

LOOK UNDER THE SURFACE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The story related in parshat Korach about the aborted rebellion against Moshe has great relevance in all generations and all societies. For it is not so much a story of an historical event that happened over three millennia ago as it is a story about human failings and personality faults. Korach is the paradigm for the ambitious, talented, self-confident and aggressive person who feels that the society does not appreciate his talents and abilities. He is slighted because his position in society, according to his own lights, is unworthy of his own true stature. Naturally, Korach cloaks his personal frustration in the mantle of lofty ideas and purposes. He becomes a populist, someone who is interested in bringing democracy to the people of Israel and freeing them from the autocratic rule of Moshe. As do all such ambitious, unscrupulous people, he gathers to himself all of the malcontents of the society, united only in their hatred and disrespect towards Moshe and his leadership. His slogan is "All the people are holy" but his real meaning is "How come I can't be the High Priest?" The torah warns us that many times high-sounding principles proclaimed for the general good of society only mask personal ambitions and agendas. It is regarding this frequent occurrence in human affairs that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter coined the ironic phrase: "One's actions on behalf of the sake of Heaven also must in themselves be for the sake of Heaven."

Demagoguery and simplistic populism have always posed a problem in Jewish society. Especially so, in a situation that cries out for solutions, with apparently none on the horizon. Korach is in essence a type of false messiah, someone who offers platitudes and panaceas to a generation that sees no bright future for itself. It is no mere coincidence that Korach appears on the scene and attempts his putsch against Moshe after Moshe has informed that generation of Jews that they are doomed to die in the desert and will not enter the Land of Israel. Seeing no way out of their problems, clutching at straws and illusions, there are many Jews of that generation who are willing to listen to and support Korach. Moshe offers them no easy solutions and does not raise their hopes and spirits. In such a situation, a charlatan such as Korach has a golden opportunity to ply his false wares.

Moshe's reaction to the rebellion of Korach is to demand that an exemplary punishment be visited from Heaven upon the rebels. It is not a measure of revenge - certainly not personal revenge - that motivates Moshe in this request. Rather, it is the realization that this situation of Korach will recur often in the long story of Israel and mankind generally and therefore something dramatic must happen to remind later generations of the dangers of being misled by false prophets and scheming egotists. The final admission of the followers of Korach that "Moshe is true and his Torah is true" rings

down through the ages as a vital lesson that reality and faith, logic and thought, will always trump demagoguery and unbridled egotism.

Shabat shalom.

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