

PARTS IN HARMONY

by Shlomo Katz

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Korach

R' Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger z"l (the "Sefat Emet") writes that Korach wrongly argued that G-d seeks a different type of service than Moshe claimed. Korach said, "Are not all of the people holy?" meaning, "Should not each person choose his own path in the service of G-d, rather than having one Torah for all people?" Korach claimed that Bnei Yisrael did not need a Kohen Gadol such as Aharon, for every Jew was a "High Priest." [However, Korach later contradicted his own words by seeking position of Kohen Gadol for himself.]

Moshe told Korach that he was wrong. As Rashi writes: "We have only one G-d, one Holy Ark, one Torah, one Temple, and one Kohen Gadol."

Furthermore, writes the Sefat Emet, if Korach had understood the nature of the kohen's position, he would not have wanted it. One is not necessarily deserving of honor merely for being a kohen, for it is an inherited position which does not depend in any way on the qualifications of the holder. (This is what Moshe meant when he said to Korach, "What is Aharon that you should complain against him?") True honor is found in working oneself up the ladder of improvement through one's own righteousness and accomplishments.

The parashah concludes with some of the gifts that Bnei Yisrael must give to the kohanim and the levi'im. This is G-d's response to Korach. It represents the idea that each Jew - kohen, levi and yisrael, man, and woman - is part of a group which can succeed only as a whole, but not if each member seeks to do the work of the other.

Rashi introduces our parashah with the statement: "This parashah is explained nicely in the midrash of Rabbi Tanchuma."

R' David HaLevi z"l (the "Taz"; died 1667) questions Rashi's statement based on the gemara (Eruvin 64a) which states that one is forbidden to say, "This teaching is pleasing; that teaching is not pleasing." This means that just as one is forbidden to criticize part of the Torah, one is forbidden to praise part of the Torah. The reason is that such praise, by implication, calls into question the beauty of the rest of the Torah!

The Taz answers: Regarding most of the Torah's verses, we find that there is a "peshat" (a plain meaning) and a "drash" (the deeper meaning found in the midrash). In the case of Parashat Korach, writes R' David, the situation is different, for here the explanation given by the Midrash Tanchuma is the peshat. The Torah does not give us much information regarding the motives and beginnings of Korach's rebellion. The midrash fills in these "gaps" through the exegetical means typical of the midrash.

This is what Rashi was telling us when he praised the midrash on our parashah.

(Divrei David)

R' Ovadiah Yosef shlita writes that from Rashi's comment to Eruvin 64a, it would appear that one is permitted to say, "This teaching is pleasing." It is merely prohibited to compare the relative beauty of two parts of the Torah. However, R' Yosef acknowledges, the Taz (quoted above) and Maharsha (in his Talmud commentary) do not understand Rashi in this way.

R' Yosef offers a second answer to the Taz's question on Rashi: The gemara's statement that one may not praise part of the Torah was referring to praising a halachah; all halachot are equally beautiful and equally important. However, when one hears a particularly beautiful derashah or homiletical teaching, one is permitted to say so.

If one is not permitted to criticize a Torah teaching, why are there so many instances in Torah literature (including in the gemara) where scholars denigrate each others' teachings? R' Yosef explains that if one scholar truly believes that the halachic opinion of another scholar is wrong, the first scholar must speak out in strong terms to prevent the public from acting in accordance with that mistaken view.

(She'eilot U'teshuvot Yabia Omer, Yoreh Deah II:16)

The gemara says, based on Mishlei 29:3, that a person who says, "This teaching is pleasing, that teaching is not pleasing" will "lose the treasure of Torah." R' Moshe Shlomo Zalman Halevi z"l (19th century Poland) explains that a person who respects the sages who came before him can build on their teachings. However, one who does not respect his predecessors cannot rely on the foundation which they built and must rely on his own intelligence. As a result, he cannot progress very far in his studies.

(Tevunat Mishlei)

"For the whole congregation is holy..." (16:3)

At first glance, Korach is complimenting Bnei Yisrael. Hadn't Moshe himself prayed (Bemidbar 11:29), "Would that all of Hashem's people were prophets"? Why then is Korach criticized for this statement?

Moshe spoke about those who act like "Hashem's people." Korach grouped everybody together. This demonstrates that Korach had lost his ability to distinguish between good and bad, holy and profane, and that which is truly holy versus that which just appears holy.

This is what led him to attack Moshe and Aharon, the holiest of Hashem's people.

(Iturei Torah)

R' Nachman said: "I was once walking in the desert and an Arab said, 'Come! I will show you where Korach's gang was swallowed up.' I saw two cracks in the ground and smoke rose from between them. He took a woolen cloth, dipped it in water, stuck it on the end of a spear and threw it into the smoke. When he took it out, the cloth was burnt. He said to me, 'Listen to what they are saying.' I put my ear to the ground and heard, 'Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and we are liars'."

(Gemara Bava Batra 74a)

R' Yaakov Lorberbaum of Lissa z"l (early 19th century; author of Nesivot Hamishpat) explains as

follows: Korach was not a fool. His dispute with Moshe occurred because, like so many philosophers, his profound, but wrong, thoughts led him astray. Specifically, the two cracks in the earth represent the two foundations of Judaism which Korach and other philosophers denied: (1) The principle of prophecy; and (2) that Moshe was the teacher of Torah par excellence. The smoke which came from between the cracks represent the fact that Korach was blinded by his own logic.

The white cloth represents a mind which is a clean slate, and dipping it in water represents teaching it Torah. When this mind was hurled with force into the smoke, it was burnt because if a Torah scholar **rushes** into debate with a philosopher, the Torah scholar may lose. Rather, the arguments of a Korach (or any philosopher) must be thought through and refuted calmly and patiently. If you take the time to put your ear to the ground and listen very closely, then you can hear Korach saying, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and we are liars."

(Emet Le'yaakov)

3 Tamuz 2488

On this day 3,720 years ago, the sun and the moon stood still for 36 (some say 48) hours pursuant to the command of Yehoshua bin Nun (Seder Olam). Several reasons are given for Yehoshua's taking this action: first, so that Bnei Yisrael would not have to fight a war on Shabbat, and also, in order to publicize that Hashem is the G-d over all of creation, contrary to the beliefs of those who worship the celestial bodies.

R' Natan Zvi Finkel z"l (the "Alter of Slobodka"; died 1926) writes: The Torah teaches that Bnei Yisrael have the power to control the calendar. When the Sanhedrin still existed, the beginning of each month was set based on the sighting of the new moon by two witnesses. However, the Sanhedrin had the right to ignore the witnesses' testimony, and it also had the right to accept the testimony of the witnesses, even if it knew based on astronomical calculations that the witnesses had not seen the moon. (The Sanhedrin might do this to prevent certain holidays from falling on certain days of the week.) The day that the Sanhedrin said was rosh chodesh _was_ rosh chodesh; the rewards and punishments associated with keeping or violating the holidays were allotted for that day which the Sanhedrin said was holy, not for the "correct" day.

Just as we can control the calendar, so we can control the celestial bodies themselves, as the miracle wrought by Yehoshua demonstrates. Furthermore, the celestial bodies can be made to serve each person individually. This happened at the time of the plague of darkness in Egypt, when Bnei Yisrael had light wherever they went, even in the homes of the Egyptians. Where did these powers come from? From the fact that such miracles helped to fulfill promises contained in the Torah (e.g. to enable Bnei Yisrael to locate Egyptian gold). If such power comes from one detail of Torah, imagine the greatness of a person who never lets go of the Torah!

(Ohr Hatzafun II p.38)

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