

PARSHAS KORACH: CHALLENGE NUMBER FOUR

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

After the miraculous exodus of the B'nei Yisroel from Mitzrayim, The Torah relates how four incidents disturbed this uplifting and stirring time in the life of the B'nei Yisroel. The Jews had previously sinned by 1) serving the egel (golden calf), 2) raising baseless complaints about their food in the desert, and 3) by mourning the negative reports of the meraglim (spies).

In this week's parsha, Moshe was faced with his fourth challenge - an outright rebellion and defiance of his leadership from his cousin Korach and the group of 250 people that he assembled, many of them distinguished leaders in their own right.

What is unclear from the pesukim is exactly what the complaints of Korach and his followers were. A simple reading of the pesukim leaves one with a sense that there was discontent on behalf of Korach and his followers - but with many unanswered questions as to the exact nature of those complaints.

KORACH'S COMPLAINT

Rashi explains that Korach became envious of Moshe after Korach's younger cousin Eltzofon assumed the position of Nasi (leader) of the shevet of Levi. Korach felt that Moshe and Aharon, who were older than he, were entitled to the two most coveted roles - leader of the Jews (Moshe) and Kohein Gadol (Aharon). However, he strongly felt that as the next in line, he was entitled to the Nasi position.

According to Rashi's understanding of these events, however, it is quite striking that Korach never mentioned this seemingly reasonable complaint when addressing Moshe. In fact, it seems as if the main point of Korach was that the Bnei Yisroel needed no leaders.

This line of reasoning is evident in the first three pesukim of this week's parsha (Bamidbar 16:1-3). Korach challenged [the leadership of] Moshe, by asking him, "Why do you exalt yourself over Klal Yisroel?"

He and his followers mocked Moshe by asking him if a house filled with seforim requires a mezuzah, and by wearing garments made entirely of techeles (blue wool, used for tzitzis), and asked Moshe if those garments require tzitzis. This would seem to be 'sour grapes' - if we cannot lead, Moshe should not lead either, since a great group of people need no leader at all. That raises the question; did Korach want to lead or to have no leadership at all?

OTHER QUESTIONS

Several other questions arise:

- 1) Why did the 250 people of the Shevet (Tribe of) Reuvain accompany Korach? Rashi explains that they were influenced by Korach, who dwelled in close proximity to their tents. However, it is difficult to believe these wise men (See Rashi 16:1) would risk challenging Moshe with nothing to gain. What was in it for them?
- 2) Moshe initially responded by 'falling on his face' (Bamidbar 16:4) in frustration and despair when he heard of this fourth significant sin that the Jews committed since they left Egypt (see Rashi). Shortly thereafter, he firmly answered the challenge of Korach. What changed that gave Moshe encouragement?
- 3) Moshe ends his forceful declaration by stating, "u'vikashtem gam kehunah?; are you asking for the kehunah - priesthood - as well (Bamidbar 16:10)? He then finishes his argument by stating, "Lachein, ata v'chal adascha hanoadim al Hashem, V'Aharon ma hu ki salinu alav? - Therefore, you and your entire group are joining together against Hashem; and [as for] Aharon, why do you protest against him? (Bamidbar 16:11).

This is most difficult to understand. When did Korach ever ask for kehunah? When did he complain against Aharon? Finally, what is the 'lachein; therefore'? That would seem to indicate a line of reasoning (see Rashi for his explanation). Why would his challenge of Aharon prove that he is quarreling against Hashem?

A POWERFUL INSIGHT

The Chasam Sofer offers an overriding view of Korach and his followers. He maintains that they were only united by their feelings of disenchantment and malcontent.

As noted earlier, Korach felt that he was passed over for a position of influence. The Chasam Sofer maintains that the members of Shevet (Tribe of) Reuvain felt slighted that Yaakov Avinu took the right of the firstborn from his eldest son Reuvain (Bereishis 48:5). They thought that one misdeed should not have disqualified them from leadership. He adds that among the 250 people were bechorim (firstborn children) who were replaced by members of Shevet Levi after the sin of the egel.

The Chasam Sofer points out that each of these groups had conflicting agendas. Even if they had defeated Moshe, they would have argued among themselves!! Therefore, their alliance was only a temporary one, which would crumble as soon as their mutual goals were met.

He offers a beautiful insight into the timeless words of our chachamim (sages) in Pirkei Avos. "Any argument that is l'shem Shamayim, for the sake of Heaven, sofo l'hiskayeim, will have a constructive outcome, while a dispute that is for other, personal reasons, will not have a constructive outcome (Avos 5:20). The Mishnah notes Hillel and Shammai as examples of people who argued for the sake

of Heaven - and Korach and his followers as those who argued with personal agendas.

The Chasam Sofer points out that the Mishna says that Korach and his followers were the ones arguing [not for the sake of Heaven] not Korach and Moshe, since Korach and his followers were deeply divided and only joined forces to do battle with Moshe.

THEREFORE ...

Following this line of reasoning, I would like to suggest an explanation for the "lachein - therefore" counterargument of Moshe and his emboldened stance.

At the onset, each of the three diverse groups in Korach's band has seemingly legitimate complaints. Korach had a 'lineage' claim - that he was the next in line for a position of leadership. The firstborn people and the leaders of Reuvain claimed that they were unjustly penalized for one-time sins. Perhaps Moshe 'fell on his face' feeling that their claims were difficult to disprove.

I would like to suggest that at that point, seeing Moshe's public display of frustration, Korach may have become overconfident. He tried adding to his initial claim for the position of Nasi, and abandoned his theme that the Jews need no leaders at all. He then challenged Aharon's worthiness to serve as Kohein Gadol, and claimed that Aharon was unfit to serve since he had a role [albeit inadvertently] in the forming of the egel.

THE TIDE TURNS

At that point, Moshe became energized. As the Chasam Sofer explains the words of Moshe, he countered Korach with a powerful argument. He asked Korach, "How could you join forces with others (the people from Reuvain and the bechorim) who had served the egel?" Even if individually your claims have merit, as a group, you contradict each other!!

I would like to suggest that this fits well with Moshe's words. "Lachein (therefore)" - since you challenged Aharon, [it became evident that] you and your band [the collective unit of malcontents] are arguing against Hashem [and not only against my leadership]."

Our chachamim in Avos cite this as a timeless message.

Selfish people only serve their own narrow goals. Selfless people - even when they disagree - can unite to enrich the world and contribute to its improvement.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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