

KORACH'S DISAGREEMENT, MOTHER EARTH'S PUNISHMENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Predispositions have a lot of say about who we end up being in life, and how. Some help us, while others hinder us, but all of them affect us and the way we turn out. Something as short and simple as an embarrassing moment in public can be compounded by one's predisposition towards such moments, and give the event the power to psychologically scar a person for life, while someone else, with a healthier disposition, may simply learn a lesson and move on.

Take Korach, for example. When blessing Levi, Ya'akov Avinu cursed his anger, which had resulted in his contribution to the Shechem fiasco. At that time, he had a prophecy about Korach and his future rebellion, and already disconnected himself from his descendant, or at least the fiasco he would later create:

Son of Yitzhar, son of Kehas, son of Levi: It does not mention "son of Ya'akov," since Ya'akov sought mercy (i.e., he prayed) over his name, that his name not be mentioned with regard to their dispute, as it says, "Do not join my honor with their congregation" (Bereishis 49:6). (Rashi, Bamidbar 16:1)

In a sense, Korach was destined to rebel in this week's parshah. The same anger that caused Levi to go into Shechem and take revenge for what happened to Dinah was the same anger that eventually led Korach to challenge the leader of the generation in this week's parshah. It didn't seal his fate, but it certainly made it much harder to escape.

To compound matters, the Arizal revealed:

Korach, the son of Yitzhar was from the level of the Ruach of Kayin from the side of evil, as the verse indicates, "And Korach took" (Bamidbar 16:1). This evil Ruach of Kayin was enclothed within him, and therefore, he accused Hevel his brother, Moshe Rabbeinu . . . Korach thought he had rectified Kayin the firstborn, and therefore he tried to overcome Moshe, who was Hevel. However, he had erred in this because the tikun of Kayin could not have come through Korach, since he was from his evil side. Rather, it could only come through his descendant, Shmuel HaNavi, who was from the good side of Kayin. Chazal have said that Korach prophesied but did not know, because he saw a fire go out from him (Tanchuma, Korach 5). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 33)

Hence, as it turns out, Korach's problems began long before Levi perpetrated his act of vengeance against Shechem and his city. As it turns out, his soul had problems going back to the first

generation to be born of flesh-and-blood, all the way back to the first murderer of history. To complicate the situation, it turns out that his nemesis in this week's parshah was the very person he killed back at the beginning of history, creating a certain inevitability to the confrontation between Korach and Moshe Rabbeinu.

It gets worse. As the Arizal alludes, and Rashi explains, Korach was goaded on by Heaven as well. He had a sense that someone great would come from him, and he assumed that it was him, encouraging him to challenge Moshe Rabbeinu. As it turned out, it was a descendant of his, Shmuel HaNavi, who had been destined for greatness, not Korach himself, and hence, his downfall.

Talk about starting off behind the eight ball. Even his wife, the Midrash teaches, instigated Korach to rebel against Moshe Rabbeinu. Whereas the wife of On Ben Pelet dissuaded her husband to participate in Korach's plan and saved his life as a result, Korach's wife set up her husband's demise by convincing him that he was in the right. Given all this negative support, how could Korach, or anyone for that matter with so many negative predispositions, be held responsible for what occurred? The answer might be based upon the answer to question that arises from the following:

A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sotah 3a)

After all, who in his right mind rebels against God? Such a person either mistakenly believes that what he is doing is not a sin, or he has lost touch with reality, either temporarily or permanently, and no longer knows right from wrong. Either way, he should be free of any culpability, especially if he is no longer in control of his mental faculties; an insane person is not obligated in the mitzvos.

The answer is, he's not. The guilt is for not having protected himself against a situation in which he could sin. A person who is dieting can be forgiven for breaking his diet when eating delicious food at a simchah; both the food and the atmosphere arouse the yetzer hara to enjoy oneself, making it hard to say no, in spite of the diet. But, can he be forgiven for coming to the simchah on an empty stomach, knowing how hard it will be to resist temptation when everyone else is enjoying themselves?

The battle for spiritual life takes place in the quiet moments, when the yetzer hara is less active. Wars are not always won by the strongest armies, but often by the best prepared ones, something that is much easier to accomplish when preparation takes place before the battle begins. It is very, very hard to make rational decisions during a moment of crisis, but it less difficult to carry out one that was prepared prior to the crisis.

Yes, Korach had many strikes against him from the beginning. However, there were times and opportunities when he could have stepped back and taken in the big picture. Perhaps he might even have taken advice from someone more experienced than he was to put into perspective what he thinking and feeling. All of his accusations should have first been phrased as questions, either to Moshe Rabbeinu, or Aharon HaKohen, or anyone else who might have been able to answer them. It

would have not only saved his life, but the lives of so many others whom he took down with him.

Terrorism is a terrible thing, but even it can teach us something about life. One of the reasons why 9/11 had such a catastrophic impact is because the American people had not anticipated such an attack on American soil. Just look at how many Presidential acts were set in motion the very next day to try and avoid such calamities in the future. American security was revamped overnight, with anticipation being the operative word now. Finger pointing can push blame onto others, but it can't bring back those who have died, or heal those who have been injured.

"However, if God creates a new thing, and the earth opens up her mouth and swallows them up with all their possessions, sending them to their graves alive, then you will know that these men have rebelled against God." (Bamidbar 16:30)

This is an interesting way of making the point, which, seemingly, could have just as easily been made by having the rebels die by plague. After all, death-by-plague has worked in other parshios to make it clear who was right and who was wrong, so why did Moshe Rabbeinu feel the need in this particular case to have the earth swallow them up? The answer might be based upon the following warning from the Talmud:

Just as among fish of the sea, the greater swallow up the smaller ones, so with men, were it not for fear of the government, men would swallow each other alive. This is just what we learned: Rebi Chanina, the Deputy High Priest, said, "Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, men would swallow each other alive." (Avodah Zarah 4a)

The concept of being swallowed alive, by fish, usually means certain death. However, the same concept, when applied to human beings, usually means that those being swallowed alive will remain alive, specifically so that they can be reduced to cogs in a wheel run by people in power. They will become pawns in someone else's chess game.

This is certainly what Korach did, using what seemed to be a cause that was relevant to the entire nation to accomplish his own personal goals. He gave the impression that he had come to champion the cause of the people when in fact he had come on his own behalf, and used the people to shore himself up before Moshe Rabbeinu.

Though he was successful at being able to fool those who followed him, even some very prominent people, he didn't fool Moshe Rabbeinu for a second. And, to unfool the people who had followed him, he chose to have Korach and his followers die by the very system that they were trying to implement. "You want to swallow innocent Jews alive to achieve your own ends, then you will die by being swallowed up by the earth." It was not just about stopping Korach, but about stopping his way of thinking, which could have easily lingered after his death.

Machlokes—disagreement—for selfish reasons is not only unproductive, it is extremely self-

destructive. As Rashi points, even though Bais Din gives capital punishment only to the perpetrators of a crime, and only if they are physically mature, and Heaven metes out capital punishment only once a person reaches the age of 20 years, Korach's machlokes resulted in the death of the perpetrators and their families, including the children.

Disagreement is rarely a good thing, since it implies a lack of intellectual clarity. Nevertheless, it is not the essence of the problem, since the entire Talmud is filled with disagreements. The problem is the basis of the disagreement, which sometimes isn't even known to the people arguing. For Korach and his followers to bring the fire pans and perform the Incense service was extremely risky, and should have caused them to back down, just to be safe.

Instead, the challenge from Moshe Rabbeinu only made them more brazen, which should have been their first sign that they were off-base. Humble people, even when fighting for a point, still question themselves over-and-over again, and find room to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. Arrogant and self-centered people do not and cannot, since their self-image is built upon their being right, and in the end, they end up swallowing themselves.

For, as much as falsehood exists and can grow, and often results in terrible damage, in the end, Creation has no patience for it. Eventually, Creation will do away with falsehood and those who spew it, which is perhaps another lesson that Moshe Rabbeinu decided to teach by inviting Mother Earth to participate in the bringing down of Korach and his assembly.

Text

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