

# SUBTLE MOCKERY

*by Nechama Stampler*

## Subtle Mockery<sup>1</sup>

Korach the son of Yitzhar the son of Kohos the son of Levi took himself aside, with Doson and Aviram, sons of Eliav...

Rashi: What did Korach do? He gathered 250 heads of courts, mostly from his Reuvenite neighbors, and garbed them all in talisos of techeiles. They stood before Moshe and asked, "Is a talis made entirely of techeiles obligated in tzitzis or not?" Moshe responded that it is indeed obligated. They began to laugh. "If a talis made of a different substance fulfils its obligation through a single strand of techeiles, should not a talis made entirely of techeiles exempt itself?"

Gur Aryeh: Just what was Korach's action plan? If Korach believed that such a talis is exempt from tzitzis, why would he think that Moshe would argue differently? Perhaps Moshe would concur, and there would be no pretext for engineering a dispute. Alternatively, if Korach knew of some argument to obligate the techeiles -talis in tzitzis, even against the intuition of most people, perhaps Moshe would come up with the same line of reasoning. Any way you look at it, Korach did not seem to have an effective plan for beginning a large-scale communal dispute!

We must conclude that Korach's objective had little to do with the halachic parameters of a techeiles -talis. He used the talis as a metaphor for the spiritual state of the community. Korach believed that this talis would not be obligated in tzitzis, and sought to extrapolate to the structure of the tzibur. An ordinary garment somehow requires elevation through the presence of techeiles. A garment with a surfeit of techeiles, then, should have no need for further elevation. Similarly, Korach argued - employing reasoning guaranteed to be popular with many people - the lofty station of the entire community ("The entire assembly - all of them - are holy!" <sup>2</sup>) leaves all of them in a spiritually supercharged place. They have no need for a Kohen Gadol to inspire them to get to higher places. They are already there.

Korach, moreover, took equal aim at Moshe and Aharon. He meant to demonstrate that both of them were equally irrelevant to the progress of the community. He perceived that the two brothers had complimentary roles. As Kohen Gadol, Aharon focused on the avodah on behalf of the nation. His job included directing the actions of the people, at least insofar as the avodah was concerned. Moshe, on the other hand, specialized not in action, but in the conceptual. Moshe listened to the Voice of Hashem and then conveyed what he heard to the Bnei Yisrael. Put more simply, Aharon bailiwick

was action, while Moshe's was study.

Korach's attack strategy contained two parts, each part aimed at unseating a different leader of Klal Yisrael. He used the techeiles argument against Aharon. Just as the garment of techeiles in his opinion needed no further enhancement, the kedushah of Klal Yisrael was such that no Kohen Gadol was needed to direct them in their avodah. He chose tzitzis to make this argument, because their function is to remind us of all the myriad duties, the 613 mitzvos, that Hashem places upon us as our general avodah to Him.

Korach then offered another rhetorical question: Does a house full of seforim still require a mezuzah? Once again, Korach believed that the house would be exempt, and that this was obvious. His intent was to mock thereby the role of Moshe as teacher. The purpose of mezuzah, he thought, was to stimulate Torah study. ("And you shall speak of them while you sit in your home...and write them of the doorposts of your house."<sup>3</sup>) As a people who had stood at Sinai, they were as full of Torah as a house stacked with seforim. They did not need anyone to teach them Torah; they were capable of comprehending it on their own, without any official middleman as their instructor.

Having come this far, we could explain that Korach targeted Moshe with both of his arguments. Korach argued that while people might suppose that the nation depended upon him in two distinct ways, this was not really true. Moshe instructed the people in practical aspects of Torah living, as well as in the comprehension of the deep wisdom of Torah. He was unnecessary, claimed Korach, on both counts. Like a garment of techeiles - symbol of the detailed network of practical mitzvos - nothing more was needed. The people would understand what Hashem and His Torah asked of them. And like the house full of seforim, no mezuzah need grace its door. The Torah nation needed no one to fix within them the knowledge of Torah. Both roles played by Moshe were gratuitous.

This approach helps explain Chazal's source for the mezuzah theme. The tzitzis idea grows directly out of the text, because the Korach story is juxtaposed to the parshah immediately before, which sets forth the mitzvah of tzitzis. Where, however, did Chazal find support for the house-full-of-seforim theme? If we are correct, however, in understanding Korach as challenging any and all contribution of Moshe Rabbenu, we can readily identify the source. The mezuzah theme is alluded to be the juxtaposition of the parshios. Once we establish that Korach argued that Moshe was dispensable as a guide to proper action, it follows that Korach would complete the argument. He would go on to convince the people that they did not need Moshe as a conduit for Torah instruction either.

Korach's rebellion, then, had little to do with any halachic disputes about tzitzis or mezuzah. He planned his insurrection around an appeal to the people for autonomy built upon flattery. It proved to be a deadly combination.

#### Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 16:1
  2. Bamidbar 15:3
  3. Devarim 6:7,9
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