

Parashat Korach 5782, 2022:

Understanding the Rebellion

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yeziel, 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, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The primary focus of our *parasha* is the rebellion of Korach and his minions against Moshe, Aharon, and Hashem:

Korach the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kahat, the son of Levi took [himself to one side] along with Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and On the son of Pelet, descendants of Reuven. They confronted Moshe... They assembled against Moshe and Aharon, and said to them, “You take too much upon yourselves...” Therefore [said Moshe], you and your entire company who are assembled are against Hashem, for what is Aharon that you should complain against him? (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:1-3 11, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining and brackets my own)

These individuals were punished by being swallowed by the earth:

[Moshe said:] “If these men die as all men die and the fate of all men will be visited upon them, then Hashem has not sent me. But if Hashem creates a creation, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they descend alive into the grave, you will know that these men have provoked Hashem.” As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the earth beneath them split open. The earth beneath them opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korah and all the property. (16:29-32)

In his interpretation of this narrative in *Toldot Yitzchak*, *Sefer Bamidbar*, chapter 17, Rav Yitzchak ben Rav Yosef Karo *zatzal* (1458-1535), uncle of the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, focuses on three specific topics: The identity of those who rebelled, their goals, and the substance of their complaints. He identifies four factions in the rebellion: Korach, Datan and Aviram, the *levi'im*, and the *bechorot* (first born sons), asserting that these distinct groups shared the same objective:

to be recognized as bona fide *kohanim*. He then presents the key elements of each of their claims to the *kahuna*.

According to Rav Yitzchak, the *bechorot* sought the *kahuna*, since they had initially been the ones to offer the *korbanot*. “As a result of the *Chet HaEgel* (Sin of the Golden Calf), however, the Holy One blessed be He removed the *kahuna* from them and gave it to the Tribe of Levi.” (This and the following translations and brackets my own) Moreover, Rav Yitzchak maintains the *bechorot* did not trust Moshe, “as he was from the Tribe of Levi, and [they] claimed that it was he, and not the Holy One blessed be He, who took the *kahuna* from them and gave it to the members of his tribe.”

In Rav Yitzchak’s view, the group of rebellious *levi'im* demanded to be *kohanim*, since, after all: “They were from the Tribe of Levi and direct descendants of Levi; as such, why were they not *kohanim* like Aharon and his sons—all of whom were from the Tribe of Levi? They mistrusted Moshe, and claimed that he chose his brother, Aharon, for this position [himself, instead of this having been a direct command from the Almighty].”

Rav Yitzchak describes Datan and Aviram as “*gedolim b'Yisrael*,” in the sense that they had gravitas in the eyes of the nation. He notes that they were from the Tribe of Reuven, who was the *bechor* of The Tribes of Israel, and that, on this basis, Datan and Aviram insisted that they had full rights to the *kahuna*. In addition, like the *bechorot*, and the relatively small group of breakaway *levi'im*, they believed that Moshe had chosen Aharon and his descendants for the *kahuna* for nepotistic reasons.

In Rav Yitzchak’s estimation, Korach demanded the *kahuna* based upon two prerogatives: Like Aharon, he was from The Tribe of Levi, and he was a *bechor*. Korach believed these two “facts

on the ground” made him destined for the *kahuna*, and given his overall egotistical orientation, deserving of being chosen as the *Kohane Gadol*.

Rav Yitzchak’s analysis of Korach’s rebellion is a conceptual tour de force. With penetrating insight, he demonstrates that, while various claims for the *kahuna* were presented, all four segments of the insurrection were equally blind to the *anavah* (humility) that was the heart of Moshe’s very being. Moreover, each group failed to comprehend that their participation in the uprising was, in essence, a revolt against the Master of the Universe Who had commanded that the *kahuna* be entrusted to Aharon and his descendants forevermore.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah*, *Tanach* may be found at:
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*** 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: [The Rav](#)