

# SELFISH DESTRUCTION

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"And Korach took..." [Numbers 16:1]*

What did Korach take? The verse never provides an object - rather, Rashi explains, Korach took himself off to the side - he and his group divided themselves from the congregation of Israel, in order to start a rebellion against Moshe's authority and Aharon's priesthood.

Our Sages identify Korach's goal: honor. He had wealth - tremendous wealth, according to Midrashic sources. He was part of the illustrious tribe of the Levites. He was even an outstanding scholar. And yet, he still wanted more - he wanted greatness. He wanted to enjoy the honor of leadership or priesthood.

Several verses later (v. 7), Rashi explains that Korach attained prophecy - that which was only given to those who were exceptionally pious and learned (with the notable exception of Bilaam, as we will learn in two weeks). But if so, how could such a brilliant and indeed holy person pursue such foolishness?

The answer comes in two parts. First, he managed to fool even himself into thinking that his goals were themselves pious and righteous. And second, his own prophetic vision fooled him. Even a prophet, when blinded by his own self-interest, can see only what he wants to see.

How did his insight fool him? He saw, through prophetic vision, that a line of greatness would emerge from him, including the prophet Shmuel (Samuel) and others. This was indeed true - but only because his sons regretted their participation in the rebellion and abandoned their transgression at the last minute, and were thus saved when the earth swallowed their father and the other rebels. Korach, seeing only the line of leaders who would come from his lineage, believed that this indicated both his own greatness and the assured success of his efforts.

Korach was able to cloak his own desires in false piety and concern for the community - rather than stating his goal of taking a leadership role for himself, he instead claimed that the nation of Israel had no need for leaders such as Moshe and Aharon. "...the congregation is entirely holy, and HaShem is in their midst, so why have you lifted yourselves above the congregation of HaShem?" [v. 3] He dressed the members of his group in woolen garments dyed with the "techeles" blue prescribed for

Tzitzis, the fringes required on a four-cornered garment (as discussed in last week's Parsha). They went to Moshe, and asked, "if a garment is entirely colored with techeles, does it need Tzitzis?" They then laughed at him when he answered in the affirmative. These garments were used as a parable, referring to the Holy nation of Israel. But of course, the answer is that just as those garments do need Tzitzis, even the nation of Israel needs leaders.

And, as we learn from our Parsha, underneath Korach's display of selfless concern was his own hidden desire to one day be the leader himself. Yet by trying to take upon himself an honor that was not his - ignoring all the things he already had - he ensured his own destruction, while fighting the Nation of Israel's best interests.

When we read the story of Korach, we must search for and remove the spark of Korach that resides in each of us. All of us have a little gremlin that wants to translate our accomplishments - even in the holiest of pursuits - into something greater than they really are, and to seek out self-glorification and new honors. When we try to take honors upon ourselves, and seek our own glory at the expense of those around us, all we do is wreak destruction.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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***Dedicated in loving memory of Chaya Freidel bas Shimon Pinchas, a"h.***