

CALENDRIC GREATNESS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

They stood before Moshe with two hundred and fifty men from the Bnei Yisrael, leaders of the assembly, summoned for the appointed time, men of renown...[Moshe]spoke to Korach and to his entire assembly, saying, "In the morning Hashem will make known the one who is His own...

Be'er Yosef: "Summoned for the mo'ed / appointed time," explains the gemara,² means that each one was great enough to assist on the high court that made issued decisions about the calendar. Their proclamations, fixing the length of months, and declaring a leap-year when necessary, determined when the holidays would be celebrated. This is important not only in comprehending their intentions, but in understanding the talent and guile of Korach, who was able to win them over to his side of the argument.

Fixing time plays a role in Moshe's response as well. Rashi cites a midrash that Moshe spoke of "morning" to drive home the point that Hashem created immutable division between day and night. Korach could no more change the nature of the kehunah than he could turn morning to evening.

How, then, did Korach make such a persuasive case against the role of Moshe? It was a matter of public record that Moshe's serving in a key role of kehunah during the milu'im days did not elicit a dramatic response from heaven, while Aharon's service was met with a fire that descended from Heaven. How could anyone doubt Aharon's appointment?

Korach, it would seem could not challenge the fact of Aharon's appointment. He argued, however, that Hashem asked Moshe to appoint someone to the position, and Hashem would go along with whatever choice was made. Korach and his followers objected to Moshe's choice of a close relative.

To counter the claim that none could tamper with a selection approved of by HKBH Himself, Korach picked backers who were part of the process of fixing the Rosh Chodesh date and the leap year. The gemara establishes that the proclamation of Rosh Chodesh by a human court is dispositive - even when the beis din acted mistakenly. In a sense, they have veto power over the calendar, and the Heavenly Court goes along with their decision. The fire that descended for Aharon from Heaven didn't prove anything about Aharon, as much as showed that Moshe's choice for the job would be respected above. There was still a way to undo Aharon's appointment, a way to reverse the nepotism. The old appointment could be undone, and a new appointee substituted.

Moshe's response was to underscore the word "morning." While beis din was granted authority over

the fixing of Rosh Chodesh, this hardly means that they wield power in all matters of the physical heavens. Human beings are incapable of changing certain elements, like light and darkness. The boundary between them is intrinsic; nothing humans do is going to change that. Moshe correctly argued that the selection of Aharon and his children to the kehunah was an intrinsic, unchangeable value.

The Yalkut broadens the scope of the dispute. In its version, Korach attacked much more than Aharon's appointment. He spoke of a theoretical widow and two daughters, left to fend for themselves. They wished to plow their field, but Moshe objected, citing the prohibition of working with an ox and a donkey yoked together. When they began to sow their field, Moshe again objected. Sowing a mixture of plants is forbidden! At harvest time, he interfered again, demanding that they leave dropped and forgotten gleanings for the poor, along with an entire corner of the field. Selling their property and buying animals offered them no respite. Moshe was there once again to demand the first shearings and the first-born offspring.

In other words, Korach mocked the entire system of mitzvos. Moshe's response was that the difference between Klal Yisrael and the other nations was fixed and immutable as that between light and dark. Hashem chose to differentiate and sanctify Klal Yisrael with a plethora of mitzvos that governs every decision they would make.

The gemara³ has the sun and moon retreating to the zevul, a distant heaven, and refusing to give light unless Hashem intervened on behalf of Moshe. While they were coaxed out of their protest, we should ask why they were exercised over this challenge to Moshe more than any other.

Our approach explains their position. Korach's chief argument was that the kehunah was plastic and fungible. It didn't really have to go to the descendants of Aharon; others could substitute just as well. Hashem would honor any reasonable request, just as He deferred, as it were, to the decision of beis din about calendar matters. Now, the Torah describes two purposes for the main luminaries: "to separate between the day and the night, and...for festivals."⁴ The first function is fixed. Nothing ever changes in the difference between day and night. The second function - allowing us to determine when the holidays begin - rests in the hands of the human court. They have some leeway in applying it. Heaven goes along with their decision.

Because Korach inappropriately cited this second function in support of his position, the luminaries felt compelled to address themselves to the dispute.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 16:2-5
2. Sanhedrin 110A
3. Nedarim 39B

4. Bereishis 1:14
