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 Baruch Gigi**

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Dedicated in memory of Elisa bat Tsirelé z”l

whose yahrtzeit is 1 Tammuz

By Family Rueff

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**Proper and Improper Motives for a Rebellion**

Summarized by Eitan Sivan

Translated by David Strauss

Now Korach, son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, the of Levi, [with] Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and On, the son of Pelet, sons of Reuven, took men; and they rose up before Moshe, [with] men of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown. (*Bamidbar* 16:1-2)

Our *parasha* opens with the emergence of three different groups who complain to Moshe and Aharon about their leadership:

1. Korach, son of Yitzhar, the eldest of the present generation of the tribe of Levi, who complains that he was not made a priest and was left with the status of a Levite.
2. On, son of Pelet, and Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, men of the tribe of Reuven, who was originally destined to become the natural leader of the twelve tribes.
3. Two hundred and fifty men, princes of the congregation, most of whom, according to Rashi, were from the tribe of Reuven – i.e., important figures and also members of the senior tribe (two good reasons to claim a share in the leadership).

This small group, which, as stated, was itself divided into sub-groups, manages to stir up and attract a large segment of the people. Their primary goal, ostensibly, is to challenge the hierarchy of holiness and turn the entire people into an ideal and holy class. Such a mass revolt, against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon and the very idea of a hierarchical sanctity, was doomed to failure – and there were many casualties in its wake.

**The Motives of Revolt**

The rebellion presented in *Parashat Korach* brings to mind many other cases throughout history in which a small, ideological group manages to galvanize a large group into a struggle against the existing order. Such a rebellion can end in success, with a change in the status quo, or in failure and bitter disappointment. In any scenario, the original instigators of the revolt often pay a high personal price – in the risk they assume in the event of failure, as well as in the forfeiture of their current status, which is often comfortable and secure.

What motivates them to revolt? What causes an individual to rise up, to sacrifice his life and to allow his belief in rebellion to take a significant chunk out of his life, sometimes in a wholly altruistic manner, while he destroys himself? It seems that several reasons can be suggested as to why a person rebels.

*The Image of God*

First and foremost, let us speak of the forces that are inherent in humanity. Every individual has the power to act and to change things, and the more a person is aware of his capabilities and of the impact he can have on the world if he but acts – the greater is his desire to activate and realize those capabilities. These forces are inherent in every living creature that the Creator brought into being, as the Torah states at the conclusion of the creation story: "which God had created to do" (*Bereishit* 2:3). God's creations are meant to do and to act.

Moreover, it would seem that these forces are even stronger in man than in other living creatures, for man was created in the image of God and thus inherited some of the attributes of the Creator. There is a well-known exposition attributed to the *Zohar* on the words: "And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (*Bereishit* 2:7) – "He who breathed, breathed of His own"; man's soul comes directly from the upper worlds. The Creator, who builds worlds and destroys them, endowed man with the will to act and to improve in his own world, to make changes and to rebel against things which he believes to be evil.

And God blessed them, and God said to them: Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth. (*Bereishit* 1:28)

*Competition*

Beyond the primal urge to progress and change, the other element which seems to be of fundamental significance for human development is the interaction of the individual with other people. It is well known that any gathering of people brings with it social development that leads to technological innovation and development. Man's desire to develop stems from the competition created by society, and every interaction involves some kind of progress in the world:

As Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] said: I learned much Torah from my teachers, even more from my colleagues, and from my students more than all of them. (*Makkot* 10a)

*Man and His Home*

The third element does not only push the individual to rebel and influence, but it also knows how to restrain that desire and direct it to the right places by means of sincere review and examination. This group is the home of the individual – spouse, children, and other relatives. The members of society at large who surround a person are not always interested in his welfare, and are not always willing to criticize or to speak to him candidly about the consequences of his actions. A person's family, on the other hand, worries about his welfare at all costs, even in cases where he would not be pleased to hear their criticism and their criticism might even hurt him, and it is precisely because of this that he must listen to them. A prime example of the importance of consulting with one's relatives is found in the case of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, when the Sages asked him to replace Rabban Gamliel as head of the academy:

They went and said to him: Will your honor consent to become head of the academy? He replied: I will go and consult the members of my household. He went and consulted his wife. (*Berakhot* 27b)

Rabbi Elazar's first response to the honorable proposal was to consult with his family, and indeed, his wife gave him good advice. A family's concern for each of its members, and the individual's desire to benefit those close to him and dear to his heart, can drive a person to act to improve his world.

*Ego and Pride*

It is, however, important to note that in addition to these three forces, which stem from the desire to advance and benefit the world, there is also a destructive force within man that pushes him to rebel: the human desire for greatness, or ego. Man's desire to be known, loved, honored, and esteemed – all of which he feels he deserves – can lead to dark places.

There is always the danger that instead of advancing an idea that one believes in, he will use his idea to advance himself, and he must be on guard every time he acts that his ego not get the better of him – that his motive for rebellion is the right one.

**Korach and Moshe**

In our *parasha*,we read about a struggle between two diametrically opposed sides. On one side are Moshe and Aharon, the holy leaders of the people, who act out of a sense of mission and concern for the entire Jewish people. We know this about Moshe from what we read two weeks ago in *Parashat* *Behaalotekha*, where God himself testifies that Moshe was completely free of any taint of improper pride:

Now the man Moshe was very humble, more than any person upon the face of the earth. (*Bamidbar* 12:3)

As for Aharon, we know he was a righteous and sensitive individual whose sole concern was to promote peace and harmony among the people of Israel:

Hillel used to say: Be of the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving [fellow] people and bringing them near to the Torah. (*Avot* 1:12)

On the other hand, Korach and his followers acted for exactly the opposite reasons. They did not believe what they were saying, but preferred to seize the reins for themselves for egoistic reasons. The ideal of sanctity was not really uppermost in their minds; they were more interested in the honor that the people would bestow upon them if they were in that position. *Chazal* explained (*Sanhedrin* 109b) that On son of Pelet, who is at first mentioned among the company of Korach but later makes no further appearance, spoke to his wife and she dissuaded him from the rebellion. Apparently, his wife discerned that the forces driving the rebels were pride and lust for honor, which would ultimately fail before the righteousness of Aharon and Moshe, and it was on her account that her husband was saved from the fate of the rest of Korach's company.

At first, the people are dazzled by Korach’s arguments and believe that Moshe and Aharon are selfishly holding onto their positions for personal gain and the thrill of power. And indeed, when Korach and his followers die in the plague, the people are angry with Moshe and Aharon and blame them for what happened:

But the next day, all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moshe and against Aharon, saying: You have killed the people of the Lord. (*Bamidbar* 17:6)

But, as with most phenomena in our lives, it is in the moments of true crisis that the interests and character of the people around us are revealed. At the time of the plague, Aharon does all he can to save the people from death, refuting the people's claim that he acts as leader for his own personal benefit:

And Moshe said to Aharon: Take your fire-pan, and put fire on it from upon the altar, and lay incense [on it], and go quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them, for there is wrath gone out from the Lord; the plague is begun. And Aharon took, as Moshe spoke, and he ran into the midst of the assembly; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people; and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed. (*Bamidbar* 17:11-13)

The people are enraptured by the values and righteousness that Aharon displays and are confronted with the fact that they were wholly mistaken regarding the parties to the rebellion. Moshe and Aharon were chosen by God, and they are holy and righteous and worthy of their positions, whereas the people are not worthy of a reality in which the *Shekhina* dwells among them:

And the children of Israel spoke to Moshe, saying: Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Every one that comes near, that comes near unto the *Mishkan* of the Lord, is to die; shall we wholly perish? (*Bamidbar* 17:27-28)

**In Heaven’s Name**

We will conclude with the famous Mishna in *Avot*:

Every controversy that is in the name of Heaven, its end is to endure; but one that is not in the name of Heaven, its end will not be to endure. Which is the [kind of] controversy that is in the name of Heaven? This is [as was] the controversy between Hillel and Shammai; and which is the [kind of] controversy that is not in the name of Heaven? This is [as was] the controversy of Korach and all his congregation. (*Avot* 5:17)

If we read carefully, we see that there is no symmetry between the examples. On the one hand, in a proper controversy, the two disputants, Hillel and Shammai, are both present. But in the improper dispute, only Korach and his party appear, without the side of Moshe and Aharon. Here we see a fundamental principle, that when there is a genuine dispute over values and ideals, each side listens to the other's views, and therefore there is a genuine and fruitful dispute. On the other hand, when a person is only interested in himself, he does not see the other side and its arguments but only his own personal benefits. There is no dispute here between two sides, but only one side that is self-absorbed and self-interested.

The rebellion that appears in our *parasha* was totally unjustified, for the people who stood behind it were motivated by self-interest alone. The entire rebellion was a misguided enterprise – a challenge to the world of sanctity, which must be hierarchical and cannot be fully egalitarian.

But as we have seen, the impulse to rebel and to change the existing order has deep and valid roots, and there are rebellions in which it is important that one join and participate. The way to distinguish between the two lies in a true appraisal of the aspirations and leaders of the rebellion, to determine whether they are motivated by a desire to improve or whether they are primarily driven by pride and the goal of achieving honor.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Baruch Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Korach* 5782.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)