

PARSHAS KORACH - WHO'S TO BLAME

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Who's To Blame¹?

Korach ben Yitzhar ben Kohos ben Levi took, along with Doson and Avirom, sons of Eliav...

For hundreds of years, people have puzzled over what it was that Korach took. Some of the rishonim^[2] propose that Korach seized the hearts and minds of a larger group, until he had two hundred and fifty followers. Still not clear is who was doing the taking. Our pasuk uses the singular form of the verb: he took. Yet, Doson and Avirom are mentioned in our pasuk by name. They would seem to be among the takers, the chief conspirators, not the followers. If so, the plural should have been used.

An additional reason for confusion owes to the obviously different contributions of three groups to the effort at insurrection, namely Korach, Doson and Avirom, and the 250 men.

In fact, they differed on several counts. Only Korach and the 250 brought fire-pans of incense, while Doson and Avirom sat that one out. The 250 died in an honorable way, while the others did not.

Let us begin with the last point. The death of the 250 points to their stature - they were all among the greats of their generation, including in yir'as Hashem. No thoughts of power and honor propelled them. All they sought was to further sanctify themselves through avodah. They knew quite well that Moshe was blameless and correct. It wasn't his conduct they questioned as much as Hashem's decision to restrict the coveted avodah to the kohanim. They were love-sick; if the only way to experience the elevation of the avodah was by sacrificing themselves for it, they were prepared to pay that price.

All this is really implicit in the Medrash^[3] paraphrased by Rashit^[4]: "What did Korach see in this foolishness? Concerning the 250, the Torah is quite explicit. â??The fire-pans of these sinners regarding their souls...^[5]"

How does this last reference clarify the intentions of the 250? (The gemara^[6] reads "regarding their souls" as "regarding that which sustains their souls," and sees this as a hint that they all sat with Korach at a meal, at which they were convinced to join in the revolt. It is not so appealing to read this into our Medrash, which seems to be going off in a different direction.)

Rather, the sin regarding their souls should be seen as similar to the state of affairs of the nazir: "He shall atone for him, for having sinned against the soul[7]." The nazir sets his sights on spiritual elevation, which he tries to achieve through abstinence. He fails, as evidenced by his becoming tameh. The Torah characterizes a person as a sinner against his soul when he denies himself wine in pursuit of a spiritual level that is beyond his grasp. The 250 as well tried to achieve the impossible. They wanted the level of ahavas Hashem that attends the performance of the avodah - even though they knew that the avodah was not something they could claim just by asking for it, and that there would be dire consequences to their seeking it inappropriately. In that regard, they too were sinners regarding their souls.

Practically speaking, they had no chance of performing the avodah of the incense in the mishkan, even illicitly. The levi'im would have blocked them. Their only possibility was through participating in a revolt against Moshe. This was a sin, but it was committed in their minds for the sake of Heaven. HKBH honored their intentions by taking their lives from them through a special flame from the kodesh kodashim.

Doson and Avirom pursued something very different - and it was definitely not spiritual elevation. They were a pugnacious pair, having shown their true colors already in their hatred of Moshe while still in Egypt. Along with the rest of the nation, they had seen the promise of a land of milk and honey turn into a sentence to die in the wilderness. This further inflamed their evil designs. Hashem responded to that evil by killing them by swallowing them up in the earth, disappearing from sight and memory like the spirit of an animal upon its death.

Korach, on the other hand, was a man of great stature. In a sense he was the opposite of the mean-spirited and base Doson and Avirom. Judging by his demeanor and accomplishment, he had far more in common with the 250. He, too, could have strived for spiritual greatness as they did. What observers could not detect, however, was the rot eating away at him internally - his jealousy and hunger for power. In his flawed inner makeup, he resembled Doson and Avirom, and therefore died in the same manner as they did.

We thus arrive at the meaning of the Medrash we cited above. Korach was wise enough to understand that the strivings of the 250 would meet with failure - and not full enough of ahavas Hashem to proceed despite that failure. To him, their behavior was foolishness. Neither was he entirely in the thrall of his base flaws, as were Doson and Avirom.

His error had to be more subtle. He must have had some strong indication that he would prevail. (Chazal find one for him in the eventual birth of Shmuel, one of his descendents. Korach understood that great progeny coming from him meant that he, Korach, would survive while others perished.)

Unseating Moshe would not be so simple. Korach recognized his limitations. Spiritually significant people are ill-suited to foment revolution. Doing that job effectively means grinding out lashon hora, libelous charges, and incendiary reports. Korach was not used to wallowing in such mud. Moreover,

he could not fully throw himself into the mission statement of the revolt. He fully identified with Moshe and the Torah. He just found Moshe's selection as leader too constraining to accept, leaving him no choice but to launch his campaign.

Korach hit on what seemed to him to be a stroke of genius. He was not prepared by temperament to sustain a popular movement. He could, however, delegate that task to others, namely Doson and Avirom. Supercharged by Korach's passionate evocation of his position, Doson and Avirom recruited the assistance of others for the cause. Thus the 250 were brought into the affair, adding stem to the nascent revolt.

As far as ultimate responsibility, however, all roads led to Korah, who was at the heart of it all. Hence the singular verb in our pasuk, because it was really Korach's revolt. The others were pawns that he used for his purposes.

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1. *Based on Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 16:1*
 2. *See Ibn Ezra*
 3. *Bamidbar Rabbah 18:8*
 4. *Bamidbar 16:7*
 5. *Bamidbar 17:3*
 6. *Sanhedrin 52A*
 7. *Bamidbar 6:11*
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