

KORACH'S STRATEGY

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The story of Korach's rebellion is as contemporary today as it was 3,009 years ago. It is the story of humanity's struggle to understand G-d's system for ruling his world and administering justice. It is the story of an uncensored ego with a selfish agenda in conflict with a disciplined greatness whose sole purpose was to serve his Creator. It is the story of humility and arrogance doing battle with each other in both the public arena of the community as well as the private arena of the soul. It is the story of our people's struggle with being subject to G-d, His Torah, and the teachings of the Oral Law.

In order for us to understand Korach's rebellion against Moshe and G-d, it is essential that we comprehend the intellectual and spiritual state of the Generation of the Desert.

The Rambam (Maimonides) in Hilchot De'ot (5:1) says that a true Talmid Chacham (Torah scholar) should be evident in his personal and public behavior, no differently than he is evident through his scholarship. Why did the Rambam need to even state such an obvious expectation? Of course a Torah scholar is expected to behave in a manner that reflects greater adherence to legal nuances and social sensitivities! The fact is that religious (and certainly secular) scholarship alone does not generate ethical behavior or good manners. A proper, ethical personality and society can only evolve and be maintained when scholarship is coupled with religious observances and commitments. Scholars of all disciplines, including religion, have perpetrated some of the most horrendous atrocities in human history. Similarly, religious devotees lacking scholarship and understanding have proven equally dangerous. It is only when scholarship and religiosity are integrated that a g-dly personality can emerge. Therefore, the Rambam states that a Talmid Chacham should be an integrated personality and should be recognized through his personal behavior to the same degree that he is recognized through his scholarship.

The Generation of the Desert following the incident of the Spies was still in its spiritual infancy. Although they had experienced extraordinary manifestations of G-d's beneficence, they were similar to Adam and Chava at the time of their creation. Adam and Chava were physically mature at the time of their creation, and the Bnai Yisroel were physically mature at the time of their nationhood. Adam and Chava were acutely aware of G-d's existence following their creation, and the Bnai Yisroel were acutely aware of G-d's existence during the formation of their nationhood. Adam and Chava were spiritually inexperienced relative to their awareness of G-d's reality, and the Bnai Yisroel were spiritually inexperienced relative to their awareness of G-d's manifest presence. Adam and Chava

sinned in spite of their awareness of G-d, and the Bnai Yisroel sinned despite their awareness of G-d. In both instances, the critically missing developmental components were education and religious observances.

Korach's rebellion occurred soon after the incident with the Spies. The Bnai Yisroel had suffered their greatest failure. Their loss of faith in G-d had revealed a deficiency in their relationship with G-d that demanded 38 extra years in the desert to correct. As the Medresh explains, even though they had witnessed Egypt's defeat and the greatest miracles of all time, the Jews didn't have the confidence that G-d would or could do the same against the 31 kings of Canaan. Therefore, when the Spies reported the nature of the defenses and warriors that they had encountered, the Jews lost faith in G-d and Moshe. (It was a reversal of, "And they believed in G-d and His servant Moshe.") Therefore, to correct the deficiency in their faith, the Bnai Yisroel were confronted for 38 additional years with G-d's manifest presence in the covering of clouds, the mana, the Well of Miriam, and the centrality of the Mishkan. It would take the entire experience in the desert, and the constancy of G-d's caring, for the Bnai Yisroel to accept that G-d would always be there for them. Only a new generation, raised with a life style that integrated a belief of G-d into every facet of their existence, could inherit the Promised Land.

In order to compensate for the spiritual inexperience and immaturity of the nation, G-d appointed Moshe to be their teacher. Under his guidance and direction, the nation would be able to gain an understanding of G-d and His expectations. However, it was up to the nation to accept Moshe's teachings and guidance. Moshe could not be the one to proclaim his own divine designation as sole teacher and arbitrator of G-d's intentions. That is why, as Rav S.R. Hirsch explains, Moshe and Aharon fell on their faces whenever their leadership was questioned. "The veracity of a messenger can be confirmed only by the one who sent him; so too, the authenticity of Moshe's mission can be confirmed only by G-d Himself. For this reason Moshe does not utter a word to counter Korach's accusations. If G-d would not consider it proper to refute Korach's words by reconfirming the authenticity of Moshe's mission then his mission was indeed at an end, and so "he fell upon his face." (Hirsch 16:4).

Korach's rebellion could have been predicted. The nation was still reeling from the blow of the forty-year decree. Their emotional and philosophical adjustments must have been enormous: the seemingly endless punishment; the feelings of regret and foolishness; the attempt at creating a permanence under conditions that should have been temporary. The nation's need to rationalize and blame must have been overwhelming. Therefore, it isn't surprising that a Korach type figure would have emerged.

What was Korach's platform? I would like to suggest that although Korach devised Halachik (legal) arguments to challenge Moshe, his real intent was to rally the people behind the slogan, "Elect me and I will lead you into the Promised Land. Stay with Moshe and you will die in the desert!" His strategy was as follows. Moshe is clearly the Navi - prophet. No one could possibly dispute that fact.

Korach was not going to set himself up as a false prophet. Instead, Korach wanted to limit Moshe's position to that of "Conveyor of G-d's word." Moshe was not to be the interpreter of G-d's intentions, only the messenger who delivered the basic information. The information was to then be analyzed and applied, as the community understood. In essence, Korach's first step was to challenge the Oral Law, while keeping the divinity of the Written Law in tact. In order to do this, he contrived Halachik scenarios which challenged Moshe's lack of innovative and independent thinking. In contrast to Moshe, Korach was willing to chance a logical interpretation of G-d's word while Moshe kept spouting the party line of, "but G-d said to do it this way!"

Korach then challenged Aharon's selection as the Kohain Gadol. It's one thing to claim the position of Navi, it's an entirely different thing to place Aharon in the nation's second most important position. "You take too much upon yourselves... they are all holy and G-d is in their midst!" Of greater concern to Korach was the power which Aharon and Moshe could wield through Aharon's position. Through the office of the Kohain Gadol the structure of the religion would take shape. The position of Navi was one-generational, G-d was not going to give another Torah. Once Moshe died, the interpretation of the Torah would be open territory. However, the tribe of Layvie, under the leadership of the Kohain Gadol, was an institution that would be interpreting the law for generations to come. It would be the office of the Kohain Gadol that would establish ritual and give substance and structure to the religion. He who wore the breastplate would be King! It therefore made sense that Korach would focus his challenge against Aharon's appointment as Kohain Gadol, rather than Moshe's designation as the Navi.

Once Korach had undermined Moshe's standing as the sole interpreter of G-d's word, he would be in the position to challenge Moshe's handling of the Spies fiasco. First of all Moshe was responsible for sending the Spies. The fact that he had done so with great trepidation and reluctance didn't stop the buck from stopping at his feet. Secondly, it was Moshe who had delivered the news of the punishment. The fact that Moshe has also successfully saved the nation from annihilation was on Moshe's say so. Who really knew what had actually transpired between Moshe and G-d? In fact, the Torah records that in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion the people blamed Moshe for the death of the 250 men! They rebelled, and he is blamed! The assumption was that Moshe either set them up with the test of the incense; or, he had prayed for their death; or he hadn't prayed for their forgiveness. It therefore made sense to blame Moshe for not challenging G-d's determination to keep them in the desert for another 38 years.

Let us consider the punishment. The only one's to be punished were those who were 20 years and older at the time of the Exodus, and they were the only one's who could have challenged Moshe's leadership. Only those who had been present at the parting of the sea and the giving of the Torah were slotted to die. Only those who could claim their own recollection and interpretation of those events were to die in the desert. It therefore stood to reason that Moshe has a personal gain in allowing the punishment to play itself out, removing all others who might have otherwise opposed

his rule.

Considering the emotional dissatisfaction of the people and the newness of their religious practices, the setting was ripe for rebellion. Considering the charisma of Korach, his family lineage, (the same as Moshe and Aharon's) his personal ambitions, and his exceptionally creative and insightful intelligence, Korach was perfect to lead the rebellion. However, in the end, the rebellion failed. The rebels died and 14,000 others perished in the lingering aftermath. Moshe and Aharon's positions were confirmed, and the remaining years in the desert were devoted to connecting awareness with scholarship, religiosity with ethical behavior. In the end, it was the word of G-d as spoken by Moshe which proved to be eternal. In the end, it is the very same Written Law given to Moshe on Mt. Sinai as interpreted by the very same Oral Law taught by Moshe, which guarantees our survival.

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