

# PERSONAL BRIBERY

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The Talmud tells us that Korach was an unusually intelligent man recognized and admired by his people. His rebellion took place after the incident with the Miraglim - Spies and he certainly recognized the power of G-d, his obligation to follow His commands, and the inevitability of consequences. Korach was from the elite tribe of Layvie and shared a personal lineage on par with Moshe and Aharon. How is it that such a man could be so wrong? How is it that individuals of great recognition and potential often self-destruct?

Rashi (16:1) references the Medresh Tanchuma that states Korach's rationale.

"What motivated Korach to rebel against Moshe?" Layvie the son of Yakov had three sons, Gershon, Kehas and Merari. Kehas had four sons, Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron and Uziel. Amram, the oldest of Kehas's four sons, had three children, Miriam, Aharon, and Moshe. Yitzhar, Kehas's second son had three sons of which Korach was the oldest. Uziel, the youngest of Yitzhar's children had three sons of which Eltzaphan was second.

Moshe was the leader of the nation and Aharon was the Kohain Gadol - High Priest. Eltzaphan, Korach's cousin, was appointed to be the Nassi - head of the family of Kehas. Korach felt that Eltzaphan's appointment to Nassi was a personal affront to himself and the entire family of Yitzhar.

Amram was the oldest of Kehas's children and during the time of the enslavement in Egypt had been considered the leader of the Bnai Yisroel. Therefore, it made sense that one of Amram's sons should become the leader of the nation. However, why was the leadership of the family Kehas given to Eltzaphan the son of Kehas's youngest child? It should have gone to Yitzhar the next brother in line, and to Yitzhar's oldest son Korach! Therefore, the Medresh Tanchuma states that Korach was jealous of Eltzaphan, Moshe, and Aharon, and because he was jealous he deluded himself into believing his own self-righteousness to such an extent that he was able to convince many others to join his rebellion against Moshe.

The phenomenon of jealousy giving rise to unhappiness, dissension, and outright rebellion is not new. In every family and community the process plays itself out, for better or for worse. However, Rav Dessler delves more deeply into the dynamics of self-delusion and offers an illuminating perspective on the workings of our hearts and minds.

The Pasuk in Divarim 16:19 states, "Do not show deference to either litigant and do not accept a bribe, because bribery will blind the eyes of the wise." The fact that small-minded people with weak

character can be easily swayed by money or power is not the concern of this verse. The Torah is telling us a non-negotiable reality about human nature. The smartest of the smart and the wisest of the wise will be blinded by bribery. Regardless of convictions and discipline, bribery, in all its subtle forms will pervert justice and truth.

The Torah and Halacha were given to moral and ethical people. It was never intended for immoral and unethical scoundrels. My Father Shlit'a told me that my Grandfather Zt'l was once asked how it is possible for "frum" (observant) Jews to daven three times a day, attend regular Shiurim (classes), give Tzedaka (charity), send their children to Yeshiva, make sure to eat only the most stringent of Hashgachos (supervision), and still cheat in business and engage in fraud and other questionable practices? My Grandfather Zt'l answered, "You are asking the wrong question. The real question is, why are immoral and unethical people davening (praying) three times a day, attending regular Shiurim, giving Tzedaka, sending their children to Yeshiva, and making sure to eat only the most stringent of Hashgachos?"

The Torah did not have to forewarn us that there are immoral and unethical scoundrels who aspire to positions of power. Obviously we need to be careful that our appointed leaders and judges are G-d fearing and Torah observant. However, the Torah was forewarning us that any and all forms of bribery would pervert the most righteous and intelligent individuals among us with the best of intentions.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman Zt'l explained that bribery is the preferred method of the Yaytzer Hara (evil inclination). We are all born physical and needy. The early comforts of food and caring lavished upon us awaken in us the desire for more and more sensual and physical pleasure. Therefore, when society or religion demand that we limit those pleasures because it is the proper and moral thing to do, the mind might accept the argument but the heart screams out, "no way!" Regardless of how rational and persuasive the moral imperative might be we have been bribed by pleasure and materialism to deny or ignore the truth.

Rav Dessler's analysis goes even deeper. Rav Dessler explained that the moment we give birth to a thought or idea we are influenced to accept our thoughts as conclusive and factual rather than evaluate them objectively. It is very rare to find an individual who will remain open to the idea that first thoughts and feelings might not be true or accurate. Instead, we defend our positions regardless of the opposition. Rav Dessler explained that because those first thoughts are our own we are immediately biased toward them. In essence, our own initial thoughts and feelings bribe our pure intellect and true intentions to accept falsehood and illusion instead of seeking truth and facts.

Korach might have been extremely intelligent, insightful, analytical, and well intended; however, he was still human. As soon as he viewed the political and religious appointments within the nation as personal whims of Moshe rather than divinely directed assignments, he became jealous. Once he became jealous, rational arguments and fact were irrelevant. The fact that Moshe had led them from

Egypt was secondary to Korach's jealousy. The fact that Miriam had been afflicted by Tzaraas (leprosy) for questioning Moshe's divine appointment became irrelevant. The fact that the Miraglim had died because they ignored Moshe's instructions was irrelevant. The fact that Korach himself had joined in the song by the sea and proclaimed G-d's greatness and Moshe's divine appointment became irrelevant. He was blinded by his jealousy and bribed by his own thoughts and feelings.

The extent of Korach's delusion was extraordinary. He was not content to stew in stoic silence or in the privacy of his tent. He needed to gather around himself others who would support his initial feelings and unfortunate conclusions. The people he gathered were also men of stature and character. However, they too suffered degrees of jealousy motivated by reasons we will never know. However, the Tanchuma offers one all encompassing explanation. "Woe to the Rasha (evil-one) and woe to his neighbor." The majority of Korach's support came from the tribe of Reuven who were situated in the arrangement of the desert encampment next to Korach and his family. Korach's discontent and jealousy spilled over to his neighbors and influenced them to join his rebellion. (Note: Reuven was a first-born who had been passed over in the hierarchy of the nation.)

The Tanchuma is very revealing. Imagine allowing yourself to be drawn into a dangerous confrontation because your neighbor's discontent. Imagine remaining loyal to the rebellion even at the expense of your own life! Until Korach began to kvetch and stir things up the members of Reuven were content to follow Moshe's lead and be part of the nation's collective destiny. The miracles of the desert, the parting of the sea, the awesomeness of Revelation, and the certainty of G-d's punishment did not sway them from their position. How blind we can be! How irrational, delusional, and self-destructive, and it wasn't even their fight!

Considering the natural and seemingly inevitable tendency toward self-delusion because of self-interest, why were Korach and his cohorts judged so harshly and severely? More so, how are we supposed to avoid making the same mistakes? It seems that once the thought and feeling enters the mind the body and brain automatically follow suite!

Rav Dessler referenced the incident of the Spies in explaining why we are held accountable for our own biases. The Zohar described Moshe as having the ability to look at each person and see his or her unique strengths and weaknesses. He would then define for them their mission in life. Why did he let the Spies go on the mission? The entire premise of the mission involved a lack of faith in G-d's promise. Furthermore, why was he misled by the intentions of the Spies? Why didn't he see them for who they were and not allow them to go on the mission?

The Medresh tells us that the Miraglim offered a compelling argument for supporting the mission.

"G-d promised that we would be given the riches of the seven nations inhabiting the land. As we near the Promised Land the seven nations are scrambling to hide their wealth so that we will never find it. Imagine the disappointment and disillusionment of the Jews when they occupy the land and do not find gold, silver, and precious vessels? They will lose faith in G-d and His ability to fulfill His

promises! Therefore, let us spy out the situation so that we will know where the riches are hidden and avoid the potential disaster of the nation losing faith in G-d and His promises!"

The Medresh says that Moshe bought their argument allowing the mission to proceed and did not suspect any ulterior motives on the part of the Spies! Considering Moshe's ability to see the truth of each person's true self why wasn't Moshe held responsible for allowing the mission to proceed? Rav Dessler explained that G-d judges us by the inner truth of our motives as well as our actual actions. The Miraglim themselves believed their own arguments and motives. Therefore, Moshe sensed their motives as being true, pure, and for the sake of G-d's honor. However, the Spies themselves knew better. They were obligated to delve more deeply inside themselves and discover the buried truth of their intentions. They and G-d knew that their argument hid their own lack of trust and faith in Hashem. Therefore, they were punished for not pursuing truth to the extent that they could have, whereas Moshe was not punished.

Korach and his supporters were guilty of not pursuing the truth. Had their motives been truly "L'Shaim Shamayim," for the sake of heaven, they would have brought their doubts, fears, and questions directly to Moshe before stirring the pot of public discontent.

Humility and the pursuit of truth are the prerequisites for serving G-d and unlocking the secrets of His Torah. Humility provides us with the willingness to objectively confront the truth of our own biases and subjectivity, and the pursuit of truth is the commitment to study G-d's Torah that is the source and foundation of all truth. As the Talmud states, "If the Yetzer Hara grabs you (meaning: your own bias and the bribery of your own desires) shlep him into the Bais Hamedresh (study-hall) (meaning: force yourself to confront the truth of Torah which will reveal the truth of your motives)."

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