YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat kORACH**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Rebecca Singer *z"l*,  
wife of Rabbi Joseph Singer *z"l*, daughter of Rabbi Chaim Heller *z"l*,  
upon her *yahrzeit*, 27 Sivan,  
by her daughter Vivian Singer

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**On Controversy:**

**Personal Issues and Matters of Principle**

Summarized by Mordechai Sambol

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

The prophet Yirmeyahu asserts that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding weak – who can know it?" (*Yirmeyahu* 17:9). Man is complex, and his thoughts can be like a ball of tangled threads: When a person adopts a certain position, it is not always because of the "official" reasons that he gives to others, and sometimes not even for the reasons that he tells himself. Only God "discerns both mind and heart" (*Yirmeyahu* 11:20).

This is true in general, but it is especially important regarding interpersonal relations, and in particular when it comes to disputes. A dispute is almost never limited to a single plane; in most cases, moral principles, economic claims, and personal considerations are all tangled together. An example: the dispute of Korach and his company.

**The Complexity of the Dispute**

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 18, 2-4), echoed by Rashi in his commentary to the Torah, brings several explanations of the dispute involving Korach. The first explanation is as follows:

What did he do? He arose and assembled two hundred and fifty heads of the Sanhedrin… and he dressed them in robes of pure *techelet* (blue) wool. They then came and stood before Moshe and said to him: Is a garment that is entirely of *techelet* subject to the law of *tzitzit* or is it exempt? (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 16:1)

Here, the argument attributed to Korach is, on the face of it, an ideological question similar to the question of singling out one thread among many: Must there be an internal hierarchy in the nation? Are there people who are more important than others, or do we say that "all the congregation are holy, every one of them" (*Bamidbar* 16:1).

The *midrash*, however, also provides another explanation for the controversy, also cited by Rashi:

And what brought Korach to quarrel with Moshe? He was envious of the princely status held by Elitzafan the son of Uziel, whom Moshe had appointed prince over the sons of Kehat at God's command. Korach argued: My father and his brothers were four, as it is stated: "And the sons of Kehat [were Amram and Yitzhar and Chevron and Uziel]" (*Shemot* 6:18). As to Amram, the eldest, his two sons have assumed high dignity, one as king and the other as High Priest; who is entitled to receive the second (the rank next to it)? Is it not I who am the son of Yitzhar, who is the second to Amram among the brothers? And yet he has appointed as prince the son of his [Amram's] brother who was the youngest of all of them! I hereby protest against him and will undo his decision. (*Rashi*, *Bamidbar* 16:1)

Here it is not a matter of principle, but a personal dispute between Korach and Moshe – a dispute that Korach began because of an insult to his personal honor, because of his desire to wield power.

Another explanation for the dispute appears explicitly in the verses, in the words of Datan and Aviram:

Moreover, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. (*Bamidbar* 16:14)

This verse indicates a disagreement not about principles, nor a personal dispute, but an economic, monetary objection: Datan and Aviram complain about monetary assets that had been promised them but that were not yet delivered.

The dispute involving Korach and his company is a prototype for all disputes (see *Avot* 5:17), and we have indeed seen how prominent regarding that dispute is the fact that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding weak." It turns out that the controversy is comprised of several disputes: a matter of principle, a personal issue, and a monetary claim. Now, let us continue and see other places where a mixture of different disputes can be identified.

**Yaakov and Esav**

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1, 1) toiled to spell out in detail the various sins of Esav:

The wicked Esav committed five transgressions on that day: He had illicit relations with a betrothed girl, he killed somebody, he denied the resurrection of the dead, he denied God, and he despised the birthright. And furthermore, he desired his father's death, and he wanted to kill his brother… and he caused Yaakov to run away from his fathers, and he even went to Yishmael to learn from him depravity, and to add to his wives. (*Shemot Rabba* 1, 1)

The first part of the *midrash* seems to emphasize the ideological aspect of the controversy: it was a conflict between the righteous Yaakov, "the quiet man dwelling in tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27), and the wicked Esav, who committed five major transgressions on that day.

But the *midrash* does not describe only "ideological" sins of Esav. "He despised the birthright," for instance, seems to allude to a personal dispute between Esav and Yaakov – who is the firstborn; who will be Yitzchak's successor? Similarly, the account of Esav going to Yishmael and marrying into his family can be understood as a financial dispute between them regarding the inheritance. In the framework of this dispute, Esav married into Yishmael's family, in order to receive a larger part pf Avraham's estate.

We see, then, that as with Korach, so too in the case of Esav, three levels of dispute are intertwined: matters of principle, personal issues, and financial claims. Indeed, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding weak – who can know it?"

**Kayin and Hevel**

Another good example of this can be found in the quarrel between Kayin and Hevel, the first dispute in history. The dispute between Kayin and Hevel can be understood as an ideological dispute: Kayin is a man of the land, who builds cities and is involved with the settlement of the world – while Hevel is content with tending his sheep. It is quite possible that Kayin believed the world should follow in his path, and when his brother opted for a different way, a moral conflict arose between them, ending in Kayin's horrible murder of his brother Hevel.

But this is not the only explanation. Kayin and Hevel's quarrel may have begun as ordinary tension between brothers, and escalated to the point of murder. Alternatively, it may have involved a monetary dispute – a dispute over the inheritance of the world: Adam was given the entire world, but in the next generation, Kayin and Hevel would have to share it with each other, and thus Kayin saw that he would receive only half of the world.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, each of Kayin's sons would receive only a part of that half, and his sons a part of that, and so on. Perhaps that is why Kayin rose up against his brother Hevel and killed him.

We might have said that each of these possibilities is an independent reason, with different commentators understanding the controversy in different ways. But the truth is that there is no need to decide between the various possibilities, because they are all correct: all of these reasons were present and had an impact, and all of them joined together to stir up the controversy. All of them are entangled in the human heart.

**The Severity of the "Mixture"**

Now that we have pointed to the mixture of arguments that characterize disputes, let us try to understand the significance of this mixture – first, in the dispute involving Korach and his company.

**Cooperation Between Different Parties**

So far, we have talked about the confusion that reigns within the heart of man. But we must not ignore the fact that this confusion is not always limited to one heart; a situation may arise in which several different people join in the same conflict for different reasons. This is precisely how the *Netziv* understands what happened with Korach and his company.

The *Netziv* (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Bamidbar* 16:1) distinguishes between the motive of the two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation and that of Datan and Aviram. According to him, the leaders of the community disagreed with Moshe for a genuine ideological reason, whereas Datan and Aviram disagreed with him out of personal hatred. Korach, on the one hand, shared the moral argument put forward by the leaders of the congregation, while, on the other hand, he shared the personal animosity toward Moshe felt by Datan and Aviram. In this way, he managed to turn the two groups into one – the company of Korach.

The *Netziv* adds and clarifies that each of the two parties alone could not have come to a real dispute with Moshe. The leaders of the congregation disagreed with Moshe's principles, but they would not have been able to ignite a major dispute and a real fight. If they had argued with Moshe face to face, he would have been able to engage in discussion with them and get to the bottom of things (though it is not clear how willing they would have been – ideologically – to accept a compromise). Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, hated Moshe already in Egypt, and precisely for this reason, no one would have been willing to follow them. If they had complained about Moshe on their own, no real dispute would have arisen, since they had no allies (and they were probably prepared to compromise, since they had no principled argument).

This being the case, explains the *Netziv*, it was only the joining of the two parties – the joining of political tools and the tools of hatred and strife, together with a sharp ideological statement and the unwillingness to compromise – that allowed the controversy to go so far. When you add the monetary element to this "mixture" as well, you stoke the fire even more.

**The Worsening of the Dispute**

Just as confusion exacerbates a dispute when different parties cooperate with each other and enter into the dispute for different reasons, confusion also worsens the situation even when it is within the heart of a single person. If we examine the actions of a person who is engaged in a dispute, we will not be able to identify the reason behind each action.

The problem is that in many instances, a dispute does not *start* with a combination of different claims, but with a single claim, a single motive – which then gives rise to additional reasons on other levels. Thus, when a person has a personal quarrel, he develops an ideological position that supports his side – often unconsciously – and he begins to believe in that position.

Adding the ideological dimension, a truth for which one is willing to do anything, is what deprives a person of the ability to see what is happening around him; he is in a bubble, where all he cares about is his own success – and all this under an ideological cover, which does not allow for compromise. Moreover, when two reasons are used in a "mixed" argument, each of them is impaired: the ideological principle is damaged when it serves a personal quarrel, and the personal quarrel is also aggravated when it is covered with ideological arguments.

**The Kings of Israel**

We see growing severity in disputes, especially ones driven by different motives – principles, personal issues, and the like – further down the road as well, with the kings of Israel.

**Yarovam son of Nevat**

It is evident from the verses that Yarovam was an impressive man, perhaps even the strongest political leader the Jewish people have ever had. Moreover, even his decision to divide the kingdom may actually have been justified (to some extent) in light of Rechavam's aggressive reactions.

But Yarovam was not content with dividing the kingdom, and added a religious dimension to the controversy. Yarovam's pursuit of honor caused him to set up two golden calves despite knowing the significance of this grave act – which justifiably recalls the sin of the golden calf in the wilderness. Because of these actions, he is counted among the three kings who have no portion in the world-to-come (Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10:2).

This fate was not inevitable. The Gemara describes how God offered Yarovam an opportunity to repent: "The Holy One, blessed be He, grabbed him by his garment and said to him: Repent, and you and I and the son of Yishai will walk in the Garden of Eden" (*Sanhedrin* 102a). God was essentially ready to legitimize Yerovam's actions and to consider him a (further?) continuation of the House of David – on condition that he would repent.

But only one thing was important to Yarovam, as we see from his response: "And who shall be at the head?" (ibid.). Yarovam wanted to serve as the head, to be the leader, and he was not willing to have anyone precede him. This desire is evident when to God's reply: "The son of Yishai [=David] will be at the head," Yarovam responds: "If so, I do not desire it." Indeed, all that interested him was to be the first, and for that, he was willing to go all the way towards a political and religious rift that would be a tragedy for generations. He continued to instigate Israel to sin, and according to some opinions, he is the one who caused the ten tribes to be sent into exile and not return – and thus, he forfeited his part in the world-to-come.

**King Shaul**

A similar idea appears in the Gemara regarding King Shaul:

It was taught: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya said: At first, whoever were to say to me, "Take up the honor," I would bind him and put him in front of a lion; but now, whoever were to say to me, "Give up the honor," I would pour over him a kettle of boiling water. For [we see that] Shaul [at first] shunned [the throne], but after he had taken it, he sought to kill David. (*Menachot* 109b)

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya expresses the great change that an ordinary person undergoes when he rises to greatness: initially, he recoils from taking a position of authority, but ultimately he desires to hold onto it at all costs.

He does not only describe himself, but cites Shaul as an example. Shaul is perhaps the most tragic figure in the Bible. He ran away from greatness, but after he attained power, honor drove him to madness, literally, to the point where he threw a spear at his son. That is how far confusion in the human heart can reach.

**Conclusion**

Of course, the pursuit of power also plays a significant role in the dispute involving Korach and his company. When ideals and honor combine – or to be precise, when an ideal serves honor – a person degenerates into corruption, no matter how great he is, and Korach was truly a great person.

How can a person avoid such deterioration? One should always examine oneself. Not alone, but with the help of one’s spouse, children, and friends. When a person finds himself insistent about a certain subject, he must carefully probe his intentions and make sure he is acting out of a true ideal, and not, God forbid, in search of honor or in pursuit of power. And as stated, he must not be satisfied with his own opinion, but must consult with family and friends. The people most suited to leadership are those who run away from it, but unfortunately, the way of the world is that authority comes to those who seek it; therefore, one must be especially careful about the pursuit or acceptance of such a role.

While it is true that one must be careful about mixing different arguments and falling into dispute, this statement must be slightly qualified: Ultimately, we were created in such a way that there is a connection between our ideology and our ambition. If we did not have ambitions to reach new heights, the world would not progress anywhere. Not in science, not in medicine, not even in Torah. Indeed, "the heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceeding weak – who can know it?"

We have personal ambitions; the question is what we do with these ambitions. In other words, the way to deal with the connection between values and ambition is not to ignore or try to suppress our ambition, and certainly not to use ideology to further our ambitions – rather, the proper approach is to harness ambition in order to advance our values.

There are Biblical examples not only of decline in the wake of the pursuit of power, as discussed above, but also of the correct combination of ambitions and values. I will limit myself to mentioning two of them: Shlomo had very great ambition, but instead of harnessing his ideology to his ambition, he harnessed his ambition to his ideology and directed everything to heaven – and thus he succeeded in the huge undertaking of building the Temple. Similarly, Shmuel the prophet had a powerful personality, but he succeeded in directing it towards God and dedicating his entire being to Him.

The task and responsibility that falls upon all of us is to examine our abilities and see how we can harness them for good. We must strive to direct our personal ambitions in proper directions, to realize the right values – and not, God forbid, to harness those values to further our ambitions.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on *Shabbat Parashat Korach*, 5781 (2021).]

1. The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 22, 7) offers an explanation that goes in a similar but not identical direction. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)