

CAN WE KNOW EVERYTHING?

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Korach

Can We Know Everything?

In this week's parashah, we read of Korach's rebellion. What was Korach, who our Sages say was a wise man, thinking, and what brought about his downfall?

R' Yitzchak Leib Kirzner z"l (1951-1992; mashgiach ruchani of Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef in Edison, N.J.) explains: We were taught as children--indeed, midrashim state--that Korach made a mockery of various laws. He argued, for example, that a techeilet-colored garment should not need tzitzit; if one string of techeilet is adequate for an otherwise white garment, certainly a garment that is entirely techeilet shouldn't need tzitzit! He also argued that a house full of sifrei Torah shouldn't need a mezuzah; if one small scroll is adequate for a house with no Torah scrolls in it, certainly a house full of sifrei Torah should not need a mezuzah!

However, writes R' Kirzner, we should not fool ourselves. The generation that received the Torah is referred to by our Sages as the "dor de'ah" / "the Generation of Knowledge," and it is not conceivable that mere mockery would have won anyone over to Korach's cause. Rather, Korach must have been preaching a philosophy in which his mockery played only a supporting role.

R' Kirzner explains: Korach preached that one must understand everything that he does. He argued that Hashem gave us the Torah to teach us to differentiate between good and bad, and that a mitzvah that seems illogical doesn't help us accomplish that goal. Therefore, Korach argued, such a mitzvah is not binding. Korach was partially correct, insofar as there is nothing wrong with wanting to understand. However, one can't always understand everything he wants to understand. Korach's downfall came from his lack of emunah peshutah / simple faith to sustain him when his intellect failed him. (Ma'oz La'tam, Vol.2, p.163)

"Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehat son of Levi took . . ." (16:1)

The Aramaic translation reads: "He separated himself."

R' Shlomo Kluger z"l (1784-1869; rabbi of Brody, Galicia) writes: Based on this, we can understand why Korach was punished so severely. It is difficult to understand: Korach's 250 cohorts transgressed an express commandment in the Torah by offering a private ketoret / incense offering, a sin for which the Torah imposes the death penalty, yet they merited to die in a "fire that came from Hashem" (16:35). Korach, on the other hand, did not transgress anything for which the Torah imposes the death penalty, yet he died an ignominious death--being swallowed alive by the earth. Why? And, why was his fate worse than that of those who made the Golden Calf and those who believed the Spies?

The answer is that Korach, alone among all of the other sinners just mentioned, separated himself from the Jewish People. The others, though they sinned, were protected by the merit of the community to which they adhered. (Kohelet Yaakov: Bein Ha'meitzarim pp.2-3)

"Do not be like Korach and his assembly." (17:5)

"One who persists in machloket / discord commits a transgression." (Sanhedrin 110a, citing our verse)

"What machloket / 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." (Pirkei Avot, ch.5)

"For three years, the Academy of Hillel and the Academy of Shammai disagreed. These said, 'The halachah follows our view,' and these said, 'The halachah follows our view.' Finally, a Bat Kol / Voice from Heaven declared, 'These and these are the words of the Living G-d, but the halachah is in accordance with the Academy of Hillel'." (Eruvin 13b)

How is it possible that both views are the word of G-d when the two academies are pronouncing opposite rulings on halachic matters, e.g., one says something is kosher and one says it is not kosher?

Rabbeinu Peretz z"l (Corbeil, France; died approx. 1295) answers: A midrash records that Hashem Himself taught Moshe Rabbeinu forty-nine arguments on each side of every question; thus, both sides were the word of G-d. Moshe Rabbeinu asked, "What shall we do in practice?" Hashem answered, "Following the majority of the Sages of each generation."

R' Peretz continues: How can this answer be applied to a disagreement between our Sages about a fact--for example, a disagreement about what the dimensions of the altar were? He answers: When

we find such a disagreement, we should understand that the two Sages are arguing about the interpretation of a verse: one says, "As I understand such-and-such verse, the altar should have been this size"; the other says, "As I understand such-and-such verse, the altar should have been a different size." Both of those opinions could have been taught to Moshe by Hashem. Of course, only one of them is correct regarding the actual physical dimensions of the altar, but they are both correct interpretations of verses in the Torah. (Tosafot Rabbeinu Peretz)

R' Yom Tov ben Avraham Asevilli z"l ("Ritva"; Spain; 1250-1330) quotes the first paragraph of R' Peretz's answer (above), and adds: "This is correct on the level of drush. Based on kabbalah, there is a secret to the matter." (Chiddushei Ha'Ritva)

R' Zvi Hirsch Chayes z"l ("Maharatz Chayes"; 1850-1855; rabbi of Zolkiew, Poland) writes: The reality is that the arguments between the Sages involve details, often tangential details, of the mitzvot. There is no argument about what we, as Jews, fundamentally believe. Likewise, there is no argument about the basics of what Hashem expects of us. [No one disagrees, for example, that we have a duty to recite Shema or observe Shabbat. Any disagreements involve details--for example, what time Shema should be recited.]

When the academies of Hillel and Shammai argued about the details of different mitzvot, it didn't "bother" Hashem. So long as their dispute was conducted for the sake of Heaven and not for personal glory, so long as they were genuinely seeking the "words of the Living G-d," and so long as there was no threat of hatred or discord developing between the two disputants, Hashem would have been happy, so-to-speak, if either's opinion had prevailed. Now that the halachah has been decided in accordance with the Academy of Hillel's opinion, we are, of course, bound to follow that view in practice. Nevertheless, at the time that conflicting opinions were expressed by their respective proponents, they were both the "words of the Living G-d" because they both were spoken with noble intentions and both were based on Torah principles that Hashem taught to Moshe. (Torat Ha'nevi'im: Introduction)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: Do not think that one doesn't fulfill the mitzvah of Torah study by studying the opinions that we don't follow in practice. Just as Hashem created a physical world that has many aspects, some of which are opposites (for example, fire and water), so He gave man the intelligence to look at things many different ways, some of which are opposites. Some of man's thoughts come closer to the truth than others, and those become the halachah, but all have aspects of the truth to them. (Drush Al Ha'Torah p.41)

Memoirs

R' Yaakov Halevi Lifschutz z"l (1838-1921) was the long-time secretary to R' Yitzchak Elchanan

Spektor z"l (1817-1896; rabbi of Kovno), who was one of the leading halachic authorities of the second half of the 19th century as well as a spokesman and lobbyist for Russian Jewry in the Czar's court. Through his position, R' Lifschutz was a witness to, and a participant in, many important events of that era. His memoirs are entitled "Zichron Yaakov." He writes:

From the year 5600 [1840], a new era begins in the history of our people in Russia, a period of frequent, harsh decrees against the Jewish People, the period of the spread of the Haskalah / so-called "Enlightenment" movement into our country. Every subject and event has an inside story, and one who wishes to study the subject or event must pierce through its outer and middle layers to its very core. The time and place of the subject or event also need to be understood, and nothing should be evaluated superficially.

If we examine the war of the Haskalah against our People, a war that lasted more than a century--starting with its first appearance in Austria and Germany, followed by the current, second period in Russia--we will find in the literature only the viewpoint of the Maskilim. They agreed unanimously that the heads of the nation, the rabbis and geonim / brilliant Torah scholars; the Torah teachers; and all of the multitudes of the House of Yisrael, the religious people, who followed those leaders were ignoramuses who walked in darkness, bereft of wisdom, haters of knowledge, pursuers of false faith, zealots and fanatics who were unwilling to open the "windows" of the House of Yisrael. . . [According to the literature of the Maskilim, the above-mentioned religious leaders] ignored the desire of the Maskilim to work for the good of Yisrael and to raise their honor. . .

This is the substance of the literature of the Maskilim over a period of a century, first in Germany and later in Russia.

From the side of the religious, which was the majority of the people in those days, we have not heard a clear response, only painful sighs, only crying over the spiritual and material destruction that our supposed "benefactors" tried to bring upon our nation. There has been virtually no literary response contradicting their false claims in well-written prose, citing proofs from actual events. Therefore, the next generation has seen only the writing of the Maskilim, which appears to be the last word.

Why is this so?

- To be continued -

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

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