

SWALLOWED ALIVE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

"When we presume to interpret G-d's intentions rather than adhere to the letter of His Law, we lose our place in Paradise, we kill our brother, and we and our families are swallowed up alive by the world around us."

What was the rebellion of Korach all about? A simple reading of the Parsha indicates that Korach and his supporters challenged the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. As a first cousin to Moshe and Aharon, and sharing the same Yichus - lineage, Korach felt that he had equal claim on the leadership of the nation. The 250 men from the tribe of Reuven who joined with Korach also felt that the designation of Aharon's family as Kohanim was based on nepotism, and decided to join Korach in bringing the issue to a head. However, the story is far more complex. The conflict between Korach and Moshe was, and is, fundamental to understanding our relationship with Hashem and His Torah.

Korach confronted Moshe's leadership in a seemingly roundabout fashion. He asked Moshe two contrived Halachik questions:

1. Does a Talis entirely dyed in Techeles - (a special blue dye) require Tzitzit?
2. Does a house filled with Sefarim (books) require a Mezuzah?

Moshe answered that in both cases the obligation is to follow the commandment of Hashem, and put Tzitzit on a four cornered garment, regardless of its color, and affix a Mezuzah to any doorway requiring one, regardless of how many Sefarim the room contains.

Armed with Moshe's answers, Korach "went public" with his challenge. Being fabulously wealthy, and Techeles being the most expensive of all ancient dyes, Korach dressed his followers in the same garment he described to Moshe, and publicly confronted Moshe and Aharon.

What did Korach really want? The Gemara tells us that the controversy of Korach is the quintessential example of a an argument that is not for the sake of heaven; meaning, a construed controversy whose agenda is selfish and personal, rather than noble and well intended. Korach wanted power and position, but he postured himself as being noble, G-dly, and concerned about the community. He used the people around him to advance his own desires and rationalized it as being for their benefit. "Behold, the nation is all holy, so why do you put yourself over them?" (16:3) "I don't want leadership for myself, I am but one of the

people. Each of us is worthy of leadership, so why have you arbitrarily imposed yourselves upon us?"

Korach's rationalization appeared to deny the reality that they had all experienced. They had all witnessed Moshe's part in the 10 plagues. They had all seen Moshe's outstretched arm as the sea parted. They had all believed in him and joined him in divine praise on the shores of the Yam Suf. They had all stood with Moshe during Revelation and saw him ascend Har Sinai and descend carrying the Luchos. They had all stood in awe of the divine radiance shining from his face, and had no other choice but to turn to Moshe for instruction and knowledge of G-d's commandments. They had all witnessed the inauguration of Aharon and his sons into the priesthood, and the heavenly fire which consumed the lives of Nadav and Avihu while confirming Aharon's appointment as Kohain Gadol. So how was it possible for Korach to challenge Moshe and Aharon's claim to leadership, and why did anyone even listen to his ravings?

The answer lies in the two Halachik questions which Korach used to challenge Moshe's leadership. The two scenarios of a four cornered garment dyed in Techeles being exempt from Tzitzis, and a house filled with Sefarim being exempt from having a Mezuzah have the same underlying, and contemporary theme. Korach did not challenge Moshe's divine appointment as the greatest prophet and teacher of G-d's word. However, he did challenge Moshe's claim of being the sole interpreter of G-d's law. We are told that Korach was a brilliant and successful individual. He was gifted with an aggressive, highly intelligent, innovative and insightful mind. However, he lacked humility. Moshe on the other hand was equally gifted, however he was the most humble of all men. Humility is the single most important quality for being a true servant of Hashem. No matter how bright we may be, we are still obligated to seek out the word of G-d. No matter how intelligent and innovative our intelligence, we are obligated to seek out the teacher who will teach us the law of G-d as taught to him by his teachers. This can only happen if there is humility. Moshe was humble and able to become the ultimate servant of G-d. Korach, on the other hand, lacked humility and was unwilling to accept Moshe's interpretation and application of G-d's law.

In a most direct fashion, Korach challenged the "Naaseh V'Nishmah - We will do and then we will understand" of Revelation. Initially, he was willing to do as he was told, however, once he heard the word of G-d as taught by Moshe the Teacher, Korach would only do as he understood the commandment, not as he was told to do the Mitzvah. Korach argued, why put Tzitzit on a garment that is dyed completely in Techeles? Techeles was the single most expensive dye in the ancient world. Why would anyone go to such an expense unless he truly loved Hashem and desired to be close to Him! Why then should it be necessary to put additional "strings" containing a single strand of Techeles as a show of love and devotion! It is completely unnecessary! Likewise, a house filled with holy books is a home devoted to having

an ongoing relationship with Hashem. Why put a tiny little piece of parchment on the door post as an additional sign of commitment and piety? It's unnecessary! It's foolish! G-d didn't intend the Mitzvah to be performed by robots who simply listen without thinking! G-d wanted us to use the gift of our intelligence and understanding to integrate the Torah into modern, daily life circumstances. The key is to do what we understand and feel, not just the surface adherence to the specific word of G-d! Moshe's response was to underscore the "Naaseh- We will do" as we are told, regardless of what we understand or think. The key is to be humble and accepting of the letter of the law, regardless of personal interpretations or feelings.

The Gemara tells us that arrogance is tantamount to idol worship because it places human intelligence and desire above adherence to the letter of the law. From the very first moment of our creation we were confronted with the challenge between our understanding of G-d's word, and the simple adherence to the letter of His law. Hashem said, "do not eat from the fruit of the trees in the middle of the garden". Chava and Adam, as encouraged by the serpent, listened to their own desires and rationalizations, rather than accepting the word of G-d at face value. They thought they could ascertain G-d's true intentions and in the end were expelled from Paradise.

Kayin kills Hevel over the same issue. Which is more important, form or intent? Is it the quality of the offering or the thought behind the Korban? Let's be honest. Hashem doesn't actually eat the offering, it's symbolic at best. On the other hand, the Torah insists that each Korban be unblemished and aesthetically pleasing. Kayin followed the side of logic and interpretation of intent, while Hevel adhered to the obligation of maintaining form, while attempting to understand intent. The tragic outcome of their conflict was that Kayin's personal interpretation extended itself to placing an arbitrary value on all things, including the life of his brother.

Accepting the letter of the law as taught by our teachers, or taking license to interpret Hashem's words as we see fit, is more than a religious debate. The conflict is a battle fought for the validity of our traditions and the belief that we are the Chosen People. Our responsibility as the Chosen People is to accept G-d's word at face value while attempting to understand the secrets of His intentions. The conflict which is "for the sake of heaven" is a battle between combatants who both struggle to submit themselves and their circumstances to Hashem's law, as taught to us by Moshe and all the rabbis who followed him. The conflict which is "not for the sake of heaven" is when one or both of the combatants battle to arbitrarily subject G-d's word to their own needs and desires, yet posture themselves as "understanding G-d's true intentions".

Korach's strategy has become the strategy of all those who wish to update G-d's intentions. "Give validity to Moshe as the messenger of G-d's word, but reserve the obligation of ascertaining G-d's true meaning." As in the case of Adam and Chava, Kayin, and Korach, when we presume to interpret G-d's intentions rather than adhere to the letter of His Law, we lose

our place in Paradise, we kill our brother, and we and our families are swallowed up alive by the world around us. However, if we humbly subject our intelligence and abilities to the letter of the law as taught by Moshe and Chazal, we will earn a place in Gan Eden, we will value our brother's life as we do our own, and we and our families will proudly survive the world's attempt at assimilating and swallowing us alive. We are the ones who will remain standing above the world around us as the chosen ones of Hashem.

Good Shabbos.

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