**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KORACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Korach tells of the revolt led by Korach against Moshe and Aharon. The Torah is very brief in its account of Korach’s arguments, recording only the rhetorical question, “*Madu’a titnas’u al kehal Hashem*” – “Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?!” (16:3). The Midrash, however, presents additional information regarding the arguments advanced by Korach in his campaign to undermine Moshe’s authority. In one such passage (*Bamidbar Rabba* 18:4), the Midrash comments, “Korach at that time assembled his followers and said to them [Moshe and Aharon]: You have imposed upon us a greater burden than the Egyptian bondage. We would be better off [living] under Egypt’s rule than under yours.”

According to this Midrashic passage, Korach and his followers objected to the “burden” imposed by Moshe, likely referring to the large, complex body of laws included in the Torah which Moshe taught. They charged that Moshe overburdened them with laws which he claimed were given by God, and they were “enslaved” to a greater extent than they had been in Egypt.

It is clear from Moshe’s response that Korach and his followers protested their being barred from the roles assigned to the *kohanim*. After all, Moshe told Korach that he should feel content with his lofty role as a Levi, and there was no reason for him to vie for the priesthood, as well (16:8-11). And, Moshe decided to settle the question by having Korach, his followers, and Aharon all bring incense offerings, a job reserved for the *kohanim*, after which God would demonstrably accept the offering of the individual chosen for the high priesthood. Quite clearly, then, Korach’s objective, or one of his objectives, was to lift the restrictions that barred the rest of the nation from performing the rituals assigned to the *kohanim*.

In light of this objective, Korach’s charge that Moshe “overburdened” the people becomes especially revealing. Korach wanted, on the one hand, more opportunities to serve God. He felt dissatisfied with his role as a Levite, and sought to perform also the rituals reserved for the *kohanim*. At the same time, however, Korach protested the “subjugation” that he accused Moshe of imposing upon the people. He felt Moshe was overburdening the people with laws, requirements and restrictions. Even as he sought additional duties and responsibilities, he objected to the “burden” of duties and responsibilities which he and the people already bore.

Of course, these two complaints are not at all contradictory. Korach wanted to serve God, but on his terms. He wanted to choose for himself which rituals to perform and which were an unfair and unnecessary “burden.” He ostensibly desired a closer relationship to God, one which he saw as available only to the priestly class, but he wanted to dictate the terms and conditions of this relationship.

Rashi (16:5), citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, writes that Moshe said in his response to Korach and his cohorts, “The Almighty drew boundaries in His world. Are you able to turn morning to evening? If so, then you can overturn this.” Just as we are unauthorized to dictate the laws of nature, which have been established exclusively by the Creator, likewise, we cannot dictate the terms of *avodat Hashem*, the way God wants His nation to serve Him. The decision of what we may do, what we may not do, and what we must do is one which is made exclusively by the Almighty, and we cannot try drawing close to Him by doing what we decide He wants.

Sunday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a) tells, startlingly, that during the time of Korach’s uprising against Moshe, the married men of *Benei Yisrael* suspected Moshe of violating their wives, and they even went so far as to warn their wives not to be found going into seclusion with Moshe. Whereas the Torah speaks only of Korach and his followers challenging Moshe and Aharon’s rights to their respective positions of leadership, the Gemara relates that the story was even uglier, as the people accused Moshe of regularly committing adultery with the nation’s women.

On the surface, the Gemara’s comment simply demonstrates the extent to which people will go in their effort to besmirch and defame their rivals, or those against whom they have grievances. The charge of Moshe’s sexual misdeeds was baseless, but this is how far Korach was prepared to go in his campaign to overthrow Moshe by arousing the people’s mistrust.

There may, however, be a deeper, allegorical meaning of the Gemara’s comment. Perhaps, the Gemara refers here to the people’s objection to what they perceived as Moshe’s infiltration into their private lives. The Torah’s laws govern every aspect of our lives, including our professions, social activities, finances, and family relationships. The charge that Moshe violated the nation’s women may allegorically refer to the alleged “invasiveness” of Torah law. The people claimed that they felt “violated” by the Torah’s presence in their most personal, intimate affairs, by its restricting their conduct even in the most private areas of their lives.

This claim comes into clearer focus when we consider the fact that Korach and his followers approached Moshe to demand the rights of the priesthood. They argued that the Torah imposed itself upon their private lives, where they felt it did not belong, instead of obligating them in the public, formal setting of the *Mishkan*. They wanted a system of laws and obligations involving formal ceremony and ritual, but not one which dictated the way they conducted their personal affairs.

Of course, this objection was fundamentally mistaken. The Torah is observed primarily in our ordinary, day-to-day affairs, and only secondarily in the “*Mishkan*,” in formal settings such as the synagogue and the like. We show our devotion to God by conducting all our affairs, both private and public, in subservience to His will. Far from “violating” our privacy, the Torah’s presence in our personal lives elevates and enhances them, transforming our ordinary, mundane activities into acts of holiness. Whereas Korach’s followers argued that their private lives should remain “off-limits” to religious laws and principles, we believe that to the contrary, religious laws and ideals are specifically intended to uplift and refine our private lives, infusing them with meaning, dignity and sanctity.

Monday

The opening verse of Parashat Korach identifies Korach, the instigator and leader of a revolt against Moshe, as “the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi.” Korach was the great-grandson of Levi, the third son of Yaakov Avinu.

Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, finds it significant that the Torah did not go one generation further, identifying Levi as the son of Yaakov. Rather than introduce Korach as “the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi, the son of Yaakov,” the Torah stopped at Levi. The Midrash explained that this was done in fulfillment of Yaakov’s deathbed request. When he assembled his sons just before his passing, Yaakov sharply condemned the anger and violence of two of his sons – Shimon and Levi, and asked, “Let my soul not come among their council; let my honor not be counted among their assembly” (Bereishit 49:6). Yaakov specifically asked not to be mentioned in reference to Shimon and Levi, “for in their rage they killed a man, and when it pleased them they maimed an ox.” Due to Shimon and Levi’s violent nature, Yaakov expressed his desire not to have his name associated with them. The Midrash explains this as a prayer that Yaakov’s name not be associated with two grave offenses committed by descendants of Shimon and Levi: the revolt led by Korach, Levi’s great-grandson, and the incident of *Ba’al Pe’or*, when the leader of the tribe of Shimon, Zimri, publicly sinned with a Midyanite woman (Bamidbar 25). Yaakov’s name is omitted when the Torah identifies Korach, and also when it identifies Zimri, the leader of Shimon who committed the sinful act during the incident of *Ba’al Pe’or* (Bamidbar 25:14).

Why would we have expected the Torah to identify Shimon and Levi as Yaakov’s sons in these contexts? Are we not already well aware of the fact that Shimon and Levi were among the sons of Yaakov? Was it really only because of Yaakov’s special request that his name was not mentioned in reference to these unfortunate incidents?

Rashi, in explaining Yaakov’s condemnation of Shimon and Levi’s violence, writes that Yaakov speaks here specifically of two incidents: Shimon and Levi’s assault on the city of Shekhem after the city’s prince abducted and defiled their sister, and Shimon and Levi’s seminal role in eliminating Yosef from the family. A certain parallel exists between these two acts of violence and the two later incidents with which Yaakov asked not to be associated. Zimri, of course, committed a forbidden sexual act, the kind of misdeed that Shimon and Levi sought to avenge. And Korach launched his revolt in the name of equality and inclusiveness: “for the entire congregation – they are all sacred, so why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” (16:3). He argued that no distinctions at all should be made between different members of *Am Yisrael*, that everyone should be equally granted the privileges and opportunities offered to the *kohanim*. In a sense, this position represents the polar opposite of Shimon and Levi’s belief that Yosef needed to be driven from the family. They were convinced that Yosef had no place among them due to his improper behavior, and needed to be excluded – in contrast to the belief that everyone should be equally embraced and have equal access to all privileges. And thus just as Zimri committed a similar offense to the one which Shimon and Levi had violently avenged, Korach was driven by an inclusivist ideology which marked the diametric opposite of the exclusivism which drove Shimon and Levi to eliminate Yosef.

In light of this parallelism, we might perhaps suggest an explanation for the Midrash’s curious remark. One might have misinterpreted Yaakov’s condemnation of Shimon and Levi’s extreme reactions to Shekhem’s crime and to Yosef’s problematic behavior as reflecting some degree of indifference to the conduct they reacted to. If Yaakov censured Shimon and Levi for their responses, one could have charged, then this must mean that he was not all that troubled by Shekhem’s defilement of Dina or by Yosef’s youthful arrogance. To dispel this misconception, *Chazal* emphasized that Yaakov would not want to be associated in any way with the sexual misconduct of Zimri or with the ideology of Korach. Yaakov opposed Shimon and Levi’s extreme reactions, but he also opposed that to which they reacted. His rejection of their responses must not be interpreted as indifference to the misdeeds to which they responded.

The lesson being conveyed, then, is that firm, unequivocal and passionate opposition to wrongdoing does not require, or justify, extreme reactions. We might intuitively think that anything less than extreme, unrestrained reactions bespeaks apathy and resignation, but the Midrash here seeks to teach us otherwise. We must respond to wrongdoing in a measured, calculated and reasonable fashion, even as we strongly and loudly condemn it.

Tuesday

During Korach’s revolt against Moshe, after Datan and Aviram – Korach’s two leading cohorts – cynically rejected Moshe’s summons, Moshe turned to God and avowed his innocence of the charges brought against him. He exclaimed: “*Lo chamor echad meihem nasati ve-lo hari’oti et achad meihem*” – “I did not take a single donkey from them, nor have I done evil to a single one of them” (16:15). Moshe was being accused of assuming the mantle of leadership for personal gain, and thus he turned to God and professed his integrity and selflessness, that he never once used his position of leadership as a means of enriching himself.

Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in his *Kedushat Levi*, adds a chassidic reading of this verse, focusing on the word “*echad*” (“one,” or “single”). He explains that Moshe never limited his work and efforts to “lifting” (“*nasati*”) just one person. The word “*chamor*” (“donkey”), Rav Levi Yitzchak writes, is associated with physicality (“*chomriyut*”), and this verse thus refers to the role of teachers and leaders to help their students and followers “uplift” their physical beings and live on a higher plane. Moshe here avowed that he did not restrict his efforts to just “*chamor echad*,” any particular person or group. He worked to elevate and inspire the entire nation, including all its various different groups and subgroups. Moreover, “*lo hari’oti et achad meihem*.” The word “*hari’oti*” (“done evil”) may be read as a derivative of the word “*rei’a*” (“friend” or “comrade”), and Rav Levi Yitzchak thus interprets this phrase to mean that Moshe did not “befriend” just “*achad meihem*” – one member or group of members. Moshe was equally committed to all members of *Am Yisrael*, and did not limit his concern or attention to only one person or one segment of the population.

Korach launched his campaign against Moshe with the motto, “*Kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” – “the entire congregation, they are all sacred” (16:3). He and his followers demanded equal access to the privileges of the *kehuna*, to the special rituals in the *Mishkan*, and accused Moshe of creating an exclusive clerical class that ignored the rest of the people. Korach claimed that as the entire nation is “sacred,” and has potential for spiritual greatness, the special *mitzvot* performed in the *Mishkan* should not be restricted to just one group. And thus, according to Rav Levi Yitzchak’s creative interpretation of the text, Moshe avowed his innocence of the crime of exclusivism. He indeed followed God’s instruction to establish a priestly class, but this did not mean that he disregarded or discounted the rest of the nation in any way. He devoted himself tirelessly to “elevating,” guiding, teaching and inspiring the entire nation.

Rav Levi Yitzchak’s insight perhaps reminds us that there is one aspect of Korach’s revolt which was correct, and from which we have what to learn. We wholeheartedly accept his premise that “the entire congregation – they are all sacred.” While Korach was incorrect in his demand to obliterate the divisions between different groups with regard to specific ritualistic obligations, he was correct fundamentally, that each and every member of *Am Yisrael* has the potential for greatness, and that leaders and educators must concern themselves with the needs of the entire nation. They must never limit themselves to just “*chamor echad*,” to a specific kind of Jew, a narrow segment of the nation. Rather, “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” – they must acknowledge the potential and respect the needs of the entire nation, and, like Moshe Rabbenu, devote themselves unconditionally to all members of *Am Yisrael*, trying to guide and inspire each according to his or her potential.

Wednesday

In response to the challenge to his authority launched by Korach, Moshe tells Korach and his followers to return the next morning with incense pans. They would all, together with Aharon, offer incense, and God would demonstrably accept the offering of the person chosen to serve as *kohen gadol*.

Rashi (16:5) offers an explanation for why Moshe decided to schedule this event the following day, rather than arranging it immediately: “His intent was to stall, so they might perhaps change their minds.” Moshe employed a stalling tactic, hoping that by morning Korach and his followers would recognize the folly of their campaign and the revolt would subside.

[It has been suggested](http://www.karnash.co.il/index.asp?catID=52501) that Rashi’s comment be read in light of a Midrashic passage cited by Rashi later (16:19). The Torah tells that the next morning, as Korach and his followers prepared to offer incense, Korach assembled the entire nation by the entrance to the *Mishkan*. The Midrash explained that Korach did this by working throughout the night campaigning for his cause. He spent the night speaking what Rashi calls “*divrei leitzanut*” – cynicism, deriding Moshe and Aharon and promoting himself as a “freedom fighter” of sorts who had come to rescue the people from the oppressive grip of their current leadership. Moshe had hoped that the quiet, still peacefulness of nighttime would give his opponents clarity, and allow them to think through the situation rationally, without being affected by the clamor and commotion of the daytime. Korach, cunningly, recognized how the clarity afforded by the serenity of nighttime could undermine his efforts, and so he made a point of keeping his campaign alive and continuing to stoke the coals of controversy and dissent throughout the night. In essence, Korach’s counterplan was to not allow the ordinary nighttime calm to take hold, to prevent his followers from experiencing clarity of thought by raising the “noise level” and maintaining the ruckus of his uprising all night long.

Moshe and Korach’s maneuverings remind us of how difficult it oftentimes is to think clearly and rationally when there is “noise” all around us. We are so easily influenced by the “noise” that we hear, by the emotional stimuli that we see and hear throughout the day, making it a challenge to think objectively and sensibly. *Chazal* here teach us of the need for calm and serenity when we make important decisions, to recognize the importance of the “nighttime,” of quiet, serene moments when we are alone with our thoughts and capable of working things through without the inevitable impact of the noise and clamor all around us.

Thursday

*Yalkut Reuveni*, a collection of primarily Kabbalistic commentaries to the Torah, cites in Parashat Korach a source associating Korach with a well-known verse in Sefer Tehillim (92:13) which foresees the time when “*tzadik ka-tamar yifrach*” – “the righteous shall blossom like a palm.” The final letters of these words spell the name “Korach,” and this verse thus alludes to the fact that in the future, Korach will rise again from the underground to where he was condemned, and will be a “righteous” person who will “blossom like a palm.”

This passage should perhaps be understood as reflecting the view that appears in several sources, including the *Ba’al Ha-turim* (Shemot 19:6), that in the future, all *Am Yisrael* will serve as *kohanim* – precisely the view championed by Korach and his followers. They approached Moshe to demand the rights of the *kehuna*, declaring, “*Ki khol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” – “For the entire congregation, they are all sacred,” and thus everyone in the nation is deserving of ministering before God in the *Mishkan*. The Midrash (cited by Rashi, 16:1) tells that Korach and his cohorts dressed in garments made entirely of material dyed in *tekheilet*, and asked whether their garments require *tzitzit*, which include a single string of *tekheilet*. Moshe answered in the affirmative, whereupon Korach and his followers ridiculed him. Why would a garment made entirely of *tekheilet*, they asked, require an additional string of *tekheilet*? The meaning of this question is clear: since the entire nation was “sacred,” there was no reason for one group to be especially designated as the “*tekheilet*,” as the spiritual guides and leaders. In light of the source cited by *Yalkut Reuveni*, it appears that Korach was fundamentally correct. Under ideal conditions, when all *Am Yisrael* are truly “*kedoshim*,” fully and unwaveringly devoted to God, they do not require a priestly class. In theory, a garment made entirely of *tekheilet* does not require a string of *tekheilet*. In practice, however, it does – because there is no such thing as a garment made entirely of *tekheilet*, a nation that can reach great spiritual heights without the assistance and inspiration of religious leaders. God instituted a special tribe of *kohanim*, a tribe that would live at a higher spiritual standard, in order to inspire and guide the rest of the nation, who need this example and model. In the future, however, when the world reaches its ideal state of perfection, then indeed (at least according to this view), there will be no separate priestly tribe. At that point, then, “Korach” will “blossom.” The ideology he espoused, the argument that “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*,” will be correct, and all *Am Yisrael* will equally serve as *kohanim*. (This explanation of *Yalkut Reuveni*’s comments is cited in the name of the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* in *Likutei Yehuda*, Parashat Korach. See also the [article on the subject](https://www.kby.org/hebrew/torat-yavneh/view.asp?id=4573) by Rav Kalman Meir Bar of Yeshivat Kerem B’yavneh.)

Significantly, the verse referenced as an allusion to Korach’s future stature – “*Tzadik ka-tamar yifrach*” – appears in the Psalm that was composed for Shabbat (“*Mizmor shir le-yom ha-Shabbat*”). Shabbat, which is commonly called “*me’ein olam ha-ba*” – a “glimpse” of the next world – is a time when we experience the concept of “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*,” when the gap, so-to-speak, between the *kohanim* and the rest of the nation is narrowed, if only somewhat. The tribe of Levi was not given agricultural lands in *Eretz Yisrael* and was instead supported by the rest of the nation so it could devote itself to the service in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. On Shabbat, to some extent, we all become like the tribe of Levi. We all refrain from mundane activity, and spend the day enveloped in an aura of sanctity, like the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Many writers have noted the parallels that exist between our Shabbat observance and the *Beit Ha-mikdash*: the Shabbat candles parallel the *menorah*, the loaves of bread on the table correspond to the *lechem ha-panim*, our singing is associated with the songs of the *Leviyim*, and so on. In short, on Shabbat we are given the opportunity to resemble the *kohanim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Although Korach’s ideal of “*kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” will be fully manifest only in the next world, when all *Am Yisrael* will become *kohanim*, we catch a glimpse of this idyllic condition each week on Shabbat, when we ascend to a higher plane and spend the day immersed in sanctity, like the *kohanim* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

Appropriately, then, *Yalkut Reuveni* associates Korach and the future acceptance of his doctrine specifically with the Psalm of “*Mizmor shir le-yom ha-Shabbat*,” as on Shabbat we experience some element of his doctrine, as we all move just a bit closer to the status of *kohanim*, living on a higher plane which resembles, if only somewhat, the idyllic conditions of the next world.

Friday

We read in Parashat Korach that after Korach confronted Moshe along with his followers to challenge Moshe’s leadership, he then succeeded in marshalling support from the entire nation: “Korach assembled the entire nation around them, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (16:19). Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains that Korach worked throughout the night campaigning for his cause, spreading false accusations about Moshe and Aharon and convincing the people that he, Korach, would stand up for them and release them from the tight shackles of Moshe and Aharon’s leadership.

The Torah proceeds to tell that at that point, God informed Moshe and Aharon of His desire to annihilate the nation: “Separate from amidst this nation, and I will eradicate them in an instant” (16:21). Once the nation lent Korach their support, God condemned the entire nation to annihilation. Moshe and Aharon immediately pleaded on the people’s behalf, turning to God in prayer and asking, “Shall just one man sin, and You will be enraged at the entire nation?!” (16:22). They defended *Benei Yisrael* by noting that the current situation was precipitated by just one man – Korach – who used persuasive rhetoric and lies to generate support for his nefarious campaign. It was thus he, and not the rest of the nation, who should be punished.

God accepted Moshe and Aharon’s prayer, but with one condition. He replied, “Speak to the nation, saying: Rise from around the tent of Korach, Datan and Aviram” (16:24). In order to be spared, the people would need to show that it is indeed just one person, or small group of people, who are guilty of insurrection. If the people would now separate from Korach and his fellow leaders, then God would limit His anger to that small group. Sure enough, the people heeded Moshe’s call to withdraw from Korach’s headquarters, and only the leadership was devoured by the ground.

This incident demonstrates that we are accountable for our decisions and actions even if we were lured by misleading, persuasive arguments. The fact that the insurrection was instigated by Korach did not suffice to absolve the followers he attracted of guilt. They were punishable for following his lead, despite the fact that they fell prey to his convincing campaigning. We cannot excuse ourselves from wrongdoing by blaming those who tempted and lured us.

This message resurfaces later in Sefer Bamidbar (25), in the tragic story of *Ba’al Pe’or*. The Torah tells that many among *Benei Yisrael* worshipped the deity of Moav and slept with women from that nation, resulting in a plague that killed 24,000 members of the nation. *Chazal* explain that this incident was orchestrated by the people of Moav, who, at the advice of Bilam, sent their young women to entice the men of *Benei Yisrael* to sin. Yet, despite the fact that the people’s sin resulted from an intentional campaign of seduction, they were nevertheless held accountable and were severely punished. We cannot blame our faults and failings on other people, even on people who intentionally tried drawing us to wrongdoing. Ultimately, we are solely responsible for our actions, we are endowed with the power of free will, to choose between right and wrong, and thus we must take responsibility for our actions without trying to cast the blame elsewhere.

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