

TO BE A KING

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Korach

To Be a King

Korach
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Today's Learning:
Bava Kamma 8:1-2
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 44
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Pesachim 69

Korach's rebellion, the focus of this week's parashah, is different in several respects from the other mutinies that occurred in the desert. Firstly, it was the only one that was directed at Moshe personally rather than at some aspect of Bnei Yisrael's desert experience (e.g., the food). Secondly, Korach's rebellion elicited a response from Moshe Rabbeinu like no other mutiny described in the Torah. In every case in which Bnei Yisrael sinned, Moshe pleaded with Hashem in their defense. Not so in Korach's case; to the contrary, Moshe called out to Bnei Yisrael: "Turn away now from near the tents of these wicked men and do not touch anything of theirs, lest you perish because of all of their sins." Then, Moshe called upon G-d to bring about the deaths of Korach and his leading cohorts through an unusual means.

At first glance, Moshe's response is shocking. After all, the Torah teaches that Moshe was the humblest of all men. Why, in the one case in which he was attacked personally, did Moshe react so forcefully?

R' Ben Zion Rabinowitz shlita (the "Biala Rebbe") explains that Moshe had the halachic status of a king. According to halachah, a king may never forgo or forgive the honor due him. Moshe was humble, but he, too, was bound by halachah. If he showed any mercy to Korach, he would, in effect, be abdicating his throne.

There is a practical lesson in this for every Jew, adds R' Rabinowitz. Every Jew is a king in his own way. And, kabbalists teach that every Jewish soul has a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu within it. Thus, while every Jew is enjoined to be humble, that same Jew must stand up for his dignity like a king when the yetzer hara attacks.

(Mevaser Tov, Yeshuat Avraham p. 344)

From the Parashah . . .

"The earth covered them over and they were lost from among thee congregation." (Bemidbar 16:33)

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer taught, citing our verse: Korach and his congregation are "lost"; i.e., they will not return to life at the time of techiyat ha'maitim and will not be judged at the end of days. The sage Rabbi Yehoshua disagreed, saying that about Korach and his congregation it is written (Shmuel I 2:6), "Hashem brings death and gives life, lowers to She'ol and elevates." Rabbi Eliezer asked Rabbi Yehoshua, "Then how do you interpret the verse [from our parashah], 'they were lost from among the congregation'?" Rabbi Yehoshua answered, "They were lost from that congregation, but not from the congregation of Olam Haba."

(Pirkei D'Rabbi Natan 36:2)

R' Shmuel Eliezer Eideles z"l (major Polish Talmud commentator, known as Maharsha; died 1632) notes that it is not a coincidence that Rabbi Yehoshua cites the prayer of Chana, mother of the prophet Shmuel, as proof that Korach is not lost forever. Our Sages ask, "What led an intelligent man such as Korach to rebel against Moshe?" They explain that Korach saw prophetically that he would have a descendant - the prophet Shmuel - whom the verse equates to Moshe and Aharon combined (see Tehilim 99:6). Surely, Korach reasoned, an ancestor of Shmuel could not be subservient to Moshe and Aharon.

As Shmuel's mother, Chana felt some responsibility for Korach's error and his fate. Therefore, Chana prayed that Korach's punishment not be eternal. (Chiddushei Aggadot: Sanhedrin 108a)

[The Talmudic sage] 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 Netivot 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 blinding smoke which came from between the cracks represents 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 cloth--i.e., the mind-- was hurled with force into the smoke, it was burnt. This happens 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)

"Hashem said to Aharon, 'In their Land you shall have no heritage, and a share shall you not have among them; I am your share and your heritage among Bnei Yisrael.'" (18:20)

R' Moshe Sofer z"l (the Chatam Sofer; Hungary; died 1840) comments: It is well known that it is difficult to keep one's thoughts attached to Hashem at the same time that one is actively involved with people. For one who wants to cleave to Hashem, hitbodedut / solitude is the prescription. Aharon Hakohen, however, was able to accomplish both simultaneously. He was always involved with people--always trying to resolve conflicts and strengthen marriages. Even so, he never left his lofty and holy position. This is what the verse means when it says, "I [Hashem] am your share and your heritage [even] among Bnei Yisrael." (Torat Moshe)

From the Haftarah . . . *"For with fire Hashem will judge . . ."* (Yeshayah 66:16 - haftarah for Shabbat Rosh Chodesh)

Rashi z"l explains: This refers to the fire of Gehinom. In his classic treatise on reward and punishment, R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194- 1270) writes: Since our Sages say that man's final punishment is in Gehinom and his final reward in Olam Haba, it is incumbent upon us to explain what the judgment known as "Gehinom" is, of what the punishment consists, and when it will occur. [Ed. note: This article will not answer all of these questions.]

Ramban continues: It is apparent that the punishment of Gehinom is not a physical fire that consumes the flesh, as laymen portray it, for one can exhume a wicked person's body and see that it

has not been touched by fire. On the other hand, Gehinom clearly is not a purely spiritual concept with no physical reality. This is evident from several sources. First, the Gemara (Eruvin 19a) indicates that Gehinom has three openings. One of them is in the Sinai Desert, as we read (in this week's parashah - 16:32-33), "The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and their entire wealth; they and all that was theirs descended alive to She'ol [a synonym for Gehinom]; the earth covered them over and they were lost from among the congregation." Another opening is in Yerushalayim, in the area known to this day as Geh Ben Hinom [literally, "the Valley of the son of Hinom"]. The third opening is somewhere at sea. Second, the Gemara (Shabbat 39a) states, in the course of a discussion about the permissibility of cooking in the hot springs of Teveryah on Shabbat, that the source of the heat in those springs is the fire of Gehinom.

What then is the form that Gehinom takes? Ramban explains that there is an entire dimension of existence which is physical, but which ordinarily has no tangible qualities that we can discern. Among the creations which belong to this class are malachim (commonly translated "angels") and the neshamah (soul). Gehinom, too, belongs to this group. They are physical, they cannot be touched or, ordinarily, sensed. Moreover, these creations exhibit certain qualities which defy logic. For example, Gehinom is part of our world, but, says the Gemara (Ta'anit 10a), it is 60 times larger than our world. [Ed. note: To aid the reader's understanding, we note that physicists, too, now recognize the existence of entities that are part of the physical world, yet which can be discerned only by their effects. Likewise, physics recognizes the existence of entities - for example, light - which exhibits paradoxical physical qualities.]

(Sha'ar Ha'gmul)

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