

PEER PRESSURE

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Power of the Influence of the Community

The Torah tells us that Korach attempted to usurp the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu. He contested the authenticity of the Torah, which was transmitted through Moshe to the Jewish People. Korach professed that the Torah was "Moshe's creation and not G-d's Torah." Korach nearly undermined the Klal Yisroel for the sake of his own glory because he believed that the next official appointment should have been given to him rather than his cousin (Elitzafon Ben Uziel) in accordance with the law of inheritance. The question is - regardless of Korach's grievance against Moshe how could he have come to the level to contest Moshe's authority?

The Torah states, "Vayikach Korach Ben Yitzahar (Korach son of Yitzahar took)..." Rashi cites Chazal who explain that "Vayikach Korach (Korach took)" means that Korach took himself outside of the community in order to establish himself apart from Moshe. Only after Korach removed himself from the community was he able to confront and attack Moshe. Why did Korach need to remove himself from the community in order to bring his grievance against Moshe? If Korach believed that his grievance had a legitimate basis he could have approached Moshe without removing himself from community. However, since the Torah tells us that only after removing himself from the community did he contest and question the validity of Moshe's transmission, it is evident that Korach was only able to bring about this confrontation because he removed himself from the community. How do we understand this?

Often when one asks a person who was once part of a particular observant community why he is no longer observant to that degree, the answer usually is, "I am no longer part of that world (community)." Why does he need to respond in that manner? He could have simply said, "I am still part of that community, but I disagree with their level of observance." We find that a person has to first dissociate himself from the community with a particular ideology in order for him to reject that ideology. However, if the person would still identify with his community and choose to behave differently than his peer group then he would perceive himself as different or even "less" than the rest of the community. The only way that community would have no bearing on his self-image is by removing himself and establishing himself as part of another one, which is not in agreement with his previous peer group.

Moshe was the teacher and leader of the Jewish people and Korach, being part of Moshe's

community, could not have the audacity to pit himself against Moshe while being part of the community. Korach therefore had to remove himself from the Klal Yisroel to establish his own community. Thus he was no longer subject to Moshe's authority or the Torah, which Moshe was transmitting.

The Torah tells us that the Baal Paor was an idol whose method of worship involved defecating on the idol. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz zt'l explains that pagan society at large believed that idol worship entails being reverent and respectful to the deity that is being worshiped. Defecating on the Baal Paor allowed them to establish a completely different framework of worship. Thus the community of the Baal Paor was able to establish themselves as a society with their own value system that could be contrary to the morals and ethics of the world.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that in Sodom the victim was required to pay the victimizer. The Gemara tells us that Eliezer was accosted and beaten in Sodom and then went before a Judge in order to bring a claim against his assailant. The Judge ruled that he should pay damages to his assailant because this was justice in Sodom. Hearing this ruling, Eliezer raised the weapon with which he was accosted and beat the Judge and demanded that based on this standard justice system the judge should pay damages to Eliezer's victimizers. The question is - How absurd could one become? How could this be justice? The answer is- when an individual or a community remove themselves and establish their own ethical and moral system, then anything can be rationalized and justified.

Once Korach extricated himself from the Moshe's community, he had no difficulty to approach Moshe as a peer and attempt to usurp his authority. If Korach identified as a member of Moshe's community and as his disciple, he could not have been able to attack him because the very act of questioning the veracity of Moshe's word would reflect negatively on himself.

From this we can appreciate the need to be associated with a proper community that has a laudable value system and adherence to Torah. If a person identifies with the proper Torah community, then that association will act as a safeguard from transgression. On the other hand, if one identifies himself with a community that does not adhere to Torah principles then he can rationalize any type of behavior (regardless of how severe it may be) despite it being contrary to the Torah.

2. The Blinding Effects of Conflict of Interest

The Torah tells us that Korach attempted to usurp Moshe's authority claiming that it was nepotism for Moshe to choose his brother Aaron as the High Priest. Korach claimed that all the Jewish people were "holy" and therefore would qualify for the position of High Priest.

The Torah tells us that after witnessing the splitting of the Sea, which was a new dimension of miracle, the Jewish people did not doubt Moshe to any degree. As the Torah states, "The Jewish people believed in Hashem and Moshe His Servant." The Ramban writes that other than the Sinai experience, this was the highest level of emunah (belief) which the Jewish people reached in the

history of Klal Yisroel. The Rambam, writes in the Laws of Yisodei HaTorah that at Sinai every Jew heard Hashem communicate with Moshe. Because of witnessing this level of relationship, Rambam cites the verse in the Book of Exodus, "They (the Jews) will believe in you (Moshe) forever." Meaning that the authenticity of Moshe's word will never be contested. Korach and his group of dissidents (two hundred and fifty of the most astute Torah sages from the tribe of Reuven, who were each qualified to be the head of the Sanhedrin Gedola- the High Court) were part of the generation that witnessed the splitting of the Sea, stood at Sinai and witnessed Hashem telling Moshe, "Go tell the Jews such and such (the Torah)." After experiencing the Sinai event, how could they contest Moshe's authority? How could they have possibly claimed that the Torah was Moshe's own creation and not the Word of G-d?

Moshe had a special relationship with Hashem. When the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem wanted to destroy them. Moshe prayed that Hashem should not destroy them and that He should forgive them- Hashem listened to Moshe. After the incident of the meraglim (the spies), Hashem again wanted to destroy the Jewish people, but He once again listened to Moshe's plea not to destroy the Jews. In each case, Hashem wanted to eliminate the Jewish people and to start again with Moshe as the progenitor of a new people. However Moshe refused to have this role.

Korach and his followers understood Moshe's special relationship with Hashem. They believed that Hashem would support any request or decision made by Moshe. The point of contention that Korach had with Moshe was based on the origin of the decision to choose Aaron as the High Priest. Was Aaron selected by Hashem to be the High Priest and this decision was communicated and executed by Moshe? Or did Moshe decide that Aaron should receive the position as High Priest and Hashem subsequently approved it? Korach's claim against Moshe was based on the fact that all the Jews were "holy" and Moshe could have selected anyone to be the High Priest. If so - why did he choose his brother? This is why Korach had taken the position that the Torah was the word of Moshe and it was only approved by G-d.

What one must understand is even according to Korach's own conflicted and distorted perception of reality, the fact is Aaron was chosen by G-d to be the High Priest- regardless if the basis of the decision was Moshe's or G-d's. If this is the case, how do we understand Korach's claim that we are all holy and therefore qualified to be the High Priest?

Rashi cites the Chazal which states that Korach's "eye mislead him." Korach had foreseen that Shmuel the Prophet, who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron, was going to be one of his descendants and that many families who would officiate in the Temple as Levites would arise from Shmuel. Korach believed that he would be saved in the merit of Shmuel the Prophet. Despite the fact that Korach was usurping Moshe's authority and going against the Word of Hashem, he believed that because of the special role of Shmuel he would be protected.

The Midrash tells us that Avraham our Patriarch refused to bow to the idol and was cast into the fire

at Kasdim and emerged unharmed. One may think that since Avraham was willing to give his life for Hashem he merited to be saved through a miracle because of his self-sacrifice. Chazal tell us that the reason why Avraham was not consumed by the fire was because Yaakov our Patriarch (the father of the Jewish people) was destined to be born. The Midrash states that in the merit of Yaakov, Avraham was saved from the fire at Kasdim. Avraham in his own right would have not survived the fiery kiln if not for Yaakov.

Korach believed that just as Avraham was saved because the world needed to have Yaakov our Patriarch, so too did he believe that the world needed Shmuel the Prophet. Therefore, he would not perish. It is possible that a person, as a result of a conflict of interest, would not only justify his transgressions but also consider them a mitzvah.

3. Merit comes to those who are Meritorious

Rashi cites Chazal who offer an alternative explanation to "Vayikach Korach (Korach took)" which we discussed earlier (in Commentary #1). Chazal explain that "Vayikach Korach (Korach took)" means that Korach persuaded the two hundred and fifty men who were qualified to be the heads of the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel). The term "Vayikach" which means, "to take," is used regarding inanimate objects or an unintelligible creature animal which does not have free choice to come or not to come and therefore it is "taken." However regarding a human being who has free choice to come or not to come - how is the term "Vayikach" as it applies to Korach to be understood? Rashi explains that when the term "Vayikach" is used in this context (regarding Korach); it means that Korach had "taken" them through his power of persuasion.

Although they were qualified to be the heads of the Sanhedrin and were astute Torah sages, Korach rendered them helpless through his power of persuasion. Choice is when one sees both sides of an equation and can choose between the two. However these individuals were persuaded to such a degree that they only could see the position of Korach. Rashi cites another example in which the term "Kach" (to take) is used regarding a human being. Hashem said to Moshe, "Kach es Aaron (Take Aaron)" and persuade him to assume the position of the High priest. Hashem told Moshe that his words should be so convincing to Aaron that he would no longer have any choice other than to accept this appointment.

Rambam tells us in the Laws of Teshuvah that it is only because we exercise our free choice to do the right thing that we deserve to receive reward for that deed. However if one did not have choice, but would rather be naturally compelled to do the good deed one would not deserve to receive any reward. The question to ask is - if a person is influenced and persuaded by the words of his rebbe (to the degree that Aaron was persuaded by Moshe to accept the High Priesthood) would that that person receives reward for that deed? If on the other hand, one is negatively influenced and persuaded to such a degree as Korach influenced his cohorts - would that person be held liable for punishment since their free choice was suspended as a result of this overwhelming persuasion?

Korach's followers were completely taken by his words. If this is the case- why were they deserving of punishment? As the Torah states, "They were taken by Korach." Why should they have any degree of liability?

There is a principle that is stated in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers), "One mitzvah brings another mitzvah and a transgression or misdeed encourages and brings other misdeeds." If a person is deserving of good deeds because of a good deed he has done, Hashem will bring him the opportunity to perform other good deeds. Conversely, the principle states that if a person is undeserving because of past transgressions, then Hashem will bring to him situations where he is able to fail again. The question is - what makes a person deserving or undeserving? From a spiritual perspective meritorious acts go to those who are worthy of merit.

Based on this principle, if a person is positively affected by his rebbe to grow in Torah, then it must be that he merited that level of relationship with the rebbe because of a positive choice that he had made in the past. However the two hundred and fifty member of the tribe of Reuven who were under Korach's influence evidently deserved to be subject to this influence. This was a reflection of who these people actually were. Korach could have influenced anyone; however, it was specifically this group that was affected. There must have been something in their background that brought them to this situation. For example, Dassan and Aviram (Korach's compatriots) had already informed on Moshe in Egypt and were responsible for many other unconscionable acts.

The Gemara tells us that there were two great leaders who were similar to one another vis-à-vis their generation: Shmuel the Prophet (who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron) and Yiftach. Although there is almost no comparison between the level of greatness of Shmuel and Yiftach, they are both referred to as "leaders" in their generations. As it is stated by Chazal, "Yiftach in his generation is as Shmuel is in his generation." The Chasam Sofer z'tl asks - why did one generation merit to have Shmuel and the other Yiftach when there is no comparison between their dimension of greatness? The Chasam Sofer answers that Shmuel's generation merited to have him as their leader because they were truly meritorious. However the generation of Yiftach, which is not comparable to the generation of Shmuel, only merited having a leader such as Yiftach.

We are continuously subjected to many interactions and situations- some of them are positive and some of them are also negative. We must contemplate in each of these situations in order to understand what brought about the positive opportunity or the negative pitfall. Evidently, based on the principle mentioned in Pirkei Avos that one good deed encourages another and a misdeed encourages the same, there must be valid reason why these situations present themselves.

4. How One is able to Live his own Reality.

The Torah states that when Moshe summoned Dassan and Aviram they responded by saying, "Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the Desert..." Dassan and Aviram complained that Moshe had taken the Jewish people out of

Egypt (where they were in bondage for two hundred and ten years) to die in the desert. Dathan and Aviram, who were in Egypt during the years of bondage and slavery, how could they claim that Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey? To the Jew it was a land of continuous suffering, death, and persecution. How do we understand this?

One way to understand this is that Egypt was in fact a land which flowed with milk and honey, compared to any other location. It was the most fertile and bountiful land with the exclusion of the Land of Canaan. Dathan and Aviram complained - why did the Jewish people need to leave Egypt to die in the desert after we had broken the yolk of bondage? We could have remained in Egypt and benefited from that land which flowed with milk and honey.

Another way to understand this is would be- when Moshe matured and went out from the palace of the Pharaoh, the Torah tells us that he "saw" the suffering of his brothers. Rashi explains that because Moshe made the effort to understand the plight of the Jews he therefore felt their pain. If Moshe had not focused on the predicament of the Jews, he would have not felt their pain.

The Gemara in Tractate Nidarrim tells us that Hashem came to Moshe while he was hiding in Midian and told him that the people who had informed on him had died and that it was safe for him to return to Egypt. The Gemara asks -how could Hashem tell Moshe that the informers had died if in fact Dathan and Aviram were still alive and that it was safe for him to return to Egypt? The Gemara answers that Dathan and Aviram were initially very wealthy and had access to the upper echelons of the Egyptian court and therefore were able to inform on Moshe. However since then they had lost all of their wealth and no longer had that level of influence so they could no longer inform on Moshe. The Gemara concludes that from here we see that a person who loses all of his wealth is considered as if he had died.

Dathan and Aviram were initially part of the wealthy class in Egypt despite the fact they were Jews. To them, in fact Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey. When they observed the Egyptian beating the Jew (whose wife he had raped) they were oblivious to the victimization of this Jew. They did not feel the plight and pain of this person. If they had they would not have been able to inform on Moshe for killing this Egyptian for behaving in this unforgivable manner. The fact that they did inform on Moshe is only an indication that they were oblivious and did not relate to the position of the Jewish people because of their own station within Egyptian society. Their reality was in fact that Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey. Being of such a nature, totally absorbed with themselves, Dathan and Aviram could destroy the Jewish people for the sake of their own glory.

If a person's objective is his own glory then he could justify any action for the sake of that purpose. Due to this perspective, this person is totally insensitive to the needs of his brothers despite their plight.

5. How to Understand Korach's Mistake

We had asked - how could Korach have convinced two hundred and fifty men who were astute

Torah sages to oppose Moshe Rabbeinu? They had all heard at Sinai that Hashem had designated Moshe as His spokesperson and therefore the word of Moshe is synonymous with the Word of Hashem. Korach and his followers claimed that the word of Moshe was in fact no the word of G-d. How do we understand this? What was the basis for Korach to contest Moshe's authority?

Rashi cites the Midrash, which states that Moshe's grandfather had four sons - the eldest was Amram (the father of Moshe and Aaron), the second was Yitzhar (the father of Korach), and the fourth brother was Eliztafon (the father of Uziel). Based on the laws of inheritance, the Torah states that the bechor (first born) takes a double portion of the inheritance. Korach understood that Moshe and Aaron (being the sons of the first born) deserved to receive the first two appointments - the king and the High Priest respectively. According to the order of inheritance, Korach was the next in line to receive the next official position; however, the position of leader of the family of Kahus was given to Elizafon Ben Uziel (the son of the youngest brother) rather than Korach the son of Yitzhar (the second brother). As a result of his disappointment of not receiving what he believed was rightfully his Korach reacted to undermine and usurp Moshe's authority. He had said that if the appointments were being distributed based on the order of inheritance I should have received the next appointment. If the appointments were being given based on qualifications then I am more qualified than Aaron to be appointed as High Priest. Therefore Korach concluded that the basis for Moshe's choice for the position of High Priest was nepotism. Korach believed that the only reason why Aaron was chosen was because Moshe wanted his own brother to occupy the second highest position. He did not believe that this was the word of Hashem but rather it was the word of Moshe.

Although, as we had explained earlier (in Commentary #2), Korach understood that the word of Moshe and the word of Hashem were synonymous. Korach knew that Moshe was special and Hashem would approve that whatever Moshe decided. Korach was resentful that Moshe rather than Hashem initiated the decision to appoint Aaron as the High Priest. Korach was mistaken to think that the appointment originated from Moshe and was only approved by Hashem. Moshe was only carrying out the will of Hashem and everything in the Torah to the smallest detail is the Word of Hashem being transmitted through Moshe.

With this understanding of Moshe's special relationship with Hashem, we are able to understand why Moshe had to pass away and not enter into the Land of Israel because he struck the rock. Hashem said to Moshe, "Speak to the rock to give forth its water." Moshe, as a result of being upset with the Jewish people, said to them "Listen you rebellious people..." and struck the rock rather than speaking to it as Hashem had instructed. Hashem said to Moshe, "You will pass away in the desert and not enter into the Land because you had the opportunity to sanctify my name by speaking to the rock, but you chose to strike the rock." Sforno explains that the nature and the seriousness of Moshe's failing - why is the speaking to the rock a sanctification of G-d's name while the striking is not? Sforno explains that physical involvement in bringing about a miracle minimizes the level of revelation because the result could be attributed to the person's actions and not to Hashem. If

Moshe had spoken to the rock it would have been a higher degree of revelation than if he had stricken the rock because it would have been clear that the miracle was a direct result of Hashem Willing the outcome.

The Jewish people questioned their relationship with Hashem. Did Hashem truly love them? Or was He only tolerating them? Hashem said to Moshe, "I want you to perform a miracle that will reveal My love for the Jewish people (which is the more advanced level of miracle without human intervention)." Moshe however chose to strike the rock to bring about a lesser level of miracle because he believed that the Jews were unworthy of the higher degree of revelation. Hashem said to Moshe, "For not sanctifying My name you must die." The question is - why is Hashem being so harsh with Moshe? The answer is- that what Moshe had done regarding the rock was exactly what Korach claimed is the essence of the Torah (that it is the word of Moshe that is approved by G-d rather than the Word of G-d being transmitted through Moshe).

Hashem said to Moshe, "Speak to the rock because I want to reveal My love for them." Moshe chose to do differently and he struck the rock. If Moshe would have not been punished to this degree, it would have been misunderstood that if Moshe decided to strike the rock rather than speaking to it and this was approved by Hashem, so too is the Torah the word of Moshe and approved by Hashem.

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