

PARSHAS KORACH

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Korach, 5631

The Parsha begins: "Vayikach Korach ..."; "Korach took ...". The Torah does not tell us WHAT Korach took. This open space in the text creates a problem for ba'alei Pshat (and an opportunity for ba'alei Drash.)

Many commentators handle the problem by reading the text as telling us that Korach took HIMSELF. But an important ambiguity remains. From what -- and to what -- did Korach "take himself"? The Targum translates the phrase as: "Ve'ispalag Korach ...". That is, Korach took himself "away from the klal"; i.e., he separated himself; he made a machlokes. The Sfas Emes appends to this (enigmatic) pshat an (even more enigmatic) comment of the Zohar. The Zohar: "Korach separated himself from Shalom and from Shabbos". That is: Korach made a machlokes with Shalom and with Shabbos.

You may be wondering: what is going on here? I too wondered; here is what I came up with. The Zohar and the Sfas Emes view a name as connoting the essence of what it is naming. In that perspective, the Sfas Emes quotes another passage in the Zohar which tells us that "Shabbos" is a name of HaShem. Similarly, HaShem is also called "Shalom" (peace, harmony, completeness). So, when the Zohar tells us that Korach separated himself from "Shalom" and from "Shabbos", we realize how far Korach's rebellion went. The written Torah tells us only that Korach contested Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership. The Oral tradition -- including the Zohar -- lets us read between the lines. There we learn that Korach was also wrecking the unity and harmony of the cosmos.

The Sfas Emes explains. All things created draw their chiyus (i.e., their existence; their vibrancy) from HaShem. Thus, all Creation is given life from its constant contact with HaShem. In addition, since the whole world draws its vibrancy from the same source, this structure builds harmony into the cosmos. To grasp what the Sfas Emes is saying, I suggest the following simile. Picture a central electricity generator to which are connected numerous machines that need electricity to function. Thus, they all draw their life from the connection with the central generator. And the fact that they are all linked, in a given manner, to the same generator gives unity and harmony to the whole system.

The Sfas Emes recognizes that the information presented in the preceding paragraphs may not be intuitively obvious. To help us understand the connections that link HaShem, Shabbos, and Shalom, he provides a metaphor. The Zohar presents this metaphor in a passage that Nusach Sefarad says

before Arvis of Leil Shabbos, the text that begins: "Kegavna ...". The metaphor tells us that (kavyachol; i.e., "so to speak"), HaShem is not seated on His throne -- bringing the repose and tranquility that come with Shabbos -- until the world is transformed with the "secret of unity" ("raza de'echad").

What is this transformation? The recognition that the entire cosmos draws its existence from the same, single source: from HaShem. And if all Creation derives its life from the same (one) source, all Creation shares an underlying unity. (This fact is called a "secret" ("raza"). Why a secret? Note how few people are aware of this basic feature of reality.)

The Sfas Emes goes -- and takes us -- even further. He tells us that this transformation can include extending our awareness of Creation's single source from Shabbos to the weekdays. Apropos of the "weekdays", note the following. The standard term in Hebrew for the weekdays is: "yemos ha'chol." Translated literally, this term means: "the days of non-sanctity". Or, working with the closely related word, "chalul" (empty space), we can understand "yemos hachol" as: the days when the world seems empty of HaShem's Presence. In light of this background information, it comes as no surprise that Torah authorities usually refer to the weekdays as "yemos hachol".

The Sfas Emes does not follow this convention. More commonly, he refers to the weekdays (as he does in this passage) as: "yemei ha'avoda ve'hamelacha." I suggest that with his choice of words, the Sfas Emes is telling us something. Clearly, the word "avoda" connotes serving HaShem. Likewise, "melacha" evokes the word "mal'ach". A mal'ach is an "angel" -- i.e., an emissary, an agent whose every action is to fulfill the will of his Master. The Sfas Emes is saying that if we get things right, our weekday activities, too, can be a form of Avoda. Similarly, on weekdays, we can also try to live our lives as 'mal'achim' -- agents attempting to implement the will of HaShem! (Obviously, easier said than done. But the first step in doing something new and audacious is awareness that it may in fact be feasible.)

The Sfas Emes sums up on this point with a meta-pshat reading of a phrase in the Torah (Shemos, 31:16). This phrase is repeated in kiddush on Shabbos morning: "la'asos es HaShabbos le'dorosom". (ArtScroll: "... to make the Sabbath for their generations ..."). The Sfas Emes gives us a meta-pshat reading of this phrase. We can easily see "le'dorosom" as related to the word "dor" (generation). That make le'dorosom a time word. But the Sfas Emes also sees 'ledorosom' as related to the word "dira" (a dwelling). That connection makes 'le'dorosom' a space word as well; i.e., "in all the places where they will dwell". Thus, the Sfas Emes understands this pasuk as telling us that both wherever and whenever we live, on Shabbos we can more easily perceive the unity and harmony of Creation.

To conclude: The Sfas Emes is saying that, notwithstanding perceptions to the contrary, the world is governed by an inherent unity and harmony. We can see these properties more easily on Shabbos. But the Sfas Emes also reads the Torah's phrase as urging us to extend that insight to the days and the activities of the week. Further, part of the order of Creation is Klal Yisroel -- the Jewish people functioning as a unit, led by one leader (to whom the Sfas Emes refers as "yachid hador" -- the

unique one of the generation). Thus, when Korach separated himself from Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership, he was breaking the unity of Klal Yisroel. Even worse, he was disturbing the unity and the harmony of the entire cosmos. Seen in this perspective, it comes as no surprise that the earth opened up and swallowed Korach. He had it coming!

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