**SALT | Korach 5783 – 2023**

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**Dedicated in memory of Elisa bat Tsirelé z”l**

**whose yahrtzeit is 1 Tammuz**

**By Family Rueff**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Korach of the ill-fated uprising mounted by Korach against Moshe’s authority, as he assembled a group of 250 men who demanded the right to serve as *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. In the aftermath of this revolt, God commanded Moshe to take the staff from the leader of each of the tribes, and place them all in the *Mishkan*, in front of the ark. The next morning, the staff of Aharon, the leader of the priestly tribe, miraculously blossomed and produced flowers and almonds (17:24), proving that he was the one chosen to minister before God in the *Mishkan.*

Why was this specific miracle – the sudden blossoming of a wooden stick – chosen as the sign of the designation of Aharon as high priest?

Rav Menachem Mendel of Kaliv (*Kol Menachem*, vol. 6) suggests that this miracle symbolizes the quality of maintaining joyfulness even in difficult times. Aharon’s dry, lifeless staff suddenly bloomed – producing lush, moist, beautiful flowers, representing the ability to generate joy, enthusiasm and vitality from an otherwise “dry” and “lifeless” circumstance. One of the qualities of spiritual giants is their producing “flowers” at all times, exuding warmth and excitement in situations where this would seem impossible, and this is thus the symbolism of Aharon’s blossoming staff.

The Kaliver Rebbe explains that Aharon mastered this skill because, as the Mishna in Avot (1:12) famously describes, Aharon was a “lover of peace and pursuer of peace,” who “loved people.” When we make peaceful relations with others a high priority, then we are better able to produce “flowers” from a “stick,” to remain joyful and upbeat in situations which might otherwise cause us aggravation and grief. People who do not make peace a high priority are easily triggered, becoming angry, agitated and resentful over even minor infractions and insults. When we live as an “*oheiv shalom ve-rodeif shalom*,” pursuing peace and harmony with the people around us, then we will have the ability to remain joyful and pleasant under all circumstances, and to thus uplift and enhance our surroundings at all times.

Sunday

The opening verse of Parashat Korach introduces the story of Korach’s uprising against Moshe with the words, “*Va-yikach Korach*” – “Korach took.” As many commentators noted, this phrase is left without any object; we are never told what Korach took. The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b) interprets this expression to mean “*lekach mekach ra le-atzmo*” – “he made for himself a bad purchase.”

The simple meaning of the Gemara’s comment, seemingly, is that Korach miscalculated. He decided to make a “purchase” – to invest time, effort and energy into a bold undertaking which he thought would yield dividends. But this ended up being a bad investment – as he and all his followers perished.

Rav Yosef Perlow of Koidanov (cited by his son-in-law, Rav Menachem Nachum of Kantikuziva, in *Machashevet Nachum*) offers a different explanation, suggesting that the Gemara refers to Korach’s low self-esteem which, ironically, led him to arrogantly seek power and authority. The phrase “*lekach mekach ra le-atzmo*,” the Rebbe of Koidanov explains, means that Korach regarded himself as “bad.” He felt lowly and unaccomplished, creating an emotional void which he set out to fill by challenging Moshe. When we feel comfortable with who we are, even while acknowledging our faults and trying address them, we feel no need to take drastic measures and pursue unreasonably lofty goals in order to achieve fulfillment. The story of Korach is one of ambition gone awry, where the inherently admirable drive to accomplish and excel led someone to strive for achievements which he should not have pursued. The Rebbe of Koidanov understands the Gemara as teaching that the root of Korach’s mistake was damaging feelings of unfulfillment and inferiority, an inability to take pride in one’s achievements, resulting in the urge to compete with other people’s achievements.

According to Kabbalistic tradition (as written in *Sefer Ha-gilgulim*), Korach was a reincarnation of the soul of Kayin, the older of Adam’s sons who envied his younger brother because his offering was accepted by God, whereas Kayin’s was rejected. The obvious point of connection between these two Biblical figures is jealousy, as Kayin envied Hevel, and Korach envied Aharon. More specifically, both men felt dissatisfied with their accomplishments because they were surpassed by those of their peers. Kayin felt inferior to Hevel, and Korach felt inferior to Aharon. These stories warn us not to compare ourselves to others, or compare our accomplishments to those of others. This can lead to a dangerous sense of inferiority, which can, in turn, drive us to embark on pursuits which are not right for us. We are to chart for ourselves our unique path and journey, and channel our ambition in the direction in which we are best able to achieve and maximize our individual potential.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Korach tells of the 250-member group that joined Korach in challenging the authority of Moshe and Aharon, and demanded the rights of the *kehuna* (priesthood). Moshe responded by inviting these men to offer incense together with Aharon, stating that God would accept the offering of the chosen *kohen gadol*. Tragically, the 250 men agreed, and they were killed by fire after offering the incense (16:35). Afterward, God commanded Moshe to instruct Elazar, Aharon’s son, to collect the copper firepans in which these 250 men had placed their incense, and then use the metal to make a covering for the altar. This covering was intended as an everlasting reminder of the tragic mistake made by the 250 rebels, and a warning to others who might consider demanding the privileges of the *kehuna* (17:1-5)*.*

Rav Shmuel Borenstein of Sochatchov, in *Sheim Mi-Shmuel*, offers a symbolic explanation for the significance of this command, the use of the copper from these pans as a covering for the altar. The prophet Yeshayahu (48:4) laments *Benei Yisrael*’s brazenness with the expression, “*u-mitzchakha nechusha*” – comparing their “forehead” to copper. Similarly, when God promises Yirmiyahu protection from his enemies, he says that the prophet will resemble a “*choma nechoshet*” – a “copper wall” (Yirmiyahu 1:18). Copper, then, is the symbol of courage, daring and audacity. (Indeed, in modern Hebrew, the word “*nechishut*” means “determination.”)This quality, the *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* writes, is, on the one hand, vitally important for success and for the service of God, but can also lead to ruin, if gone unchecked. Like Yirmiyahu, we need to resemble a “copper wall,” showing stubbornness, resolve and persistence in our commitment to our values and principles even in the face of ridicule and scorn. However, we must ensure that this “copper wall” does not lead us to arrogance and exaggerated self-confidence, to the point where we feel entitled to act as we wish, without consulting or deferring to Torah authority. The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* notes that Moshe instructed the 250 challengers to use specifically copper firepans, despite the fact that the regular incense offering brought each day in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* is offered with gold pans, on a gold-plated altar. Copper was used on this occasion as an allusion to the “*metzach nechusha*” – the gall and audacity shown by the rebels in demanding the rights of the *kehuna*. Whereas bold ambition is certainly important, it must be tempered by a humble recognition of one’s limits and submission of authority.

The *Sheim Mi-Shmuel* explains that the copper from these firepans were used as a covering for the altar to symbolize the delicate balance that must be maintained between boldness and humility. The altar was a hollow wooden structure, filled inside with earth, and plated with copper – representing the combination of meekness, symbolized by earth, and brazenness, represented by copper. The addition of the rebels’ firepans indicated that these men’s boldness and ambition are necessary in our service of God – provided that they are combined with “earth,” with humble submission. Bold self-confidence and persistence are critical for achieving and pursuing our goals – but only if they are counterbalanced by a keen awareness of our limits, and a willingness to submit to the Torah’s authority.

Tuesday

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:2) famously distinguishes between two types of arguments – a “*machloket le-sheim Shamayim*” (a fight waged “for the sake of Heaven”), and one which “*einah le-sheim Shamayim*” (is not waged “for the sake of Heaven”). As an example of an argument waged “for the sake of Heaven,” the Mishna points to the halakhic disputes between Hillel and Shammai. The quintessential argument which was not waged “for the sake of Heaven,” the Mishna states, is “*machloket Korach va-adato*” – the fight instigated by Korach and his followers, who challenged Moshe’s authority.

Many commentators noted the asymmetry in the names given by the Mishna to these two arguments. The Mishna refers to the halakhic debates between Hillel and Shammai as “*machloket Hillel ve-Shammai*” – naming the two parties to the conflict. By contrast, in reference to Korach’s uprising against Moshe, the Mishna names only one side of the conflict – Korach and his followers. Numerous different approaches have been taken to explain the different formulations in this Mishna.

Rav Yosef Sorotzkin, in *Meged Yosef*, suggests that Hillel and Shammai were both named as parties to the controversy because the argument resulted solely from their different opinions. Neither Hillel nor Shammai was interested in arguing; the *machloket* occurred only because each side reached a different conclusion than the other. If Hillel would not have expressed his view, Shammai would not have argued with anybody; and if Shammai had not expressed his opinion, then Hillel would not have found himself embroiled in controversy. A “*machloket le-sheim Shamayim*” is one which neither party wanted, and unfolded only because each side happened to arrive at a different conclusion. By contrast, Korach and his followers were looking for a way to stir controversy. Korach set out to promote himself by finding a fight to wage. Even if Moshe had not lived in his time, Korach would have instigated some other fight. Moshe was not the crucial component of this *machloket*; if not for him, Korach would have found a different target for a campaign to satisfy his lust for hostility and controversy. Therefore, this fight was, at its core, not a fight between Korach and Moshe, but rather simply Korach’s fight, as he and his followers set out to instigate conflict.

Rav Sorotzkin returns to this notion later (commenting to 16:15) to explain Moshe’s anger after receiving a message from Datan and Aviram, two leading figures in Korach’s uprising. In response to Moshe’s summons, Datan and Aviram refused to come, and ridiculed Moshe for bringing them “from a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness,” and now wanting to rule over them. Moshe reacted angrily, turning to God and pleading his case, explaining that he had never wronged the people such that he deserved such animosity. Rav Sorotzkin notes that Moshe’s response to Datan and Aviram’s brazenness differs drastically from his calm, measured reaction to Korach and his followers’ initial confrontation. Then, he simply invited them to offer incense with Aharon the following day, so that God would demonstrably accept the offering of the one chosen to serve as *kohen gadol*, the privileges of which Korach and his followers demanded. Now, however, Moshe appears to lose his bearings, at least to some extent, venting his frustration to the Almighty. Rav Sorotzkin explains that initially, when Korach and his followers came demanding the right to serve as *kohanim*, Moshe remained calm, because he needed simply to address this particular complaint – which he did by inviting the group to offer incense together with Aharon. But then, Datan and Aviram sent a message challenging Moshe’s entire right to leadership, falsely charging that he never intended to bring the people to the Land of Israel, and sought only to rule over them. At this point, Moshe realized that the uprising was not about any particular issue, but rather a fight waged for the sake of fighting. Korach and his followers were not challenging any specific policy or decision; they chose to instigate a conflict, and the arguments were merely the means by which they ignited the controversy. It was at this point that Moshe felt helpless. If an argument is waged “*le-sheim Shamayim*,” sincerely, out of a genuine disagreement over a particular matter, it could be addressed respectfully and, in many instances, resolved. But if one side has decided to initiate a conflict, and the specific cause they chose is just incidental, the device they selected through which to wage their fight, then reconciliation is not possible, as the party initiating the hostilities will always find a cause in whose name to continue fighting.

Wednesday

Rashi, commenting to the opening verse of Parashat Korach, cites the *Midrash Tanchuma*’s explanation of what drove Korach to openly challenge Moshe’s authority. The Midrash states that Korach resented the appointment of his first cousin, Elitzafan, as leader of the Kehat family of *Leviyim* (see Bamidbar 3:30). Korach’s father, Yitzhar, was older than Elitzafan’s father, Uziel (see Shemot 6:18), and so Korach felt he deserved precedence for the prestigious post of leader of Kehat.

The Midrash’s comments perhaps invite us to reflect upon the difference between these two personalities, Korach and Elitzafan. The only story told in the Torah about Elitzafan is when he and his brother, Mishael, were assigned the unenviable task of removing from the *Mishkan* the remains of Aharon’s two older sons, who were consumed by a fire after bringing an unauthorized incense offering (Vayikra 10:4). We might perhaps gain some insight into the characters of Elitzafan and Mishael from the view of Rabbi Akiva (Sukka 25b) that they were the ones who protested their exclusion from the *korban pesach* offering at Mount Sinai. As we read in Parashat Behaalotekha (9:6-7), there were people who, due to their state of *tum’a* (impurity), could not participate in the sacrifice on the 14th of Nissan, and they approached Moshe. In response to their complaint, God instructed Moshe that those who cannot offer the *korban pesach* on the 14th of Nissan have the opportunity to do so the next month, on an occasion known as *Pesach Sheni*. According to Rabbi Akiva, these men were Mishael and Eltzafan, who had handled the remains of Nadav and Avihu, thus becoming, impure, and were unable to regain their status of purity in time to offer the *korban pesach*.

Intriguingly, both Elitzafan and Korach had grievances against Moshe. The difference, of course, is that Korach challenged Moshe and Aharon’s right to their positions of leadership (“Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” – 16:3), whereas Elitzafan focused exclusively on his specific grievance, asking for the opportunity to offer the *korban pesach*. Korach’s complaint let him to reject Moshe’s authority entirely, while Elitzafan brought his particular problem to Moshe and petitioned for a solution, all the while maintaining respect for Moshe and showing deference to his authority.

Probing a bit deeper, the institution of *Pesach Sheni* perhaps stands in stark contrast to Korach’s argument that “the entire nation, they are all sacred, and the Lord is in their midst, so why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” The law of *Pesach Sheni* demonstrates that not everybody will necessarily follow the same precise schedule in the service of God. Although the *korban pesach* is a national celebration, which all *Benei Yisrael*, fundamentally, celebrate together in unison, practically speaking, some people will need to offer the sacrifice on a different day. While we are, on the one hand, a single nation, bound together “as one person, with one heart” (Rashi, Shemot 19:2), on the other hand, we are not expected or asked to all do precisely the same thing. Korach argued that “the entire nation, they are all sacred,” such that there should be no distinctions between different groups, and everyone should enjoy the privilege to serve as *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. The law of *Pesach Sheni*, by contrast, symbolizes the concept of diversity, that different members of the nation will serve God differently.

This distinction perhaps underlies the Midrashic teaching that contrasts the personalities of Korach and Elitzafan. Korach expressed the belief that everybody must have the ability to serve God the same way, whereas Elitzafan, regarding whom the *halakha* of *Pesach Sheni* was introduced, humbly accepted Moshe’s instruction, acknowledging that he would not offer the sacrifice together with the rest of the nation, and will instead follow a different format.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Korach of the demand made by Korach and his 250 followers that they be allowed the privileges of the *kehuna* (priesthood), challenging the exclusive right given to Aharon and his offspring to perform the special service in the *Mishkan*. In response, Moshe invited the challengers to offer incense together with Aharon, so that God could confirm whom He had chosen as *kohen*. Tragically, the 250 men were killed by fire after offering the incense, whereas Aharon survived, proving that he was God’s chosen *kohen gadol*. Afterward, God commanded that the metal from the rebels’ firepans be made into a covering for the altar, which would serve as a reminder of what happened to Korach and his followers. God said, “So that a foreigner, who is not from the offspring of Aharon, shall not approach to offer incense before the Lord, and he shall not be like Korach and his congregation…” (17:5).

The plain meaning of the phrase “he shall not be like Korach and his congregation” is that no non-*kohen* will again suffer the deadly consequences of offering incense, as Korach and his followers had. However, the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a) interprets this verse differently, as introducing a Biblical prohibition, forbidding the instigation of conflict. The Gemara comments that “*ha-machazik be-machaloket*” – one who engages in strife and quarreling – transgresses this command. Several *Rishonim* count this prohibition as one of the 613 Biblical commands, including the *Behag* (*lo ta’aseh* 166), Rabbeinu Yona (*Sha’arei Teshuva*, 3:58), and the *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (*lo ta’aseh* 157).

The *Chatam Sofer* (as cited and discussed by the Bostoner Rebbe in *Imrei Shefer*, 5771)notes the significance of the fact that the Torah here warns against following the example of “*Korach va-adato*” – of both Korach, and his cohorts. Unlike Korach, the *Chatam Sofer* posits, the 250 men who joined his campaign acted with sincere intentions, out of a genuine desire to serve God. Korach himself, as Rashi explains in several contexts (16:1,7) based on the Gemara and Midrash, was driven by jealousy and greed, but the *Chatam Sofer* asserts that his followers truly wished to achieve closeness with the Almighty through serving in the *Mishkan*. For this reason, the *Chatam Sofer* writes, only the firepans of these 250 men were used for the covering of the altar; Korach’s own firepan was not used for this purpose, because, unlike the others, his intentions were insincere. The *Chatam Sofer* explains that the 250 men nevertheless sinned by joining this conflict, because fighting and hostility are forbidden even if one believes that he fights “*le-Shem Shamayim*,” purely for God’s sake. The Torah therefore formulates this command by forbidding following the example of “*Korach* ***va-adato***” – Korach and his cohorts. If the Torah had commanded only that we must not follow Korach’s example, then people would justify their initiation of hostilities by claiming that, unlike Korach, who acted out of the vain pursuit of prestige, they fight with pure intentions. But the Torah forbids acting like “*Korach* ***va-adato***” to teach that even fights waged allegedly for the sake of God’s honor are prohibited, and sincere motives does not justify sowing hatred, contempt and divisiveness.

Friday

One of the leading figures of Korach’s uprising against Moshe, named by the Torah in the opening verse of Parashat Korach, is On ben Pelet. His name never appears subsequently in the story, and the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b-110a) explains that his wife, who recognized the foolishness of the effort to challenge Moshe, devised a plan to bring On out of the revolt after he had initially joined.

The Gemara there further comments that the name “On” alludes to the fact that “*yashav ba-****aninut***” – he lived in a state of bereavement. Rashi explains this to mean that On regretted his initial participation in Korach’s uprising, and his painful remorse is likened to the grief of losing a loved one. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (16:10) goes further, stating that On was so named because “*kol yamav ba-aninut haya*” – he spent his entire life in a state of bereavement. According to the Midrash, it appears, On regretted and repented for his mistake throughout his entire life, never allowing himself any relief from the anguish of remorse.

Significantly, as a number of writers have noted, the Gemara and Midrash compare On’s remorse not to *aveilut* (mourning), but rather to *aninut* – the period immediately after a loved one’s passing, before the burial. *Chazal* refer to a person in this state as “*mi she-meito mutal lefanav*” – somebody whose deceased family member is lying before him, awaiting burial (Berakhot 17b). This is a period not of mourning, but of preparing for the burial; the body is “*mutal lefanav*,” cast before the family member, who is charged with the responsibility of burying it. Accordingly, the depiction of On living in a state of “*aninut*” perhaps expresses not grief and anguish, which characterize the experience of *aveilut*, but rather the giving of attention to the situation at hand. *Chazal* here might be instructing not that we ought to live in a constant state of sorrow and angst over our misdeeds, but rather than we should see them in front of us at all times, so we remain cognizant of our frailty and strive to avoid repeating the mistake. On is described not as grieving over his mistake, but as being ever mindful of it, so that he can learn from it and improve. *Chazal*’s comparison between repentance and *aninut*, from this perspective, instructs that not that we to “grieve” over our wrongs, but rather we must pay attention to our weaknesses and focus on the effort to overcome them.