

THE OTHER SIDE OF AMBITION

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

In this week's Torah portion, Korach foments an outright rebellion against Moshe and Aharon. He could not have chosen a more opportune moment. After the fiasco of the spies and the decree that the entire generation would die in the wilderness without ever seeing the land, the discontent in the nation made the moment ripe for provoking an uprising.

Two hundred fifty of the most distinguished members of the tribe of Levi joined him as Korach explained to Moshe, "Rav lachem!" It is too much--more than you are entitled to--that you and Aharon have assumed leadership positions while we are resigned to perform the simple Levite services. Moshe responded by throwing back at them the exact same words, "Rav lachem, Bnei Levi" (verse 7) "It is more than enough for you." Moshe told them that they had already been given great honor as Levites and they should not be demanding more.

This seemed to be a very appropriate and fair response. However, the Talmud in Sota tells us in the name of R' Levi that Moshe was severely punished for reprimanding Korach and his followers in this manner. When Moshe implored Hashem that he be allowed to enter the promised land, Hashem responded with the exact same expression, "Rav lach" (Devarim chapter 3; verse 26), "It is too much for you. Do not continue to speak to me further about this matter". The Talmud tells us that Hashem denied him his request because Moshe had responded to Korach's rebellion with these unduly harsh words.

The commentaries are perplexed. Surely Moshe was correct in countering Korach's challenge by admonishing him to be grateful for the prestige he already enjoyed. Why then was he punished so severely for using the expression "rav lachem?"

The commentaries explain that Moshe was correct in standing firm against Korach's rebellion, but he overlooked an important facet in Korach's motivation. Although Korach was driven by raw ambition--the desire to assume the mantle of leadership and achieve prominence among the people--there was also a strain of a genuine desire to serve Hashem on a more sublime and intimate level. By being able to offer the incense in the Sanctuary, he would be able to connect to Hashem in a uniquely special way. Moshe should have acknowledged that desire as something positive and genuine.

True, Korach's rebellion was primarily fueled by his own self-interest and his recalcitrance warranted the severest punishment imaginable. However, the words 'rav lach' that implied that his spiritual

aspirations should be restricted were inappropriate. Therefore, when Moshe aspired to achieve even greater heights by entering the promised land and fulfilling the mitzvos associated with it, Hashem rejected his impassioned entreaty with the same words Moshe had used to Korach.

I recall from my youth in Manchester, England, that our next-door neighbors were Reform Jews who had little reverence for our sacred traditions. When walking home from shul one Shabbos, we saw them pulling out of their driveway on their way to their Shabbat temple services. My father remarked to me that even though they were publicly desecrating the Shabbos, they would nevertheless be rewarded for devoting their Saturday morning to connecting to Hashem in the manner they understood to be correct. In the celestial worlds, good intentions are measured and acknowledged appropriately.

Korach had committed a dastardly act and the earth was about to swallow him up for his heinous sin-a punishment that was unprecedented and never again duplicated. Nevertheless his spiritual stirrings should not have been so sharply brushed aside.

In our own lives, we too encounter many groups and individuals who challenge our traditional ways with the professed objective of enhancing a Jew's spiritual connection to the Divine. While we may vehemently oppose their religious choices, we should not condemn them personally. As this Chazal teaches us, a Jew's religious stirrings, however misguided, deserve recognition. Instead of summarily discounting them, let us acknowledge the genuine elements within those streams while opposing the misguided actions, remaining hopeful that the positive elements will ultimately prompt a true spiritual awakening.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

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Rabbi Reich is on the faculty of [the Ohr Somayach Tanenbaum Education Center](#).