dissipated and shattered. No land, no conquest,

no rivers of milk and honey, no realizations of the promise were in sight – only many bleak and dreary years before Israel would set foot on the soil of Canaan. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 192)

Many people who are generally familiar with Rav Soloveitchik's thought are unaware that in 1924 he spent three semesters studying Political Theory and Science at the Free Polish University in Warsaw, Poland. This training provided him with the perfect background for understanding the nature and development of political movements. Little wonder, then, that he emphasizes the following notions in his analysis of Korach's insurrection:

Any conspiracy or organized rebellion, no matter how egotistically motivated, must develop an ideology to succeed. Korach planned an anti-Moses movement, and such a movement cannot exist or make headway without developing an ideology. Every movement must have a motto, and Korach indeed provided the philosophy of the rebellion. (*Vision and Leadership*, page 194)

What exactly was the philosophical underpinning of Korach's mutiny against Aaron and Moses?

The Torah underscores his position at the very beginning of our *parasha*:

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 On, the son of Peleth, descendants of Reuben. They confronted Moses together with two hundred and fifty men from the children of Israel, chieftains of the congregation, representatives of the assembly, men of repute. They 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?" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:1-3, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Korach's ideological thesis appears to be entirely accurate. Beyond a doubt, the entire congregation of the Jewish people is holy and Hashem is in our midst. This has been the case ever since we stood shoulder to shoulder as one united and chosen nation in the lonely and barren Mount Sinai Desert and received the Torah. The Rav formulates this thought in the following manner:

The basis of this challenge was very simple and, at first glance quite logical. No one can deny the assertion that the whole community is holy; it is the very essence of our chosenness. Every Jew possesses intrinsic sanctity. As far as holiness is concerned, there is no distinction between Moses and a simple woodchopper. Hence, Korach asked, what right did Moses or Aaron have to lead, to

guide, to rule? He charged them with seizing power illegitimately. He raised the millennial-old argument based on the equality of all people. (*Vision and Leadership*, p.194, underlining my own)

Yet, while “no one can deny the assertion that the whole community is holy; it is the very essence of our choseness,” it is only part of the story of the *kedushah* (holiness) of the Jewish people. There exists another, equally vital component of the sanctity of our nation, namely, the *kedushah* of the individual. The Rav formulated this idea in the following manner:

...Judaism was not satisfied with the social [i.e. collective] aspect of *kedushah*. If the community were the only source of sanctity, then the individual would be deprived of his creative role, his individual initiative, his originality and uniqueness. The outstanding person would not be able to develop into a great leader. Hence, the Torah says, there is a second resource of *kedushah* – the sanctity which the individual detects in the inner recesses of his personality...There is a separate *kedushah* attached to every individual. (*Vision and Leadership*, p.195, underlining and brackets my own)

Precisely because “there is a separate *kedushah* attached to every individual,” *Am Yisrael* (the Jewish people) is infused with “the countless *kedushah* experiences of the individual members of the community.” In effect, “the single person sanctifies the community.” (*Vision and Leadership*, p.195, underlining my own) Korach’s refusal to recognize this fundamental component of *kedushat Yisrael* (the sanctity of the Jewish people) is precisely why he had the unmitigated gall to ask Moses and Aaron, “Why do you raise yourselves above the L-rd’s assembly?” Once again, we may turn to the Rav’s penetrating explication of this idea:

The statement by Korach that “All the community is holy” is correct as long as we are speaking of the community-rooted *kedushah* inherited from our ancestors. Indeed, “all the community,” the community as a whole is a source of holiness...However, if we shift our attention from the social aspect to the individual aspect of *kedushah*, the whole idea of equality turns into an absurdity. We must admit that the *behirah* [chosen nature] of Moses was above and beyond the *behirah* of the woodchopper or water-drawer. (*Vision and Leadership*, p.196, underlining my own)

May we, as a people, recognize both the “community-rooted *kedushah* inherited from our ancestors,” and the unique sanctity that each and every one of us has the potential to bring to our

nation. Then, with the Almighty's help, may we be *zocheh* to fulfill the Torah's words: "And you shall be to Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation" (*Sefer Shemot* 19:6), as we continue our sacred task *l'takane ha'olam b'malchut Sha-dai* - to perfect the world under the kingship of Hashem. (*Aleinu*) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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. Please click on the highlighted link.