**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT KORACH**

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Dedicated in memory of Zvi ben Moishe Reinitz, from Nagykallo, Hungary, whose Yahrzeit is on the 2nd Day of Tammuz.

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Whom did Korach Take?

Rav Amnon Bazak

A. "Korach took"

*Parashat Korach* begins with a most peculiar syntactical structure:[[1]](#footnote-1)

(1) Korach, son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi, took – and Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav; and On, son of Pelet, of the children of Reuven. (2) And they rose up before Moshe, with people from *Bnei Yisrael* – two hundred and fifty princes of the congregation, those called upon for convocation, men of renown.

The obvious question is: what did Korach take? The verb “*l-k-ch*” (to take) appears hundreds of times in *Tanakh*, and it is almost always followed by the object that is taken. Here we are not told what it was that Korach took; instead, we find the names of other people, who appear to have participated with him in this unexplained “taking.” What is the meaning of this?

Rashi offers two explanations, each of which attempts to fill in the missing object:

"And Korach took” – (1) He took himself aside, to be separated from the congregation [so as] to rise up against the priesthood, and for this reason Onkelos translates [the word “took”] as, “he separated himself”… (2) Another explanation: “And Korach took” – He drew the judges among them with his words…[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, the problem with both explanations is obvious: If either of these were the intention, why is the object not stated explicitly in the verse? The verse should have read either "Korach took himself" or "he took the heads of the courts among them."[[3]](#footnote-3)

It would therefore seem that the Torah deliberately employs this strange construction in order to highlight the problematic nature of the reality in which all these people gathered themselves together. As we shall see, Korach gathered different groups of people into an opposition to Moshe and Aharon, without them having any common ground other than their oppositional attitude. The deficient expression is a most appropriate description of the defective assembly of these disparate groups.

B. Two claims, three groups

What was the claim of Korach and his company? Immediately after listing those who joined the revolt, the Torah records their slogan:

(3) They gathered against Moshe and against Aharon and they said to them: “[You take] too much for you, for all among the congregation are holy, and God is among them; why, then, do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?"

However, an analysis of the complex response by Moshe to the whole affair shows that he is in fact dealing with two different main arguments, which are proposed by three different groups.

The first argument is a protest against the selection of Aharon for the priesthood, and it is this that Moshe addresses in his first response – his offer to hold a test involving the censers, to clarify who is truly chosen by God:

(4) Moshe heard it, and he fell upon his face. (5) He spoke to Korach and to all of his company, saying, “In the morning God shall make known who is His, and who is holy, and He will bring him close to Him; the one whom He chooses shall He bring close to Him. (6) Do this: take for yourselves censers, Korach and all of his company, (7) and put fire in them, and place incense upon them before God tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom God chooses – he shall be holy…"

Since the Torah notes that Moshe addresses "Korach and all of his company," it is clear that he is speaking not only to Levites, but also to men of other tribes – the 250 princes of the congregation who had attached themselves to Korach.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is therefore surprising that Moshe concludes his suggestion with the admonishment:

(7) "…[You take] too much for you, sons of Levi!"

It would seem that this is meant as a transitional comment that anticipates Moshe's second response. Here again, he addresses the protest against Aharon's selection for the priesthood, but this time he speaks specifically to the tribe of Levi:

(8) Moshe said to Korach: “Hear now, sons of Levi: (9) Is it a small thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you close to Him, to perform the service of God's Sanctuary, and to stand before the congregation, to minister to them? (10) And he has brought near you and all of your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you; would you then seek the priesthood as well?"

Here Moshe already draws a distinction between the "men of renown" from the other tribes and those members of Korach's company who – like him – are members of the tribe of Levi. He chides the *Levi’im*, arguing that God has already given them the distinction of performing the service in the *Mishkan*; their desire to receive the priestly duties is therefore presumptuous.

Moshe concludes his words to both groups with the words,

(11) "Therefore you and all of your company who are gathered together, are against God; for Aharon – what is he, that you complain against him?"

Moshe emphasizes that in truth, it is not Aharon who is the target of their protest, but rather God Himself, Who has chosen Aharon for the priesthood – as will be demonstrated.

The other complaint of Korach's group concerns Moshe's leadership. This claim is expressed by Datan and Aviram, who represent the third group:

(12) Moshe sent to summons Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said, “We shall not come up. (13) Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to cause us to die in the desert, that you also make yourself ruler over us? (14) Nor have you brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We shall not come up."

Datan and Aviram perceive Moshe as having failed twice: on the one hand, he brought them out of Egypt, which they choose to recall as a "land flowing with milk and honey;" on the other hand, he has not brought them to the land of milk and honey which God had promised, but rather to the wilderness. Hence, they argue, there is no justification for Moshe "making himself ruler" over them.

Moshe's response to this accusation is different from his response to the protesters concerning the priesthood:

(15) And Moshe grew very angry, and he said to God: “Have no regard for their offering! Not a single donkey did I take from them, nor have I done evil to any one of them."

What is the meaning of the sharp contrast in Moshe's responses? It would seem that the difference arises from the different content of the two complaints. The two hundred and fifty men have a claim concerning a specific office, and this presents Moshe with no particular difficulty: he proposes the test of the censers, whose outcome is assured, since it is quite clear that God will demonstrate His selection of Aharon. The claim by Datan and Aviram, in contrast, is not merely a complaint against the selection of Moshe. They also suggest that Moshe's leadership is corrupt. Moshe believes that he has acted correctly, in accordance with God's command, and he grows very angry in the face of this insulting charge. But to what extent can any person – even Moshe himself – be certain of his own actions? For this reason, Moshe in his distress turns to God, asking for vindication.

There is a further difference between Datan and Aviram and the other two groups. The two hundred and fifty men do not perform any particular act prior to their complaint. It seems, though, that Datan and Aviram brought an offering before they complained against Moshe. Ibn Ezra explains:

Datan and Aviram were great men, and they brought an offering prior to this act [the complaint].

Hence, Moshe had further reason for concern, and he therefore prayed to God, "Have no regard for their offering."

C. The slogan and its inherent contradiction

Thus far, we have examined two claims by the three groups. In light of our discussion, if we have another look at the slogan of the rebellion that introduced the whole incident, it seems rather surprising:

(3) They gathered against Moshe and against Aharon and they said to them: “[You take] too much for you, for all among the congregation are holy, and God is among them; why, then, do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?"

This argument would seem to imply that *Am* *Yisrael* has no need for mortal leadership, since they are all holy. *Chazal* offer a figurative expression of the claim in the well-known *midrash*:

What appears before this incident? “And they shall make for themselves *tzitzit*” (15:35). Korach jumped at the chance and said to Moshe, “If a tallit is made entirely of *tekhelet* (blue thread), is it exempt from the requirement of *tzitzit* (which includes a thread of blue)?” He answered him, “It still requires *tzitzit*.” Korach retorted, “A *tallit* which is altogether *tekhelet* does not fulfill the requirement, but [the presence of] four strings fulfills the requirement?!” (*Bamidbar Rabba, parasha* 18)

In other words, Korach argues that *Am Yisrael* – which is like a *tallit* that is made entirely of *tekhelet* – has no need for a blue string, i.e., leaders such as Moshe and Aharon.

Clearly, this slogan contradicts the arguments that are voiced later, specifically the claim of those who question Aharon's selection as the *Kohen* *Gadol*. The protest concerning Aharon is presented by people who are interested in the position themselves. How, then, can the protesters argue that "the entire congregation is holy," while at the same time seeking the priesthood for themselves?

It would seem, therefore, that the opening rallying cry, calling for anarchy and opposing any sort of leadership, expresses the mood of a fourth group. It is possible that this anarchic group is represented by On, son of Pelet, who is absent from the rest of the story. We encounter him neither among those aspiring to the priesthood, nor among those protesting Moshe's leadership. His absence may indicate that he is not punished, and this would sit well with the possibility that he represents the claim of the fourth group – the anarchists. His argument is not a personal campaign against either Aharon or Moshe; rather, it is a campaign against leadership in general. It is not motivated by personal interests; on the contrary, it is presented as an ideological argument, based on a belief in the inherent holiness of all of Israel, with the Divine Presence residing amongst them. It is therefore a far less serious offense than the arguments of the other groups among Korach's company, each of which is punished.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We are now in a better position to understand the distinction that Moshe draws between those from the tribe of Levi who are protesting about the priesthood, and the others in the group who adopt the same claim. Moshe seeks to point out to them that this argument, coming from men who themselves are *Levi’im*, is hypocritical. How can they argue, “[You take] too much for yourselves, for all of the congregation are holy, and God is amongst them,” while at the same time enjoying their own distinction: "… that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you close to Him, to perform the service of God's Sanctuary, and to stand before the congregation, to minister to them?"

In any event, the amalgamation of these four groups makes no sense in terms of their actual grievances and aspirations. Their sole common denominator is their opposition to Moshe and Aharon. Perhaps, then, the syntactical omission in the introductory verse to the *parasha* – "Korach took…" – is meant to express the essential emptiness and defectiveness of the "taking."

D. The punishments

Ultimately, each group is punished in a manner uniquely appropriate to it.

The punishment for those who offered incense is that they are burned in a fire that emerges from God. There are many similarities between our *parasha* and the episode of the death of Nadav and Avihu. First, there is the description of the act in our *parasha*:

They took each man his censer, and they put fire in them, and placed incense on them. (verse 18)

This is strongly reminiscent of the sin of Aharon's sons:

Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, took each his censer and they put fire in them and placed incense on it. (*Vayikra* 10:1)

Following the burning of the incense, we read in our *parasha*:

And God's glory appeared to the entire congregation. (verse 19)

This corresponds to the revelation which had preceded the sin of Nadav and Avihu:

And God's glory appeared to the entire people. (*Vayikra* 9:23)

In addition, the Torah uses similar language in relation to the possibility of a sin committed by individuals bringing punishment upon the congregation. In our *parasha*, Moshe and Aharon plead:

"… Shall one man sin, and You will be angry with the whole congregation?" (verse 22)

Following the death of Nadav and Avihu, Moshe instructs Aharon and his remaining sons:

"Do not grow [the hair on] your head long, or rend your clothes, lest you die and [God's] anger be upon the entire congregation." (*Vayikra* 10:6)

The punishment itself is likewise described in similar terms:

A fire emerged from God and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered incense. (verse 35)

There emerged a fire from before God and it consumed them, and they died before God. (*Vayikra* 10:1)

In both instances, there is a command to remove the remains after the fire. In our *parasha*, Moshe is told:

"Say to Elazar, son of Aharon the kohen, that he take up the censers out of the midst of the burning, and you [shall] scatter the fire yonder, for they have become holy." (*Bamidbar* 17:2)

In *parashat Shemini*, Moshe tells Mishael and Eltzafan:

"Come near; carry your brethren from before the Sanctuary out of the camp." (*Vayikra* 10:4)

Both episodes are followed by a special command to Aharon alone. In our *parasha*, we find:

God said to Aharon: “You and your sons and your father's house with you, shall bear the iniquity of the Sanctuary." (18:1)

Following the sin of Nadav and Avihu:

God spoke to Aharon, saying: “You shall not drink wine nor strong drink…" (*Vayikra* 10:8-9)

Finally, we cannot ignore the instruction in our *parasha*:

"… and scatter the fire yonder (*ve-et ha-esh zareh*), for they have become holy." (*Bamidbar* 17:2)

which clearly alludes to the sin of Nadav and Avihu:

"… they offered before God a strange fire (*esh zara*), which He had not commanded them." (*Vayikra* 10:1)

These parallels indicate that the undermining of Aharon's status is equivalent to an undermining of the service in the Sanctuary. A person who views himself as worthy of offering the incense may be compared to someone who brings a strange fire before God. Both types of rebels seek to serve God in a manner that is different from what He has commanded, and they hold their personal cause or aspiration higher than absolute subservience to God's command. Therefore, those who offer incense are punished with the same punishment that God meted out to Nadav and Avihu.

When it comes to the punishment of Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, the Torah emphasizes that this was unprecedented:

(28) Moshe said: “By this you shall know that God has sent me to perform all of these works, for they are not [done] of my own heart. (29) If these men die a common death of all men, and they are visited by the same visitation [of death] as all men, then God has not sent me. (30) But if God creates a new creation, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they descend live to Sheol, then you may know that these men have provoked God.” (31) And it was, when he finished speaking all these things, that the ground that was beneath them split open. (32) And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, and their houses, and all the people who belonged to Korach, and all the property. (33) And they, and all that they had, descended live to Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the congregation.

The punishment for the personal insult to Moshe in presenting him as having acted out of personal interest is carried out by means of a new creation – a complete change in the laws of nature. Here again, it is emphasized that the insult to Moshe – like the insult to Aharon – is like an insult to God Himself. However, since the argument here does not concern the Sanctuary service, but rather a matter of politics, the severity of the sin is demonstrated by the eradication of the protesters from the world; they descend to *Sheol* in the sight of all of Israel. In this way, God shows that the political sphere is included in His guidance of *Am Yisrael*, and anyone who undermines His guidance of the world is destined to perish from the world and to descend to *Sheol*.

And what becomes of Korach, the leader who brought these disparate groups together? *Chazal* teach:

Korach was among those swallowed up and among those burned. (*Sanhedrin* 110a)

The source of this idea is plainly presented in the text. Further on in our *parasha*, we find:

(4) Elazar the kohen took the bronze censers [upon] which those who were burned had offered [incense], and they made them into beaten plates, as a covering for the altar; (5) [as] a memorial for *Bnei Yisrael*, so that no stranger, who is not of the seed of Aharon, shall come near to offer incense before God, so that he shall not be like Korach and like his company – as God said to him, by the hand of Moshe. (17:4-5)

The simple meaning of these verses would suggest that Korach was among those who were burned. However, later on, in *Parashat Pinchas*, we read:

And the sons of Eliav – Nemuel and Datan and Aviram – the same Datan and Aviram, the men of renown, who strove against Moshe and against Aharon, in the company of Korach, when they strove against God. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, along with Korach, when that congregation died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men, and they became a sign. (26:9-10)

Here the text would indicate that Korach was among those who were swallowed up.

Without entering into a practical discussion of how this would have happened, it is clear that this dual punishment represents simple justice for Korach. Having "taken" and joined together different groups with different complaints, which had nothing in common other than their rallying to his instigation of protest, it is appropriate that he be included in the punishment of each of them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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1. All references are to *Bamidbar* 16, unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Along the same lines as this second explanation, Rashbam writes: "Korach and Datan and Aviram took many people, until there rose up with them against Moshe two hundred and fifty [of them]." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In fact, the expression, "taking himself," while quite common amongst *Chazal*, does not exist in *Tanakh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is also stated explicitly, later on in the *parasha*, that those who offered the incense were the 250 men: "Take each man his censer and put incense in them, and bring before God each man his censer – two hundred and fifty censers… And fire emerged from God and it consumed the two hundred and fifty men who offered the incense." (verses 17, 35) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Indeed, in their discussion of the difference between On son of Pelet, and Korach's other cohorts, *Chazal* attribute specifically to On the position that "the entire congregation is holy." In *Sanhedrin* 109b-110a, we read: “[As for] On son of Pelet – his wife saved him. She said to him, “What difference does [this protest] make to you? If this one is the leader, you remain a follower, and if the other is leader, you are still a follower.” In other words, On indeed had no personal interest in the whole protest. Later on, the *gemara* explains how On's wife used her knowledge that "the entire congregation is holy" to save her husband: she gave him wine to drink so he would fall asleep, and then sat at the entrance to the tent with her hair uncovered. Thus, the men of Korach's company were prevented from reaching him – since they kept their distance from this immodest sight – and On was saved. The *midrash* therefore describes the genuine faith of On and his family in the holiness of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)