

PARSHAS KORACH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

"And Korach took", yet the text does not elaborate what it is that he took. Chal said that he 'took' made a bad purchase (Sanhedrin 101), the Midrash, that he took himself to one opposing side (Tanchuma, Bamidbar 15), and Ibn Ezra comments that he took people with him. Yet it seems to me that all 3 miss the essence of the matter. What is taught here is that he took three separate and unconnected components of malcontents and welded them together into one protest group. Korach protested that since Moshe had taken Kingship, it was not correct for the descendants of Amram to also take the priesthood for Aharon's family, but that it should have devolved on Korach being the first born of Yitzhar, the second son of Levi. The leaders of Reuven disputed losing the rights to Yehudah and Levi of kingship and priesthood to which they were entitled as the First Born of Yaakov. The First Born of Israel objected to the giving of the priest hood to Levi. It is true as Ibn Ezra comments, that the actions that led to this rebellion actually took place in Midbar Sinai when the Leviim were substituted for the First Born. However, we do not have to use his argument that there is not mukdam u meuchar in the Torah to explain why incident with Korah and his congregation only appears now.

Korach seized the opportunity created by the edict that that generation would not inherit the Land, to create a coalition of rebellion of the First Born and the Tribe of Reuven to bolster his own agenda regarding the High Priesthood. By doing this he was able to appear as the defender of the disinherited, while serving his own ends as is often done by leaders and kings. This rebellion of Korach's was actually the last chapter in a chain of Lashon Harah that started with the Mitonanim, followed by Kivrot Hatavah, Miriam and Aharon criticizing Moshe, in Parshat Beha'alotcha and the Spies in Parshat Shelach. All of them were the same rejection of Moshe's speaking in the name of G-d and the same claim that his Torah was not Divine but only a creation of his own.

We have to understand the reply of Dan and Aviram to Moshe's summons (16:13-14), as follows: "Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey [Egypt] to let us die in the wilderness that you also set yourself up as a dictator [and offer us gifts and political offices as a bribe, that is worthless in view of our fate]. Furthermore, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey where you give us a heritage of field and vineyard [a bribe of property and also of social status that is knowingly false since we will never enter the Land as you yourself prophesied because of the Spies]. Will you blind these people [as to promises of generosity that you are powerless to fulfill]?" This is the only way we can explain Moshe's denial of any abuse of power on his part as an answer to these charges. It is true that the people were in the habit of giving

gifts to Moshe as is customary to give to honor leaders, as we read with regard to Shmuel (Shmuel Alef, 9:6-10), [it is difficult to find a similar source for this custom with regard to Moshe, but there is a source that Moshe never asked the people to give him assistance or personal favors, a misuse of power and status. "Not one ass have I taken from them and not of them have I hurt" (Devarim 16:15). ["Even by hire" (Nedarim, 38a); What difference would it make if he paid for the use? It would still be an abuse of power, since no would be able to refuse the great man even if it was inconvenient or unprofitable. It is important to remember that this disclaimer is made by Shmuel as well (Shmuel Alef, 12:3).

It is difficult to understand why the rebels agreed to the test of the incense to decide the issue of the priesthood as suggested by Moshe. The incense is the most spiritual of all the korbanot so that it was arrogance on their part to imagine that they were worthy of offering it. Furthermore, they had witnessed the death of Nadav and Avihu when they offered incense; an avodah for which the punishment was death when done by a stranger, so it was foolhardy for them to agree to that test. However, when they agreed to the test "And every man take his censer.....and you and Aharon" (16:17), they thought that they would all offer the incense together, so that when it was accepted each one could claim that it was in his virtue and therefore he should be the priest. However, in order to make the decision quite clear cut, in the following verse we read "every man took his censer and put fire on them and laid incense on them and stood at the entrance to Ohel Moed and [then] Moshe and Aharon [separately.] We find the same issue repeated on Har HaCarmel at the test proposed by Eliyah (Melachim Alef, 18). The priests of the Baal thought that the sacrifices would be offered as a group that would include Eliyahu. Then, when fire came down from Heaven they would claim that it was in their merit, and because the group included Eliyahu, the issue would not be settled as to who is the god, Hashem or the Baal. However, Eliahu separated the priests of Baal into two groups, the one of all the priests and the other representing Hashem, of Eliyahu alone. Then the results of the test would be clear cut and decisive.

The punishment of the bringers of the ketoret was death by fire, fitting for those who offered a strange fire, fire by strangers and that included Korach. However, in the case of Dotan ve Aviram the punishment was being swallowed by the earth, including the property of Korach. They were petty people of little spiritual value and degraded morality who dared to speak out against the Father of the Prophets, and it was 'midah kaneged midah' that they were punished by the mouth of the Earth which is the lowest of the elements and of the creation. "But if G-d will create a new creation" (16:30) was necessary since the greatest and most awesome event described in the Torah that they were querying, was the Creation at Bereishit; only a similar albeit much smaller creation could demonstrate the truth of the Torah that began with Bereishit.

It is interesting to compare Abarbanel's prosaic and political analysis of Korach's rebellion with the treatment of it, by the Hassidic school of Pshyscha, who saw in the rebellion an expression of misguided religiosity, just as they viewed all the backslidings of that generation. Simcha Bunem

spoke about "My Zeide Korach", while the Admor of Kotsk taught that Korach was a Rebbe who wore a 'spodick' and said Torah. "Korach was the equal of Moshe and he wanted to emulate Moshe by correcting the sin of Cain. As his name denotes, Cain, from kinyan, was one who created and was all activity. That is admirable and in contrast to Hevel who did not see any value or purpose in anything, even things of the spirit; "Hevel also brought a sacrifice- havi gam hu", after Cain initiated the avodah. But the characteristic of Cain is dangerous in that it can lead to arrogance and self satisfaction, so while Moshe was the most humble of men and could correct Cain's sin, Korah became proud and arrogant and that was his downfall" (Shem Mi Shmuel)].

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