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Korach 5781

The Double Standard: Judaism's View of Man

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 19, 1966)

Of the critical views of Judaism propounded throughout the ages, two are particularly relevant to our Torah reading of this morning and the Perek we shall read later today.

The first criticism accuses Judaism of a dry legalism, too concerned with the picayune and prosaic particulars of everyday life, and not sufficiently attentive to the larger dimensions of spirituality, esthetics, and morality. Thus Christianity accused us of the love of law, and sought to replace it with the law of love. It concentrated on the Church rather than the market place, and emphasized grace rather than Torah with its manifold rules and regulations.

So, too, Reform maintains that Halakhah is not truly "religious." In historic Judaism, it averred, there is too much Gemara, and not enough God. It proclaimed, therefore, that it would emphasize prophecy over priesthood, spiritual mission over study of Talmud. In a complete and utter failure to understand the nature of Judaism, it asked: what spiritual value can possibly inhere in such a Mishnah as *shor she'nagah et ha-parah*, the laws that pertain to an ox which gored a cow? The Halakhah, in other words, was seen as reducing lofty religious concepts to trivial details that did not serve to elevate man.

The second criticism was diametrically opposite. Nowadays especially one usually hears the protests of practical men deeply immersed in the complexities and perplexities of daily existence. For them, the demands of Halakhah are far in excess of what their diminutive capacities permit them. Judaism, they complain, demands a level of integrity that they do not and cannot, they feel, attain in their business life. It sets up a morality that taxes their ability for the constraint of impulses, a self-discipline in food and work and talk (Shabbat, Kashrut, and Lashon Kara) that overstrains their self-restraint in the name of

some abstract principle of sanctity that is far removed from their everyday reality.

These two criticisms can be represented typologically; that is, they are embodied in two types of personality with which we meet in this morning's Sidra. On one side there is Korah, and on the other Dathan and Aviram. Both are united against Moses. Despite the true motivation of their rebellion -- they were malcontents who were power-hungry -- they were not simply riff-raff. The Bible refers to them as *keriei mo'ed* and *anshei shem*, people of distinction, and no doubt, people who had spiritual viewpoints which deserve consideration.

Korah apparently felt that religion should be more elevated than the tiresome and tedious trivialities of the Torah of Moses. From the response of Moses -- *u-vikashtem gam kehunah* -- we may infer that Korah presented demands for greater spirituality, he wanted more personal involvement in the service of God. Furthermore, he proclaimed *ki kol ha-edah kulah kedoshim*, that the entire people is holy, and therefore the entire nation should be involved religiously as the servants of God. The Rabbis, in the Oral Tradition, tell us that Korah dressed his entire party in *tallit she'kulah tekhelet*, in garments that were completely of the blue color which the Torah of Moses requires: one of thread in the fringes; in other words, he declared that all men can rise to a much higher station than is demanded by the details of the law of Moses.

Dathan and Aviram, though they joined the rebellion of Korah, had a completely different point of view. They were practical men, political realists, who preached that the Torah must be relevant to the real needs and concerns of men. And what are the real concerns of men if not power and ambition and the fulfillment of natural appetite? Why, they protested, talk of religion when we are faced with a wilderness and desert? Why speak of ethics when what

we need is a land flowing with milk and honey? They did not believe that people are capable of the demands of Moses and his Torah. Thus their repeated slogan: *lo naaleh*, we shall not rise. Literally, this was their response to the summons of Moses to come and discuss issues. But in a symbolic sense, more profoundly, there is here reflected their whole attitude: real men in real life situations cannot rise as high as Moses demands of them. He is out of touch, far removed, unreal. Just as Korah complained that the Torah is not sufficiently edifying, Dathan and Aviram protested that it was too taxing.

How do we respond to these criticisms? They are each wrong, in that each has grasped only a partial truth. Any view of man which sees him in such a one-sided fashion--either side is false.

Judaism maintains a double standard. It considers, at all times, both the real and the ideal, man's needs and his aspirations, his material realities and his spiritual potentialities, his latent loftiness and his patent pettiness. The rebels, however, were wrong because each of the two camps maintained a narrow view and failed to see the whole of man. Thus the punishment for this group of rebels was that the earth swallowed them and the fire from Heaven destroyed them: they were each, respectively, too high in their estimation of man, and too low in their evaluation of him. Moses and Aaron had a far greater understanding. This they reflected in their prayer, at the time of the rebellion against them, when they addressed the Almighty as *Elokei ha-ruhot le-khol basar*, God who is the God of the spirits of each man. He is the master not only of the *ruah*, spirit in the singular, but *ruhot*, spirits, in the plural. For each man is both possessed by the reality of his situation, and possesses the potentiality to change it, whether for better or for worse. Man is a creature with an almost infinite capacity both for good and for evil. He is neither the giant imagined by Korah, nor the dwarf portrayed by Dathan and Aviram.

This idea is implicit in an insight in *Pirkei Avot* (Chapter 4), according to an interpretation of Rabbi Barukh Ha-Levi Epstein, the renowned author of *Torah Temimah*. In the *Perek*, the Mishnah gives us a series of definitions by the renowned Ben Zoma. *Ezehu hakham* -- he asks -- who is the wise man? He answers: *ha-lomed mi-kol adam*, one who has the capacity to learn from everyone. *Ezehu gibbor*, he asks further: who is the strong man? His answer is: *Hakovesh et yitzro*, one who can conquer his own temptation, who can control his own instincts. The third question is:

Ezehu ashir, who is the rich man, and the answer is: *hasameiah be-helko*, one who is happy with what he has. These are the well-known and the beautiful definitions offered to us by the *Perek*.

However, surprisingly, the Gemara in *Kiddushin* (49b) gives us completely different answers, and does not even mention the Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot*, although the latter is earlier, and therefore more authoritative. The Talmud discusses the interesting question of the man who marries a woman conditionally. What is the law, the Gemara asks, if a man marries a woman *al menat she-ani hakham*, on condition that I am a wise man? What is the definition of *hakham* so that we may decide whether or not a valid marriage has been contracted? The answer is, that we do not require of him to fulfill the standards of wisdom set by R. Akiva or the other sages of Yavneh, but that it is sufficient that he be one who can conduct himself intelligently in any field of discourse.

Note that all that the Gemara requires is that he be bright; no-mention is made of Ben Zoma's definition of the wise man as one who retains the capacity to learn from everyone. The next case is one who marries a woman on condition that I am a strong man. Here the definition is, he must be such that his friends fear him because of his power and influence. Again, there is no mention of the Mishnah's definition of strength interpreted as self-control. Finally, if a man marries a woman *al menat she'ani ashir*, on condition that I am rich, the marriage is valid if he is one of those whose townsfolk respect him because of his wealth -- and not merely one who is satisfied with what he has.

How do we account for these changing definitions? The answer that R. Epstein gives is that the Gemara speaks of marriage, which is essentially a *kinyan*, a contract freely arrived at by two people who must mutually agree upon the proposal. In such a case, we must estimate the *daat ha-mekadesh va-ha-mitkadesh*, the understanding that the man and the woman probably had when they came to an agreement. As a contract, we must consider only their interpretation, their definition, their understanding, and their values. The Mishnah however, does not offer us a consensus or the results of a public opinion poll. Rather, it gives us the values of the great Ben Zoma, he who abandoned all worldly ambition because he loved Torah. It is he who gives us his values, his standards -- and these became the ideal of Judaism. The Gemara's criterion goes by the count of most people; the Mishnah's criterion -- by the people who count most. In Hebrew we differentiate

between these two as the *matzui* and the *ratzui*, as the real facts and the desired situation, the “is” and the “ought.” Both are part of Judaism. The Torah and the tradition of our faith neglects neither the facts nor the ideals, neither the *matzui* nor the *ratzui*.

By considering both standards, Judaism, as it were, looks at man with two eyes, not one; thus, it sees him three dimensionally -- in the fullness of his humanity. The Torah beholds in man not a monolithic creature, but one of fantastic variety of character and accomplishment, one who possesses both elements of the divine and the demonic, one who can be disgustingly ordinary and thrillingly extraordinary, the prosaic plodder and the poetic dreamer, one who can sink in to the very bowels of the earth and one who can rise to the sublimest heights in the purest fire. It sees him as one who misunderstands wisdom as cleverness, and one who can appreciate it as the openness of mind; one who misinterprets strength as the muscles of the bully, and one who recognizes it as the control of Instincts; one who misconstrues wealth as nothing but a tool for social status, and one who knows that true riches lie in the heart and in the mind.

Thus, Judaism’s double standard is a major contribution to the philosophy of man. By combining the standards of the real and of the ideal, it never allows realism to become an excuse for human degeneracy, and it prevents idealism

What’s So Funny?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

The story is told of an itinerant preacher - a *maggid* - who went from town to town speaking, with only one sermon in his arsenal. That sermon discussed the rebellion of Korach and his minions against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. When the *maggid* spoke during the week of *parshas Korach*, of course, he had no problem, but what did he do the rest of the year? He would get up to speak, reach into his pocket for his snuff box, pretend that he had dropped it, and then, after a lengthy search, announce, “My snuff box is gone! It must have been swallowed up by the earth, just like Korach! Speaking of Korach...” He would then proceed to give his *Korach* sermon. Interestingly, this joke is only one of several that I once heard from a well known rabbi in Chicago as part of his sermon on the *Shabbos* of *parshas Korach*. Moreover, I have, on other occasions, heard rabbis begin their sermons of that week with a *Korach* joke or

from losing touch with the realities of man’s limitations. This double approach holds out hope and the challenge of moral improvement for those who feel the weight of their smallness; and it teaches those who have accomplished more in life, the virtues of tolerance and understanding for those who have attained less. Judaism comprehends both the *Halakhah*, with its keen awareness of man’s inadequacy, and *Aggadah*, with its soaring appreciation of man’s capacity for transcendence. The *Aggadah* is based upon David’s proclamation that “Thou hast made him but little less than that angels”; the *Halakhah* is based upon David’s statement in the same Psalm, “O Lord, what is man the Thou shouldst take notice of him, the son of man that Thou shouldst take account of him.”

This full and comprehensive view of man is the teaching of Moses, which Korah and Dathan and Aviram tragically failed to understand. Without it, we are doomed to a one-sidedness that will never let us understand either what man is or what he ought to be. Accepting it, we can remain firm in the knowledge that the Torah of Moses overlooks neither man’s greatness nor his lowliness, neither his reality nor his goals. In the words which our tradition ascribed to the children of Korah as their voice issued forth from the bottomless pit of the earth: *Mosheh emet ve’torato emet*, Moses was right and his Torah was eternally true.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

story (readers are invited to send in any additional *Korach* jokes they may know. For my personal favorite, see *Netvort to parshas Korach, 5759*, available at Torahheights.com). Why is it that *Korach*, more than any other Biblical figure, has become the object of so many jokes? On a simple level, it is possible to explain that the very absurdity of *Korach*’s charge of arrogance against Moshe, the humblest of all men, in saying, “why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of God” (*Bamidbar 16:3*), evokes laughter. However, I believe that there is a more fundamental idea latent in this phenomenon, and that an understanding of *Korach*’s core offense can help explain it.

Korach, in confronting Moshe and Aharon, argued that the entire congregation is holy, and, therefore, they should not exalt themselves over them and act as their leaders. The *midrash* says that *Korach* clothed the two hundred fifty people who joined his rebellion with prayer

shawls dyed completely with techeiles, commonly (though not universally) identified as a certain shade of blue, and argued that there is no need to dye any of the strings with techeiles, since the entire garment is dyed with it. Moshe, however, maintained the normative halacha that there still needs to be a thread hanging from the end corner of the garment that is dyed with techeiles. Korach also argued that a house filled with Torah scrolls does not require a mezuzah - which contains two sections of the Torah written on a small piece of parchment - on its doorposts, while Moshe insisted that it does. The Maharal of Prague, in his work *Tiferes Yisroel*, chapter 22, explains that, symbolically, Korach was arguing that everyone in the congregation is holy, and, therefore, there is no need for the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. The halachic requirement of a thread dyed with techeiles, and of a mezuzah on the doorpost, is symbolic of the need for leaders over the people. The thread of techeiles on the tallis represents the leadership of Aharon, who taught the people how to serve God properly, and the mezuzah on the doorpost is symbolic of Moshe, who taught Torah to the people. On a more essential level, the Rambam, in his list of thirteen fundamental beliefs of the Torah, writes that Moshe, as the one who brought the Torah to the nation, was in a different category than all of the other prophets, and belief in the uniqueness of his prophecy is a separate principle, in addition to the principle that God bestows prophecy on certain people. Thus, Korach's rejection of Moshe's choice of Aharon as *kohein gadol*, besides being a rejection of the *kehunah*, can thus also be seen as a further rejection of Moshe and his unique status as a prophet.

Interestingly, it seems from the Rambam that Miriam and Aharon made the same mistake as Korach when they spoke disparagingly of Moshe. As we discussed last week, Miriam was punished for this by being stricken with *tzora'as*, a certain kind of skin disease, commonly translated as leprosy. The Rambam, at the end of his *Laws*

of the Impurity of *Tzora'as* (16:10), writes that *tzora'as* comes as a punishment for speaking *leshon hora*, or evil talk. The purpose of the punishment, he says, is to prevent the person from engaging in the conversations of the wicked, which he describes as being 'leitzonus' and *leshon hora*. Although 'leitzonus' is commonly translated as 'joking,' the Rambam, as we will see, seems to use it in a wider sense, as a specific kind of humor. He goes on to mention the incident of Miriam speaking about Moshe, and notes that she did not say what she did with bad intent, and, moreover, she loved her older brother, Moshe, whom she had helped raise from infancy. Still, what she said was forbidden, and she was punished for it. All the more so, then, will people who have bad intentions be punished. Such people, the Rambam says, speak against the righteous people - the *tzadikim* - and against the prophets, the Torah, and, ultimately, deny God. My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, *zt"l*, explained that according to the Rambam, we learn from the incident of Miriam that there is a special prohibition of *lashon hora*, not to equate ourselves to Torah leaders and judge them by our own criteria.

The Rambam, as we have seen, refers to this kind of talk as 'leitzonus.' Rav Aharon translated this term to mean cynicism, imputing hidden motives to the actions of our leaders instead of regarding them with the respect they deserve. Korach, then, did not learn from the incident of Miriam and Aharon, but, rather, repeated the offense in a magnified way, cynically accusing Moshe of having personal motives in his appointment of Aharon as *kohein gadol*, and in his own role of leadership. This cynical attitude led to his eventual demise. Perhaps, then, the reason for the abundance of Korach jokes is a kind of 'midoh kineged midoh,' a measure for measure punishment. Korach spoke of Moshe in a cynical way, and so, people treat him cynically as well, making 'leitzonus' of him with a continual supply of jokes and stories.

In Machlokes, There is no Chazaka

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a combination of two shiurim given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim, on June 27, 2019 (5779), and on June 30, 2016 (5776), entitled "Avoiding Machlokes")

At the end of the first aliya of this week's Parsha, the *pasuk* tells us: *va-yishlach Moshe likro le-Dasan ve-Ja-Aviram, bnei Eliav*, etc. Moshe sent a shaliach to call for a meeting between Dasan, Aviram, and himself—

yet in the end, they refused. Why did Moshe ask them to meet him? Chazal darshen in *maseches Sanhedrin* (daf 110), also quoted by Rashi here: *mi-kan she-ein machzikin be-machlokes*. From Moshe's actions here, we learn not to

persist in disputes. That's why he tried to work it out with them. Ultimately, he was unsuccessful. However, by doing so, Moshe demonstrated the correct attitude by talking it out with them. So, according to this explanation, what do we mean when we say Ein machzikim be-machlokes? Machzikin means to hold fast to something. If you find yourself in the middle of machlokes—like Moshe here was—you should not persist in arguing. Instead, you should try to find a way to settle the machlokes, if you possibly can. And that is an obvious course of action that common-sense dictates, even if we didn't learn it from Moshe.

There is a deeper explanation—al derech drush—offered by Chasam Sofer. He explains the expression ein machzikim along the lines of what the word chazaka means in halacha. Chazaka there means status quo. If something is mutar, it stays mutar until proven otherwise, and if something is asur, it remains asur. When we say ein machzikim be-machlokes, what do we mean? Here we have Dasan and Aviram. They were the biggest reshaim from the beginning of Sefer Shemos—at the beginning of Moshe's career. From the very beginning, they were nothing but trouble—they were reshaim gemurim their whole lives. It would stand to reason that we have a chazaka—that they are still reshaim. So, what's the point of talking to them? They would neither listen two years ago nor would they listen last year or a month ago, and they wouldn't listen yesterday. What would change today? It's a chazaka! But Chasam Sofer says, No. Ein machzikim be-machlokes. Sometimes chazaka is good. It is an excellent rule in Isur ve-Heter, in hilchos Basar be-Chalav, in dinei Shechita

and Treifos, etc. But when it comes to getting along with people, you cannot use the rule of chazaka. It's true in real life. Sometimes people are unkind—they are doing something wrong to us, etc. And our natural reaction is: “Does the leopard change his spots?” We assume that that's the way they are, and that's the way they will always be. And that's it. It's hopeless, and there is nothing you can do about it. Unfortunately, numerous relationships disintegrate because of this approach. Many people get into lots of trouble because of this. They say: If there is something wrong with this person now, and it's so bad that we can't get along, then it's never going to change. It's hopeless. There is no guarantee that they will change. After all, Dasan and Aviram did not. Nevertheless, says Chasam Sofer, ein machzikin be-machlokes. You cannot presume a chazaka. You cannot assume that the way they are today, they will remain tomorrow, and the next week, etc. You ought to give them a chance to change. People have an uncanny ability to change. Unfortunately, some people change for the worse. And fortunately, people also change for the better! As bad as someone was yesterday, you cannot assume that they will continue. And, if we want to maximize our success in dealing with people, we must give people a chance. Whatever they were yesterday—that was yesterday. You never know. Perhaps, they will be better today. If Moshe could give even Dasan and Aviram a chance, we could certainly give everyone a chance to grow, improve, and do teshuva. And although in the case of Dasan and Aviram, it didn't work out, Moshe is teaching us that in our lives, it very well might.

Democracy: The Scrubbing of Identity?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The past three centuries have monumentally transformed the political landscape. In much of our world, democratic governments have replaced repressive monarchies, offering equality and dignity. After centuries of political persecution and institutional discrimination, Man has fashioned a fair and equitable form of governance. This movement has been driven by “heroes of democracy”—some of whom authored great ideas of democracy and others who valiantly struggled to implement this dream.

Listening to Korach speak, perhaps he should be included in this list of “heroes of democracy”. After all,

he campaigned in favor of political equality and his bold demand can certainly serve as a motto of democracy: “the entire people are holy why do you lord power over them?” Korach appears deeply committed to political and religious equality. Why is he punished so severely? Why is this ‘champion of democracy’ swallowed by the earth?

There are many answers to this question and many layers to Korach's crime. Firstly, Korach wasn't a loyal freedom fighter or a selfless revolutionary— he was a demagogue, shamelessly fomenting popular unrest to serve his own selfish political interests. He spoke gallantly about the nobility of every Jew, but in reality, he served the

interests of one “particular” Jew- himself. It is tragic that so many were trapped by his fraud and so many suffered such a horrific fate. Demagoguery can only be successful if it contains a kernel of truth and Korach’s cry for “equality” masked his detestable and egotistical agenda.

Secondly, opposing Moshe’s authority isn’t merely a political protest. Moshe’s authority, established at Sinai and enshrined by his ongoing prophecy, is vital to Jewish faith. Assailing Moshe’s authority undercuts the foundation of our belief system: the divinity of Torah, the validity of the oral tradition and the phenomenon of prophecy. The stakes of this faceoff are greater than just political office; Korach has committed theological heresy and this justifies a severe sentence.

Furthermore, Korach’s hostility displays ingratitude to Moshe. Quite frankly, after all the miracles Moshe performed, his courage in standing down Pharo, his selfless dedication, his feverish prayers to rescue the wayward people, Moshe deserves better. Even if Korach were dissatisfied with Moshe’s leadership, he could have been more gracious in registering his disapproval. Fomenting a mob against Moshe and accusing him of conspiracy is excessive and thankless treatment of a leader who deserves better.

So there are manifold layers to Korach’s crime and he well deserves his awful fate. But even his cry for democracy is flawed; by carefully studying his unusual judgement, and especially the language describing the earthquake, we can better grasp his faulty claims. Moshe employs two very uncommon “code words” to predict Korach’s downfall. Firstly, Moshe informs Korach “in the morning” or “boker” G-d will select His chosen agents”. Instead of describing the showdown as occurring “tomorrow”, Moshe refers specifically to the morning. Additionally, Moshe predicts a new “creation” or a new ‘beriya” which, as it turns out, is a major earthquake which swallows the rebels. Both the reference to the morning as well as the allusion to a new “creation” evoke memories of G-d’s original creation. Somehow Korach’s challenges the foundation of Nature and refuting Korach restores the original conditions of the natural order. The world of Breishit is reinforced through Korach’s defeat and the wording of his punishment underlines this.

G-d established firm boundaries within His natural order and these boundaries support and stabilize our reality. These boundaries can be “geographical” such as the barrier between ocean and dry land, or they can be

“conceptual” such as balance between various forces of physics which together brace our experience. Without these boundaries our reality would collapse. These “distinctions” or borders are built-in to the natural order and aren’t unfair or unjust; differences in Nature are crucial for the proper functioning of the universe. They are just differences not moral statements.

The most obvious example is the division between daytime and nighttime. During the week of creation G-d established two very different time periods and assigned respective planets to govern these intervals. Daytime isn’t superior to nighttime, but more so, these differences are pivotal for human survival: daytime enables certain forms of human behavior whereas nighttime permits other forms.

Without either, the human condition would fail. Without sunrise and daytime, human productivity would cease and without the sun setting and the onset of nighttime, human resources would deplete. The difference between daytime and nighttime showcases that distinctions or boundaries within Nature aren’t morally discriminatory, but built-in necessities to G-d’s world.

Korach missed this point. What is true in Nature is true in the human realm. Of course, every Jew is equal and each one possesses latent and equal holiness before G-d. However, equality does not translate into uniformity or conformity. Just as daytime and nighttime are distinct, similarly, religious functions must be differentiated, so that they can be effectively performed. Specialization is crucial to functionality and isn’t unjust or bigoted. Service as a Levi requires certain lifestyle adaptations which not every citizen can sustain, just as life as a Cohen demands even greater stringency and vigilance. By selecting respective groups to operate in these unique settings, G-d didn’t discriminate against other groups nor did He diminish the holiness of any common Jew. He merely established boundaries in the social and religious order similar to the boundaries within Nature. Moshe rebukes Korach, mentioning “creation” and “morning”, thereby reminding him that Nature is molded upon these vital boundaries.

Just as G-d created divisions within the natural order and divisions within the religious order, He also created divisions within our personal and communal “orders”. Differences between races, religions, ethnicities, and genders form our personal identity and present shared values around which communities are assembled. Without these differences personal identity become muddled and opportunity for communal experience is hampered.

Sadly, in many societies “identity markers” are often used to generalize or to stereotype; worse sometimes these differences invite discrimination. When democracy prevents these injustices it is heroic. However, if the culture of democracy blurs these fundamental features of identity, and removes the natural divisions within humanity, personal identity becomes hazy and communal experience erodes. Democracy isn’t meant to be a cultural leveler or an identity eraser. In our rush to protect the political rights of everyman, sometimes we seek to homogenize diversity and forcibly shape people into ‘everyman’ all the while denying the basic distinctions which G-d programmed within the human realm. Democracy should aim for equality before the law and equality in the voting booth. The culture of democracy sometimes threatens to undermine the divisions and differences which compose our identity. By erasing differences in our identities, the modern cultures of democracies often commit the same mistake as Korach.

Afterword

Of course one of the most basic distinctions G-d created in History is the difference between Jew and Gentile. In today’s modern culture of equality, the very notion of a

The All-Encompassing Fires of Strife

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Parshas Korach, we learn of the rebellion of Korach against his first cousins, Moshe and Aharon, the leaders of the Bnei Yisrael. Additionally, he was jealous of the appointment of his other first cousin, Elizaphan (son of Uzziel) as prince over the sons of Kehas. Korach, as son of Yitzhar (the second son of Kehas) felt that he should be appointed prince, and not his younger cousin, Elizaphan.

Mocking the mitzvos of techeilies on zitzis and mezuzah, the perceived dictatorship of Moshe, and the priestly role of Aharon, Korach manages to convince others to join his rebellion as well. Led by Korach, and with the supporting roles of Dasan and Aviram from the tribe of Reuven, along with two-hundred and fifty prominent men from Israel, the men accuse Moshe and Aharon of taking too much power for themselves. Surely the entire assembly is holy, they cry, and Hashem is amongst them all, so why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of G-d? (Bamidbar 16:1-3 w/ Rashi to v.1).

In regard to the machlokes (quarrel or strife) that was

“chosen people” sounds bigoted and racist to many. Those who bristle at the notion of a chosen people may very well paraphrase Korach’s proclamation: if every man is gifted with Divine image, and we all share virtually the same DNA, how can one race be chosen? The response to this modern “Korach-ian” challenge is true today as it was then: Jews are chosen for special mission. An exceptional people, capable of processing supernatural experiences and stubborn enough to resist historical pressure has been chosen to assist humanity in discovering the dignity and meaning of a religious lifestyle before G-d. Differences which are sewn into the fabric of the natural religious order aren’t bigoted- although they can easily be misunderstood as such.

Our role in the “historical order” isn’t yet clear to the world. As Moshe informed Korach, “Tomorrow this will all be clear”. Tomorrow, when the world reaches a better place this will all be clarified. Tomorrow, all the hate and animosity directed at Jews will fade. Tomorrow, Jews themselves will better appreciate their mission and not only their privilege. Tomorrow.

led by Korach, the Sages teach:

כָּל מַחְלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוּפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוּ הִיא מַחְלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלֶקֶת הַלֵּל וְשֶׁמַּאי. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלֶקֶת קָרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ.

Any quarrel that is for the sake of Heaven will endure and any quarrel that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. Which is a quarrel that is for the sake of Heaven? This is the disagreement between (the great sages) Hillel and Shammai (whose disagreements endure - and are studied - to this day in yeshivos around the world). And a quarrel that is not for the sake of Heaven? This is the fight of Korach and his assembly (Avos 5:17).

Given that Korach was motivated by a desire for power, control, rulership and self-gratification, his fight was certainly not one that was l’shem Shomayim, and he and his assembly of men were punished. In Divine Judgment, the ground opened up and swallowed the households of Korach, Dasan and Aviram. As the nation fled the scene in terror, a heavenly fire descended and consumed the two-hundred and fifty followers.

How terrible was their machlokes? Rashi teaches:

ונשיהם ובניהם וטפם. בא ורצה כמה קשה המהלכות, שהרי בית דין של משה אין עונשין אלא עד שיביא שתי שערות, ובית דין של מעלה עד עשרים שנה, וכאן אבדו אף יונקי שדים.

Even their wives, children and infants were punished: Come see how severe dispute is! For an early court does not punish unless the guilty party has reached maturity, and the Heavenly Court does not punish until one has reached the age of twenty years. And yet here, even those who suckled at the breast were destroyed (Rashi to Bamidbar 16:27).

In his Short and Sweet on the Parsha, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Bregman writes, “According to Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, even Korach’s little children were swallowed into the ground. Midrash Tanchuma (3) remarks that even the day-old babies were killed in Korach’s machlokes. This leads to an obvious and simple question: How could the little children get swept up into the punishment of Korach and his followers? Doesn’t the Torah state a rule that a person is only eligible for punishment from the Heavenly Court from the age of twenty and up?”

“Maharal (Gur Aryeh) provides an answer: The concept of machlokes (dispute/separation) was created on the Second Day of Creation (Bereishis 1:6 - וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, יְהִי - בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם (רְקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם, וַיְהִי מַבְדִּיל, בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם). Additionally, Chazal teach (Pesachim 54a) that the fire of Gehenom (Purgatory/Hell) was also created on the Second Day of Creation. Therefore, we may rightfully equate machlokes with the fires of Gehenom.

“Now, when it comes to fire, one’s age and consent are immaterial; if you touch fire, you will get burned. This same dynamic is at play when a person gets involved with machlokes. It doesn’t matter who you are, nor is your age of any consequence. If you are in any way connected to machlokes - even as the child of a rabble-rouser - you will get burned by it and suffer!” (Short and Sweet on the Parsha, Feldheim, p.379-380).

The Fine Line of Holiness

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

As a response to the rebellion against him, Moshe challenges Korach and his followers to offer incense, together with Aharon, and let G-d demonstrate whom He favours. The challengers’ offerings are rejected, and they are burned alive by Divine fire. Afterwards, G-d informs Elazar that the fire pans used by

How dangerous are the flames of dissent amongst us, that whoever is associated with these fires will be consumed and burned, no matter their age or station in life!

In 1910, fierce dissension broke out in the Radin Yeshiva that was directed against a certain individual. The situation became known to the Chafetz Chaim zt”l (R’ Yisrael Meir Ha’Kohen Kagin of Radin, 1838-1933). He assembled the students of the yeshiva, and in a trembling voice, addressed them:

“Our yeshiva is called Chafetz Chaim, alluding to the words of Scripture: Who is the man that is ‘chafetz chaim’ (desires life); loves days, to see good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit (Ps.34:13-14). Therefore, anyone who takes a share in stirring up contention does not belong among us here. He is not one of us! Contention in a yeshiva bearing my name!? Heaven forbid! Let it rather be healed!

“... You came to this yeshiva to earn the crown of Torah learning. You left your families and kin... in order to bear the yoke of Torah. Yet here now there is quarrel and strife! Look at the words of the Rambam in his Yad HaChazaka, where he says that persons given to evil gossip and quarrel have no share in the World to Come. You must flee from such things as from a blazing fire. Otherwise, all your toil and effort will be for nothing; your Torah learning will be of no value, if you remain embroiled in this machlokes!” (The Chafetz Chaim, by R’ M. M. Yosher, Artsroll, p.325).

May we learn well the lessons of Korach and his men, and the message that resonates in our day and time. For machlokes that is for the sake of self, and not for the sake of G-d, will never endure, and all those involved in it will bring ruination upon themselves and their loved ones, R”L. May we save ourselves from such happenings by increasing ahavas Yisrael and acceptance of our fellow Jews.

the challengers have become holy and cannot simply be discarded. Rather, they are to be collected and formed into a covering for the altar as a reminder to the Jewish people about the rebellion. But if the challengers were, in the final analysis, unworthy of offering the incense, and their offerings were therefore not bona fide service of G-d, why

did their fire pans become holy?

Ramban (17:2) assumes that the offer-ings themselves did not imbue holi-ness into the fire pans. It was G-d's subsequent command to keep them as a memorial that changed their status. However, Rashi (ibid.) disagrees with this and assumes that the offerings of the challengers really did make the pans holy. Two explanations for Rashi's position provide insight into the nuances of the rebellion and its message.

Ramban himself suggests one way to explain Rashi's view. Even though the incense offerings were invalid accord-ing to the general rules of the Mish-kan, Moshe requested them to be brought, as a test. As a result, each challenger, assuming that he may be the winner, consecrated his fire pan to the Mishkan, for his own future use as Kohen Gadol. Any Jew can consecrate items in this way. Even though the challengers failed, their fire pans re-tained that holiness.

Rabbi Meir Simchah of Dvinsk (Meshech Chochmah 17:2-3) sharpens this position further. He notes that if one consecrates an animal as a guilt-offering for a sin they believe they have committed, and then discovers that the sin never occurred, the consecration is cancelled retroactively. However, this is not true if one only thinks one may have sinned and consecrates an animal for the special guilt-offering needed in this scenario of uncertainty. In this case, even if it is discovered that the sin never occurred, the animal remains holy. This is because it was consecrated from a place of uncertainty and was therefore not conditioned on the actual circumstances of the sin. Rabbi Meir Simchah uses these rules to explain the mindset of Moshe's challengers. None of them had been certain that they were best suited to be the Kohen Gadol,

but all of them had been intoxicated with the possibility that they might be the holy one. As a result, when their offer-ings were rejected, the fire pans re-mained holy as in the case of a doubtful guilt-offering.

This nuance reveals something im-portant about the challengers. These were not haughty people consumed by the pursuit of power; rather, they were genuine seekers of G-d who had been misled by a charismatic figure. Korach had seduced them with the idea that the personal holiness they felt inside and the longing they had for G-d could and should be expressed by pursuing the priesthood. He perverted their genu-ine desires to suit his own needs.

A second approach to Rashi emerges from a midrash that depicts the events of Melachim I (18:20-39), wherein Eli-yahu the prophet challenges the false prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. Each side is to take an ox and place it on an altar without fire. The owner of the offering which is miraculously con-sumed by a heavenly flame is the one who serves the true G-d. Bamidbar Rab-bah 23:9 describes the reaction of the ox chosen by the false prophets. It com-plaints to Eliyahu that it will not take part in something which will anger its Creator, and it refuses to budge. Eli-yahu appeases the ox, responding that just as G-d's Name will be sanctified by the acceptance of his ox, so too it will be sanctified by the rejection of the false prophets' ox.

Holiness does not always emerge through positive sanctification. Some-times it appears, as in the case of the rejected incense, through the over-whelming and tragic discovery of the boundaries between us and G-d. The fire pans covering the altar remind us that in the pursuit of holiness a fine line divides between the greatest success and utter failure. This pursuit must be undertaken with proper guidance and an awareness of the risks involved.

The Danger of Thinking of Ourselves as Holy

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

The story of Korah's rebellion doesn't come out of nowhere. It can't be a coincidence that the parshah immediately following the sin of the spies is about an attempted coup. Bnei Yisrael were just informed that they wouldn't be entering the Land of Israel anytime soon. That they would have to wander around the desert for forty years first and that everybody over the age of twenty would die in that desert. For a nation that was excited to leave the bondage of Egypt with the hope of establishing a sovereign

nation of their own in a country of their own, this was a devastating blow.

In fact, this is how the Midrash explains the actions of the *מקושש עצים* (wood gatherer) at the end of the previous parshah. This unnamed person was found violating Shabbat and after some inquiring on the part of Moshe Rabbenu, was put to death. There is a Talmudic tradition identifying this unnamed sinner as Tzlofhad, an otherwise righteous person. The Tradition identifies so strongly with

his righteousness that the Midrash explains that Tzlofhad never wanted to desecrate Shabbat and only had pure intentions in mind.

Because the people were downtrodden and depressed after hearing of their punishment, some people came to think of their lives and actions as inconsequential and meaningless. If they were going to die in the desert anyway, why would God care whether or not they followed the mitzvot? Tzlofhad deliberately sinned so that the people would recognize that even during these forty years, their actions deeply mattered and had consequences.

Korah picked up on a variant of this very theme. While seemingly coming from the completely opposite perspective, he also argued that the mitzvot had no bearing on Bnei Yisrael's lives and were irrelevant. We can only wonder if he would have been so successful if not for Bnei Yisrael just having been primed with such a similar idea.

Instead of a nihilistic approach, Korah took what he thought was an opposite tactic. In challenging Moshe and Aharon's leadership, he argued *כי כל העדה כולם קדושים* — *for the whole nation is entire holy*. All of Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai, explains Rashi, and why then do they need Moshe and Aharon to tell them what to do and how to act?

The Rav Hida reads something even more subtle into this initial complaint. After the story of the spies, the Torah records a number of mitzvot, as almost an interlude in an otherwise sad story. The very last of those mitzvot that closes out Parshat Shelah and immediately precedes the story of Korah, is the mitzvah of tzitzit. Unlike many other mitzvot, the Torah gives somewhat of a rationale for the

mitzvah: *למען תזכרו ועשיתם כל מצותי — [wear them] so that you will remember and fulfill all [the rest of My] mitzvot*. But it's the last phrase that the Rav Hida points out is the key: *והייתם קדושים לאלוקיכם* — wear the tzitzit so that you should remember all the rest of the mitzvot and you shall be holy unto Hashem. It's through the performance of mitzvot that we are to become holy. And it's this very notion that Korah was attacking.

Effectively, Korah was arguing that the mitzvot aren't necessary, since we are already holy enough without them. They seem to be just some means of control that weren't necessary and didn't provide any benefit.

But this is also a somewhat nihilistic approach. In Korah's worldview, we are eternally spiritually stagnant. Even though he starts off with the premise that we are all already holy, it means that nothing we do matters. There is no room for spiritual growth or living a life of meaning through a relationship with Hashem. In his world, our actions also have no consequences, since our holiness is guaranteed, regardless of what we might do.

Putting down Korah's rebellion was about more than just preventing a political challenge to leadership. Part of it included the fundamental notion that while we may indeed have some deep seated intrinsic holiness, it's specifically through following what Hashem asks of us that we become holy. When we fulfill mitzvot, we elevate our own spiritual levels by acknowledging that Hashem is the ultimate *מְצַוֶּה* (Commander) and we are the *מְצֻוִּים* (commanded). The mitzvot aren't means of control, but rather tools through which we can spiritually soar.

Equality in Judaism and Parenting

Rabbi Yossi Goldin

In this week's Parsha, Moshe's cousin Korach leads what appears to be the first direct rebellion about the authority of Moshe and Aharon. The Torah (16:3) describes how Korach gathered hundreds of followers, and confronted Aharon with the following argument—“the entire assembly- all of them-are Holy and Hashem is among them, so why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?!” The commentaries note that Korach was bothered by the fact that Moshe had appointed himself as the leader and his brother as Kohen Gadol- and in his desire for more power, he decided to challenge Moshe's authority outright.

There a number of different ways that the meforshim explain the exact argument of Korach, and how he challenged Moshe. However, upon the simple reading of the text, Korach argument is a populist one- ‘If all of Am Yisrael are holy, and we all have a personal relationship with them, then what makes you and Aharon better than the rest of us?’ Korach argues that if all members of Am Yisrael have a special relationship with Hashem, then they are equal- no one is better than the other. If that is the case, then Moshe and Aharon have no right to tell the rest of the nation what to do- no one person has the right to place himself in a leadership position over the others.

While at first glance, Korach's argument seems to have merit- after all, it is true that every member of Bnei Yisrael is holy- his mistake lay in failing to understand a very important distinction within Jewish tradition. When it comes to our relationship with Hashem, and the importance of our personal mission in this world, we are all equal. Each and every one of us has the potential to develop and personal, deep, and meaningful relationship with G-d- and every single person has a particular purpose for which G-d created him and placed him in this world. No one mission or calling is necessarily more important than the other- as long as achieve our full potential and accomplish what we are meant to, then we are all equal in the eyes of G-d.

At the same time, when it comes to the specific details of a person's role or life, then we are certainly not equal. Each person is created with different strengths and weaknesses, and is given at birth a certain set of realities that shape him and what he is able to accomplish. Some people are born with both the characteristics and opportunities for leadership- others are simply not afforded those opportunities. That is the nature of our existence in this world- it is impossible for two people to be exactly the same, and therefore their realities and opportunities cannot be the same. Nevertheless, the beauty of yahadut is that no matter the circumstances given to each individual, he has the ability and opportunity to connect with Hashem and accomplish unique things in the world.

It is this distinction that Korach failed to understand. By claiming that each person's inherent holiness implies an equality across the board, he conflated this crucial distinction, misleading the masses. True, every person is holy, but that does not mean that they are therefore equal in other areas of life as well.

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of parenting is the issue of equality and treating our kids kids equally. We never want our children to feel that one child is love more/less than the other- and we often have the urge to give them a sense of equality. I distinctly remember a relative of mine, when she was about to give birth to her second child, declare that she was going to treat both of her children completely equally. She was determined to give the second child the same exact things that she gave her first child- such that both children would feel that they were treated equally.

However, as we gain more experience at parents, I believe it becomes clear very quickly how unrealistic, and

perhaps even mistaken, such logic is. Every child in the family is different- born under different circumstances and realities, with different personalities and needs- and therefore each child must be educated and raised differently. Treating both children the same would ultimately do a disservice to both. Rather, a distinction similar to the one above must be made with regards to parenting as well. We must make sure that each child feels that he has a loving relationship with his parents, and that his parents care for him and are proud of him in a deep and profound way. However, this does not mean we must also treat each child the same under all circumstances- as each situation, and the child involved, requires its own course of action appropriate to that situation and child. And we must work hard to help our children understand this.

In *Siblings Without Rivalry*, Faber and Mazlish deal with this issue in great detail, and they make the following crucial point- "Children don't need to be treated equally. They need to be treated uniquely." They suggest that rather than trying to focus on everything being fair and equal, focus instead on the individual needs of each child. To give two practical example:

1. If two children are given a piece of cake and one claims that his brother got a bigger piece, rather than arguing with him or getting involved in the never-ending cycle of making sure that each child gets exactly the same, the parent should focus on the needs of the complainant- "oh, are you still hungry? Would you like more?"
2. If a child ask a parent "who do love more, me or chani"- rather than stressing equality by answering "I love you the same", the parent should stress uniqueness by answering "you are the only 'you' in the whole world. No one could ever take your place."

Korach's rebellion was based on a fundamental mistake regarding the concept of equality in Judaism. By suggesting that our inherent holiness means that we are equal in areas of Yahadut, he failed to realize the important distinction between our relationship with Hashem and our positions within the community. As parents, we are sometimes tempted to make a similar mistake regarding treating our kids equally. We must strive to realize that while we must certainly make sure that each child feels loved and cherished, that does not mean that we have to treat them all the same, as different personalities and circumstances call for different responses.

Who Cares If He's Wrong?!

Rabbi Ari Zucker

It comes as no surprise that accusations and motivations don't always line up. In the case of Korach, Moshe understands that his claims are just a means to his selfish goal. Similar circumstances arise daily, and we've developed a sixth sense to disregard accusations when the accuser is clearly chasing an agenda. While Moshe has to defuse Korach's revolt, he knows that his claims are baseless. How do we react when we know the opposing argument is lacking? Many of us likely shrug off the claim, assured that we are in the right and our adversaries in the wrong. Surprisingly, Moshe reacts by falling on his face (16:4). But Moshe knew the nefarious motivations of Korach's claims! Why does he fall on his face when Korach is so clearly wrong!?

The medieval mussar work *Orchot Tzadikim* analyzes character traits, and operates under the assumption that no middah is entirely good or bad. One such illustration is the author's description of love. In what context could love possibly be wrong? If my overwhelming love for my friend, family or neighbor prevents me from sharing necessary feedback. Withholding feedback is not an act of love, but just the opposite. Which indicates that feedback need not

come from a friend or supporter. Feedback from an enemy might be the most valuable!

Valuable or not, unexpected feedback isn't easy. "Feedback rarely arrives in a gift box, tied up with a bow," writes Adam Grant, author and top-rated professor at Wharton Business School, "It's more like being hit with a bag of rocks. Our job is to inspect each one from multiple angles through a magnifying glass. When we find a diamond in the rough, we can polish it until it sparkles."

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twersky zt"l learns this lesson from Moshe. Even though he knew that Korach was wrong, he still fell on his face. Why? It was a moment of reflection; he blocked out his surroundings and looked internally to consider if there was a grain of truth amid the wild accusations. Just because Korach was his accuser didn't mean that he didn't have something to share.

It is much easier to throw away feedback when it comes from an unwelcome source. But Moshe teaches us that whenever we are confronted with an alternative perspective, we should mine it to pull out whatever diamonds we can find.