

Parashat Korach 5780, 2020:

Korach's Blind Ambition

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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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the 16th chapter of *Sefer Bamidbar* that tells the story of Korach, his wayward Levitical followers, and their rebellion against Hashem and His Torah, Moshe and Aharon. We must remember that the leaders of this uprising were “chieftains of the congregation, representatives of the assembly, [and] men of repute” who had garnered a good deal of respect among the nation (16:2, all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). It was precisely this status within the community that made them so dangerous, and encouraged them to level such a profound challenge against Moshe and Aharon: “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?” (16:3) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Tanchuma, Korach IV*, explains the content of this trumped-up allegation: “If you [Moshe] have taken kingship for yourself, you should not have chosen the priesthood for your brother [Aharon]. For not only you heard at Sinai, ‘I am the L-rd, your G-d,’ the entire congregation heard it!” In sum, Korach and his compatriots stated that Moshe and Aharon had misappropriated the people’s rightful power, and, in so doing, they rejected the notion that the Master of the Universe had chosen Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people and Aharon as the *Kohane Gadol*.

In his posthumous work, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, explored the essence of Korach’s question, “So why do you raise yourselves above the L-rd’s assembly?” His penetrating analysis offers us a novel understanding of Korach’s revolt and its underlying motivations: “Korach charged that Moses and Aaron were power-hungry, that they had set up a power structure and raised themselves above the congregation. He equated the exercise of power with kingship.” (This and the following quotations, pages 197-198)

In other words, according to the Rav, Korach’s political philosophy was totally *realpolitik* in nature, and lacked any grounding in moral and theological considerations. Korach quite simply removed Hashem from the ruling equation. Moreover, like many demagogues throughout history, he believed that all people were driven by the same will to power that constituted the core value of his own personality. Little wonder, then, that he erroneously attributed this position to none other than Moshe and Aharon. As the Rav suggests:

This equation and the politicization of the relationship between the leader and those whom he leads is incorrect. The covenantal community [that is, the transhistorical Jewish community] is, first and foremost, not a political community; it is a teaching community. Throughout the ages, the central figure in the covenantal community has not been a king, warrior, or high priest, but the teacher, the *rebbe*. (Underlining my own)

The Rav’s analysis of the covenantal community as a teaching, rather than a political, entity describes the essence of the relationship that obtains between the people and the *rebbe* within the Jewish worldview. According to the Rav, there are no subjects, there are only disciples. This sets the stage for the following type of apolitical and non-power-based association:

The relationship is not of a political nature, nor is it connected to the use of violence or the employment of sanctions. It is a free commitment on the part of the disciples to their master and teacher. The latter does not impose any authority upon the disciples. No one asks them to obey his words and to follow him. They can terminate the relationship at any time.

In the Rav's view, Judaism is reluctant to recognize any individual as king, for in truth, "G-d governs, no one else may usurp this prerogative." This leads to the following purely volitional connection between the *rebbe* and his disciples: "The disciples love their masters and listen, not to their orders, since they give none, but to their teachings, which enlighten the mind and gladden the heart." As the Rav notes, none of this was congruent with Korach's misunderstanding of the genuine nature of the Jewish community:

Moses had not raised himself above the community as Korach charged, but the community raised him above itself. Moses was elevated without questing for leadership. The teacher is certainly elected by G-d to be near Him, and his personal *kedushah* [holiness] transcends that of his disciples. A saintly person is the leader because he is the teacher. (Brackets and underlining my own)

Based upon the Rav's insights, we can now understand that Korach completely misunderstood the true nature of authentic Jewish leadership. This led to his blind political ambition to overthrow Moshe and Aharon — as if they were just one more set of self-appointed leaders, rather than beloved servants and messengers of Hashem, and the people's freely chosen role models and teachers.

May Hashem protect our *rebbe*s and teachers, and may we ever show them the honor and respect they deserve. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria 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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [**http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd**](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd)

*** 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.