

Parashat Korach 5770, 2010:

The Love of Power

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” (Lord Acton, 1834-1902, letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 3, 1887)

“The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.” (Edmund Burke, Speech on the Middlesex Elections, 1771)

Our *parasha* begins with the 16th chapter of *Sefer Bamidbar*. This is the narrative portion of our Torah reading that tells the story of Korach and his followers, and their rebellion against G-d, the Torah, Moshe, and Aharon. I have always struggled with how to understand this insurgence against all that Judaism holds holy. There are countless explanations as to why Korach chose to rebel, including psychological, political, sociological, and economic rationales, to name just a few. In my view, however, Korach’s mutiny was conceived, planned, and implemented to achieve one overarching goal: Power.

What exactly is power? Dictionary.com contains a rather large entry in its attempt to define this word. The first five definitions, I believe, are germane to our discussion:

1. ability to do or act; capability of doing or accomplishing something.
2. political or national strength
3. great or marked ability to do or act; strength; might; force.
4. the possession of control or command over others; authority; ascendancy: power over men's minds.
5. political ascendancy or control in the government of a country, state, etc.

I believe that all of these shades of meaning for the word “power” may be clearly found in the opening verses of our *parasha*:

Korach son of Yitz'har (a grandson of Kehoth and great-grandson of Levi) began a rebellion along with Dathan and Aviram (sons of Eliav) and On (son of Peleth), descendants of Reuben. They had a confrontation with Moses along with 250 Israelites who were men of rank in the community, representatives at the assembly, and famous. They demonstrated against Moses and Aaron, and declared to them, “You have gone too far! All the people in the community are holy, and G-d is with them. Why are you setting yourselves above G-d's congregation?” When Moses heard this, he threw himself on his face. Moses tried to reason with Korach. 'Listen [to what I have to say], you sons of Levi. Isn't it enough that the G-d of Israel has separated you from the community of Israel? He has brought you close to Him, allowing you to serve in G-d's Tabernacle and to minister as the community's leaders. Although He gave this privilege to you and all your fellow Levites, you are now also demanding the priesthood! It is actually against G-d that you and your party are demonstrating! After all, who is Aaron that you should have grievances against him?' (Translation, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*)

A straightforward reading of these *pasukim* (verses) reveals the following:

1. Korach instigated the rebellion.
2. Korach, Datan, Aviram, On, and the 250 men of distinction had a direct confrontation (*machloket*) with Moshe.
3. The content of the *machloket* was a direct challenge to the G-d-given authority of both Moshe and Aharon. The actual terms of this rebellion were couched in seemingly altruistic language: “All the people in the community are holy, and G-d is with them.” Korach seemingly wanted to achieve a true populist democracy wherein everyone would be equal in his or her ability to serve Hashem.
4. The rebellion's professed focus was against Moshe and Aharon. In reality, however, it was much more. It was a mutiny against G-d Himself: “It is actually against G-d that you and your party are demonstrating!”

Midrash Tanchuma, Korach II provides us with two clear examples of Korach's repudiation of Moshe's halachic authority, and his consequent rebellion against Hashem. The first vignette focuses upon Korach's ridiculing of the mitzvah of Tzitzit, while the second one presents his rejection of the mitzvah of Mezuzah:

Korach jumped up and said to Moshe [in front of the assembly]: “You have stated: ‘And you shall place on the Tzitzit [a thread of *techalet* – sky blue].’ In the case of a prayer shawl [or four cornered garment] that is entirely colored *techalet* **should it not logically be exempt** from the obligation of Tzitzit altogether? Moshe responded: “It remains obligated in Tzitzit.” Korach then said to him: “A garment that is entirely composed of *techalet* does not make it exempt from Tzitzit, yet four threads [of *techalet*] render it ritually acceptable? (See Rashi’s version, as well, on 16:1)

[Korach continued his harassment and ridicule of Moshe and asked:] “A house that is completely filled with Torah scrolls [*sefarim*], **is it not logically the case** that it should not require a Mezuzah?” Moshe responded to him: “It is obligated in a Mezuzah.” [Korach responded to him and said:] The entire Torah that is composed of 278 *parshiot* is unable to fulfill the necessary obligation; yet, two sections [of the Torah] that are found in the Mezuzah fulfill the obligation! Korach then said to him: “These things were not commanded to you! You have lied about them on your own!” Therefore it says: “And Korach separated himself...” (Translation and emphasis my own)

In both instances, the basic operative principle of Korach’s sarcastic ridicule and rejection of Moshe’s (G-d’s) halachic hegemony is common sense logic. This is why my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) labeled Korach’s actions as “The ‘Common-Sense’ Rebellion Against Torah Authority.” (See Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin’s work *Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought adapted from Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Chapter XIII.)

The depth of Korach’s animosity toward G-d and rejection of His Torah are reflected in his cynicism regarding the mitzvot of Tzitzit and Mezuzah, whose veracity and binding quality he dared to challenge. It is crucial to note that the first mitzvah that Korach attacked was none other than Tzitzit. Korach knew full well that Tzitzit symbolically represent the entire Torah. As the Rambam (1135-1204) formulates it in *Hilchot Tzitzit* 3:12:

A person must be extremely careful regarding the mitzvah of Tzitzit since the Torah [symbolically] makes it representative of all of the mitzvot. As the Torah states: “You will look upon it [Tzitzit] and you will remember all of the commandments of Hashem.” [*Sefer Bamidbar* 15:39] (Translation and emphasis my own)

As a result, Korach “went to war” against this mitzvah, and attempted to render it absurd

and irrational in the eyes of the Jewish people. He realized that if they were to remain steadfast in their devotion to this commandment, he would surely fail. Therefore, Korach tried to expunge it from their consciousness.

What about Mezuzah? What is at the “heart” of this mitzvah? The Rambam suggests the following:

A person is duty-bound to be punctilious in the mitzvah of Mezuzah since it is a continuous obligation that is incumbent upon us all. Each time that a person enters and leaves his home he encounters the oneness (unity) of Hashem, the name of the Holy One Blessed be He. [Then] he will remember his love for Him and awake from his “sleep” and the error of his ways [as a result of] following the foolish pursuits of his time (*hevlai hazeman*). He will then know and understand that there is nothing that remains forever except for the knowledge of Hashem (*Tzur Haolam*). Immediately, he will return to the knowledge of Him and follow the proper and righteous path. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin, u’Mezzuah, v’Sefer Torah, 6:13, translation my own*)

Rashi notes that Korach was blessed with a prodigious intellect (*Sefer Bamidbar 16:7*). Therefore, he may well have understood the power of this mitzvah in a similar manner as the Rambam. Accordingly, he recognized that if the Jewish people were to continue in their loyalty to the commandment of the Mezuzah, they would remain dedicated to Hashem and to His servants, Moshe and Aharon. As a result, Korach set his sights on ridiculing this particular mitzvah, in order to foment an attack upon the Torah and its Sages.

Korach was a self-serving, egocentric demagogue whose entire being was focused upon destroying Moshe and Aharon’s G-d-given stature, and repudiating the dominion and grandeur of Hashem and His Torah. As such, his “common-sense rebellion” was doomed to fail from the moment of its inception. *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory) emphasized this idea in *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:17*:

Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure; one that is not for the sake of Heaven is not destined to endure. Which is a dispute that is for the sake of Heaven? The dispute(s) between Hillel and Shammai. Which is a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? **The dispute of Korach and all his company.** (Translation as presented at <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=2099>, emphasis my own)

Chazal have a general rule of Torah analysis: “*M’klal lav atah shomeah hane*” (“From a negative formulation one can derive a positive action;” see for example, *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 14a). If we apply this principle to Korach’s actions, we can deduce a very positive message: We must continuously demonstrate loyalty to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* in our every thought and deed and do our best to ensure that everything we do is *l’shame shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven). In doing so, may we come to recognize that it is Hashem, and not we, who has the power and the glory. As *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) so beautifully stated:

And David blessed the L-rd before the eyes of the entire assembly, and David said, "Blessed are You, the G-d of Israel our Father, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O L-rd, are the greatness, and the might, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and on the earth [is Yours]; Yours is the kingdom and [You are He] Who is exalted over everything as the Leader. And wealth and honor are from before You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is strength and might, and it is in Your hand to magnify and to strengthen all. (*Sefer Divrei Hayamim* I:29:10-12, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

May each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to live our lives according to these stirring words of *Dovid Hamelech*, and thereby distance ourselves from any Korach-like thinking. In this way, and with G-d’s help, may our actions help bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our Righteous and true Messiah) soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

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http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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