

Parashat Korach, 5771, 2011:

*Korach's Rebellion: A Study in Arrogance and Its Results*

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

Korach's rebellion is very difficult to understand. At first blush, it seems that anyone with the least bit of G-d-consciousness should have been able to recognize that Korach's revolt was, in fact, a rebellion against Hashem. The mutiny against Moshe and Aharon, while crucial and fundamental, was actually a ruse. It was merely the human terms in which Korach couched his insurrection against G-d. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon several *Midrashim*, makes this point quite clearly in his commentary to *Sefer Bamidbar* 16:11:

**Therefore** Because of this, "you and your entire company who are assembled" with you **"are against the L-rd,"** for I acted as His messenger to give the kehunah to Aaron, and this rebellion is not with us **[but with the L-rd]**. - [Midrash Tanchuma Korach 6, Num. Rabbah 18:9] (This, and all *Tanach* and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, emphasis my own)

He further notes that Korach was blessed with a prodigious intellect (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:7). Why then did Korach repudiate G-d's authority and rebel against Him? Rashi answers this, as well, in his trenchant analysis of Korach's motives:

But what did Korach, who was **astute**, see [to commit] this folly? His vision deceived him. He saw [prophetically] a chain of great people descended from him: Samuel, who is equal [in importance] to Moses and Aaron. He [Korach] said, "For his sake I will be spared." [He also saw] twenty-four watches [of Levites] emanating from his grandsons, all prophesying through the holy spirit, as it says, "all these were the sons of Heman" (I Chron 25:5). He said, "Is it possible that all this greatness is destined to emanate from me, and I should remain silent?" Therefore, he participated [in the rebellion] to reach that prerogative, for he had heard from Moses that they would all perish and one would escape [death]: "the one whom the L-rd chooses - he is the holy one." He erred in

thinking that it referred to him. He, however, did not “see” properly, for his sons repented [and thus did not die at that time]. Moses, however, foresaw this. - [This is found in Mid.Tanchuma, Korach 5, Num. Rabbah 18:8] (Emphasis my own)

Rashi’s explanation of Korach’s seemingly inexplicable behavior goes a long way toward providing us with a conceptual framework for understanding these actions. It also fills in an essential detail that is the “real story behind the story.” Korach was blessed with *Nevuah* (Prophecy); i.e. G-d vouchsafed His glorious visions to him. Therefore, Korach’s view of the future was an accurate one – Shmuel *Hanavi* would be his rightful heir. Little wonder then, that Korach erred and mistakenly believed that the future belonged to him rather than to Moshe. He misinterpreted his prophetic vision as representing the eclipse of Moshe’s sun and the catapulting of his own star to the highest heights of the firmament. As we know with the benefit of hindsight, nothing could have been further from the truth. Unlike Korach, his sons did *teshuvah* (repented) and ultimately were the progenitors of future greatness. They, therefore, had a brilliant future that was filled with prominence, while Korach was literally buried alive as a result of his actions.

Given that Korach was so wise and capable of receiving *d’var Hashem* (G-d’s direct words), how did he err so grievously? In a word, how did he simply “not get it?” It seems to me that Korach’s *gaavat halev* (arrogance) blinded him to the realities with which he was presented. No matter how brilliant and far seeing he was, his ego and blind ambition prevented him from perceiving the truth. This is precisely why the Rambam (1135-1204) warns us so insistently regarding the insidious trait of arrogance:

There are some moral qualities wherein it is forbidden to take the middle approach. Instead, one should adopt one of the extremes of such temperaments. One of these is the

temperament of arrogance. It is not good [enough] for one to be just modest, but one should be meek, and one's spirits should be low. Therefore, concerning Moses our Teacher it is written, "...very meek," and not just, "meek." Therefore, the Sages commanded that one should be very meek. They said further that anyone who raises his spirits [in a haughty fashion] is denying the essence, as it is written, "...then your heart be lifted up and you forget the L-rd your G-d." They also said that all those with arrogant airs should be excommunicated, even if they are only slightly arrogant. (*Hilchot Deot* 2:3, O'Levy translation with my emendations)

Korach failed to understand the crucial nature of *anivut* (humility). He did not, and perhaps could not, appreciate that Moshe's greatness was a direct product of his *anivut*. Hence, Korach's arrogant and twisted self-perception was his downfall.

In a sense, Korach's story is a truly tragic one. It is the tale of squandered spiritual potential, misunderstanding, and unfettered ambition. He eschewed humility and embraced *gaavat halev*. Like a malevolent worm, this arrogance burrowed into every fiber of his being and prevented him from achieving even a fraction of what he could have become. Stated simply: Korach was his own worst enemy.

Korach's motivations and actions are, in reality, a study in what we ought not to do if we are to be true *avdei Hashem* (G-d's servants). *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) in Psalm 45, a psalm from the sons of Korach (*b'nei Korach*), depicts the greatness and humility that is a singular trait of true Torah scholars: "And your glory is that you will pass and ride for the sake of truth and righteous humility (*v'anavah tzedek*), and it shall instruct you so that your right hand shall perform awesome things." (Verse 5). Korach's children and his children's children understood what was necessary to serve Hashem. In a sense, they were wiser and more prescient than their father – even if they did not receive prophecy from Hashem.

May Hashem give us the wisdom to be like *b'nei Korach*, rather than their errant father.  
May He give us the ability to choose *anavah tzedek* and reject *gaavat halev*, and thereby fulfill our role as His authentic servants. With the Almighty's help may this be so.  
*V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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