

PARSHAS KORACH

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Parshas Korach

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Much of this week's parashah is devoted to the rebellion by Korach and his cohorts against Moshe Rabbeinu. Regarding this, the well-known mishnah in Pirkei Avot (ch.5) teaches: "Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will endure [i.e., will have a constructive outcome], but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. What sort of dispute is for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between [the sages of the Mishnah -] Hillel and Shammai. Which is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his entire company."

R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (German rabbi and author of significant works in many areas of Torah study; died 1764) asks: How is one to know when a dispute is for the sake of Heaven? After all, disputants typically claim that they are acting solely for G-d's honor and that their only intention is to defeat the wicked (i.e., their opponents)!

R' Eyebchutz explains that our mishnah answers that question. The Gemara teaches that, notwithstanding the halachic disputes between the academies of Hillel and Shammai, the sages of each school respected their opponents, ate at their homes, and married into each other's families. This is in stark contrast to the manner in which Korach and his followers treated Moshe Rabbeinu. Not only did they not treat Moshe respectfully, they mocked him and nearly stoned him. Such are the indicators by which one can tell whether or not a disputant is motivated by considerations which are for the sake of Heaven. (Ya'arot Devash Vol. II, drush 8)

"Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi separated himself, with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On son of Pelet, the offspring of Reuven." (16:1)

Pirkei Avot (5:17) teaches: "What dispute was for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Hillel and Shammai. What dispute was not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and his

congregation. A dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will last. A dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven will not last."

Several points about this Mishnah require explanation. First, why does the Mishnah refer to the dispute of "Korach and his congregation" rather than to the dispute of "Korach and Moshe"? Second, the Mishnah implies that it is good if a dispute lasts, for it says that a dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will last, while a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven will not last. What does this mean?

R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797; the Vilna Gaon) is quoted as answering these questions as follows: When a group gathers together to instigate a fight that is not for the sake of Heaven, it is inevitable that they will fight amongst themselves. Therefore, Korach's dispute with Moshe is called the dispute of "Korach and his congregation," i.e., Korach and his congregation fought amongst themselves.

Also, when someone instigates a fight that is not for the sake of Heaven, it is inevitable that the original basis for the fight will be forgotten. This is what the Mishnah means when it says that a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven will not last. Rather, it will quickly degenerate into a different dispute. On the other hand, a dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will last, i.e., it will stay focused on the original point of contention. (Quoted in Ha'maor Ha'gadol)

"He drew you near, and all your brethren, the offspring of Levi, with you -- yet you seek priesthood, as well." (16:10)

The Midrash Rabbah elaborates on Moshe's statement: "You want to be a kohen? I, too, desire ("rotzeh") that!"

R' Yissachar Dov Rokeach z"l (1851-1926; the Belzer Rebbe) explains: Moshe was teaching Korach that he, too, could fulfill all the mitzvot that are reserved for the Kohen Gadol. How so? By thinking to himself, "If I were a Kohen Gadol, I would fulfill the mitzvot that are incumbent upon the Kohen Gadol. And, I want to be Kohen Gadol. However, G-d has not made me the Kohen Gadol." The Belzer Rebbe explains further: The Gemara teaches that one who thinks of performing a mitzvah but is prevented by circumstances beyond his control from doing so is considered to have fulfilled the mitzvah. Therefore, Moshe said, your desire ("ratzon") can enable you to fulfill the mitzvot of the Kohen Gadol.

R' Yissachar Dov's son and successor, R' Aharon Rokeach z"l (1880-1957) adds: We say in the Shabbat zemirot, "Then they all joined together in a covenant; 'We will do and we will listen,' they said as one." Even though Hashem established boundaries in His world--a kohen cannot be a levi, a levi cannot be a kohen, neither of them can be a yisrael, and so on--nevertheless, through Torah, one can achieve all of these levels. This is what the poet means: Because Bnei Yisrael said, "We will

do and we will listen," i.e., because they accepted the Torah, therefore, they all became partners in one covenant in which everyone is equivalent. (Quoted in Orchot Rabboteinu p.24)

"The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and the entire wealth." (16:32)

The Gemara relates that the sage Rabbah Bar Bar-Chanah once was traveling in the desert when an Arab offered to show him the hole into which Korach had been swallowed. Rabbah saw a fissure from which smoke was rising. He took a ball of wool, soaked it in water, stuck it on the end of a romach / spear, and then lowered it into the hole. When he removed it, he saw that the wool had been singed by fire. The Arab told him, "Put your ear to the ground and hear what they are saying." Rabbah did so, and he heard, "Moshe is true, his Torah is true, and we are liars."

What was Rabbah teaching by telling this story? R' Yitzchak Shmelkes z"l (19th century rabbi of Lvov, Galicia) explains that Rabbah wanted to indicate the seriousness of fomenting in machloket / strife. First, he took wool, which represents tzitzit in particular and mitzvot in general. (Tzitzit, through their blue color, also remind us of the heavens, and therefore of G-d's "Throne.") Next, he dipped the wool in water, which is frequently used by our Sages as a metaphor for Torah. Then, he stuck the water-logged wool on the end of a romach / spear, alluding to the 248 limbs and organs of the human body. (The gematria of "romach" is 248.) By this, he represented a person whose entire being, all 248 limbs and organs, are steeped in Torah and mitzvot.

Finally, he lowered the spear into Korach's hole and, when he removed it, it was singed by fire. This demonstrates that even if a person is entirely devoted to Torah and mitzvot, once he becomes involved in machloket, it is impossible to emerge unscathed. (Bet Yitzchak Al Ha'Torah)

"A flame came forth from Hashem and consumed the two hundred fifty men who were offering the incense." (Bemidbar 16:35)

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 110a) teaches that Korach himself was both burnt with his followers and swallowed up by the earth. Why?

R' Yisrael Meir Lau shlita (former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel) explains based on the answer to another question: Why did Moshe, the humblest of all men, react so harshly to Korach's attack on him? The answer is that Korach's claim that Moshe had usurped power undermined the validity of Moshe's prophecy and, with it, the validity of the entire Torah. By calling on G-d to deal harshly with Korach, Moshe was not standing up for his own honor but rather for the Divine origin of the Torah.

We read in a number of verses that the heaven and the earth were designated as witnesses to the covenant between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael. For example, Devarim 4:26 states, "I appoint heaven and earth this day to bear witness against you" Likewise, we read in Devarim 32:1, "Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth." Accordingly, when Korach challenged the validity of the Torah, it was fitting that a fire should descend from heaven to consume him and that he should be swallowed by the earth. (Yachel Yisrael Vol. V. p.285)

Pirkei Avot

Rabbi Yaakov says, "If one was walking on the road and was 'shoneh' and he interrupted 'mishnato' and said, 'How beautiful is this tree! How beautiful is this plowed field!' - Scripture considers it as if he forfeited his soul." (Ch.3)

On the simplest level, this mishnah is criticizing a person who, while walking on the road and studying Torah ("shoneh," related to "Mishnah" / the Oral Law), interrupts his "Mishnah" to admire the scenery. However, R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1784-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) offers several alternative explanations. He writes:

Why should a person be condemned for noticing an attractive tree? Perhaps he has a legitimate reason to stop learning, for example, to identify a landmark to help him find his way home! This question is answered by a seeming redundancy in our mishnah, R' Kluger writes. Why did the mishnah say, "If one was walking on the road and was 'shoneh' and he interrupted 'mishnato'"? It should have sufficed to say, "If one was walking on the road and he interrupted 'mishnato'." Rather, R' Kluger writes, the word "shoneh" means "he is repeating." [Ed. note: In fact, the word Mishnah comes from the same root, for the way one learns the Oral Law is by repeating it until he has memorized it.] In this context, however, the word "shoneh" means "he is repeating [his travels on that road]." Since he knows the way, there is no excuse to interrupt his studies to look for landmarks.

Alternatively, the mishnah is alluding to something else entirely. We read (Iyov 33:29-30), "Behold, G-d does all these things with man two or three times to bring back his soul from the grave, to bask in the light of the living." This verse teaches that each soul is given up to three opportunities to enter This World to perfect itself. However, our Sages tell us that once a person has committed any sin twice, it becomes habit and is very difficult to overcome. Thus, R' Kluger writes, a soul that has failed to perfect itself in its second sojourn on earth is unlikely to succeed on the third try. This is the meaning of our mishnah: If one was passing through This World and was "shoneh"--"repeating," i.e., he is now here for a second time--and he interrupted "mishnato" / "his repetition" to focus on the material world, Scripture considers it as if he forfeited his soul. (Magen Avot)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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