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Too Wise, Too Foolish

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 22, 1974)

The rebellion of Korah constituted a trauma of major proportions in biblical history. The whole enterprise of Moses -- the spiritual reconstruction of his people, their political liberation, their psychological emancipation from a slave mentality, the development of a "holy nation and kingdom of priests" -- was jeopardized by the demagogic Korah and his band of malcontents.

In retrospect, Korah was doomed from the outset. Moses, after all, was not a leader by his own choice, but had this mission imposed on him by Providence. So, in effect, Korah was rebelling against G-d. Hence, Rashi was moved to quote the Sages in exclaiming: קרח שפיקח היה מה ראה? לשטות זו? "Korah, who was so clever, how did he become involved in such foolishness?"

But the Kotzker Rebbe adds two or three words to that quotation from Rashi which provide us with a new insight. To Rashi's words, he adds להיות פיקח -- how did Korah, such a clever man, get involved in the foolishness of being clever!

He means to say that, at the time, Korah appeared to have everything going for him. The people were afflicted with widespread discontent, with fear, with want, with jealousy of Moses, with feelings that Moses and Aaron and Miriam were nepotistic. Yet the fatal mistake of Korah was not שטות (foolishness) as such, but quite the opposite: he was too sharp, too brilliant, too capable.

Is this contravened by the Yiddish proverb א חסרון די כלה איז צו שיין (the bride is too beautiful...)? Not quite.

Korah, according to the Kotzker Rebbe, is teaching us that it is foolish to be too clever. Korah's very sharpness was a sign of his dullness; his very astuteness was a symptom of his want of intelligence; his very shrewdness was the stuff of stupidity.

It is an old truth (and truth does not dilute with age) that was known to the sages of all cultures and all times.

Thus, Jeremiah taught us אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." And his contemporary Aristotle taught that vice is virtue taken to excess. Earlier yet, the Greeks were aware that hubris (pride, arrogance) leads to the revenge of Nemesis...

Our whole society suffers from this tendency to value intelligence as an end in itself, without moral dimensions. It is true of our science and technology, which have for so long proclaimed an indifference to the moral consequences and social implications of their activities; to business, which piously proclaims only one goal, that of profit; to law and to journalism and to a hundred other professions.

That is why I personally subscribe to the thesis of James Madison, one of our Founding Fathers, that democracy is based not on the naive and romantic faith in man's innate goodness, but quite the contrary, on an expectation that groups of men, like individuals, will be motivated only by their self-interest. Each group tends to extremes in order to achieve its aims. Democracy means that we allow all the groups of society to come into a tension with each other, and in the interplay of forces, each group cancels the overreaching of other groups. This is the theory of checks and balances. Yet, despite all of this, it sometimes happens that one or several groups rip apart the social and political fabric by just being too smart and too successful.

The Yom Kippur War proved it for Israel. The Israelis fought valiantly and heroically. But they realize now, as do all of us, the danger of the שטות של פקחות, the arrogance that comes from being too smart. We foolishly tried to be clever, and imagined that our superiority was unmovable, ingrained, and permanent. We therefore become negligent and careless.

But if for Israel our overshrewdness was expressed in negligence, no such mitigation can be provided for what happened in the USA.

Here, a band of sharp-headed but small-minded men overreached themselves by trying to do in the opposition with impunity. But the Watergate gangsters succeeded only in out-smarting themselves. During the entire course of the exposure of this sordid affair, we are often moved to wonder: מה ראו לשטות זו להיות פיקח -- how foolish of them to be so smart! At every step, at every fresh revelation, in this sordid and dirty business, I have been shocked at how supposedly brilliant men do such foolish things. But I am convinced the solution lies in the Kotzker formula: להיות פיקח They are being too smart, too shrewd — foolishly so!

The same worry about an excess of success, a superfluity of brilliance, leads one to apprehension and ambiguity about our Secretary of State, One must of course admire his unquestioned genius. But is that a guarantee of peace? — of the welfare of the United States? - of the survival of Israel?

His recently proposed compromise figure of 45,000 Jews to emigrate from Russia every year sounds good, yet it also sounds quite hollow when you read that, in anticipation of President Nixon's arrival in Moscow, Russian-Jewish activists are being chased, persecuted, arrested. Some good omen for the success of Kissinger's policy!

In religious life per se, too, we must beware of the שטות פיקח, the foolishness of being too wise, too smart.

Knowledge remains the highest goal of the Jewish spiritual enterprise. But never is it valued without a spiritual-moral commitment, and never with arrogance.

I have always been fond of the statement of R. Nachman Bratzlaver that no matter how educated a man is in the ways of Torah, in the ways of G-d, and in the ways of the world, when he rises for prayer and יושב אחר גבו, let him throw out all his knowledge, all his sophistication, all his wisdom, over his shoulder — and stand before G-d childlike, simple, plain. All our philosophy, all our learning, all our ratiocination is as naught before Him. Surely each of us knows some people who think they are sophisticated when they are only indulging in sophistry!

Permit me to cite a famous mishnah in Avot which I shall consciously misinterpret — in order to illustrate my point.

The Rabbis said: איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם. “Who is a wise man? One who learns from every man.” My “misinterpretation” (in the sense that this was obviously not the original intent of the author) is to read that: איזהו חכם “who is a wise man?” הלומד מכל, “One who learns from everything” — from all of life, from all of experience, from all individuals — that: אדם, “man.” We are only human. We are only men and women. We are limited and mortal and finite and inadequate and fallible.

The merely פיקח (the shrewd man) thinks he has monopolized understanding and learning. The חכם (wise man) is one who knows how much remains inaccessible to man and forever closed to his probing intellect. The foolish “sharpie” imagines that his smartness will save him. The חכם distrusts an exaggerated view of wisdom itself.

Korah was only a פיקח, a “shrewdie,” and he thought he could outsmart the whole world. So he proved to be a שוטה, a fool. But the חכם, the truly wise man, knows how easy it is to fall into the pit of שטות, or stupidity; he knows that with every advance in knowledge or insight we walk on a thin line, on the rim of an abyss of foolishness, so that one error, one misstep — and our wisdom has begotten us eternal folly. Therefore, the truly wise man humbly acknowledges that there is no true knowledge without faith, no wisdom without morality, no advancement of man without the greater knowledge that he is also a שוטה, a fool.

Perhaps this is what Isaiah meant in his great Messianic vision: ומלאה הארץ דעה את ה', usually translated, “The world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.” But then the Hebrew should have read דעה את ה', not דעת ה'. Why the את? That small word sometimes means “with.” Hence: the world will be filled with knowledge — all kinds of knowledge: religious and secular, spiritual and scientific, economic and psychological — את ה', with the Lord, accompanied by and restrained by and graced by the healing trust and faith in G-d, and the humility that comes with it.

Only when faith is combined with knowledge, when the Lord is acknowledged along with the exercise of one's own intelligence, are we ready for the Messiah. Only then are we worthy of redemption.

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When You're Rich They Think You Really Know

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha records the controversy generated by Korach and his minions against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. Korach argued that Moshe had arrogated too much power for himself and his family, and that the positions of honor in the nation should be distributed differently. Eventually, Korach's claims were put to the test, and God disposed of his followers and him with appropriate, miraculous punishments, as described in the Torah. When Korach's name is first mentioned in the parsha, his lineage is traced back to his grandfather, Levi, but not to his great grandfather, Ya'akov. Rashi points out that Ya'akov specifically prayed, before he died, that his name not be mentioned in the Torah in connection with this controversy. One may ask, however, isn't Ya'akov the progenitor of the entire Jewish nation, and, therefore, related to every person in the nation who would, in the course of its history, arouse rebellion? Why, then, did he pray specifically in connection with the rebellion of Korach that his name not be mentioned? Interestingly, the rabbis tell us that Ya'akov also prayed that his name not be mentioned in connection with the sin of Zimri, who publicly had relations with the non-Jewish Kozbi, princess of Midian. That prayer is understandable, because Zimri came from Shimon, who, together with Levi, angered Ya'akov by wiping out the town of Shechem in revenge for the abduction and rape of Dinah by the prince of the city, whose name was also Shechem. In this case, Zimri's public act of immorality gave the lie to the explanation that his ancestor Shimon - together with Levi - had given to Ya'akov for wiping out the city: "Should he (Shechem) treat our sister as a harlot?" (Bereishis 34:31). Since Ya'akov specifically opposed Shimon in the case of Dinah, he did not want to be mentioned in connection with the eventual failing of Shimon's descendant in a similar matter. We can therefore assume that there was something specific about the rebellion of Korach, as well, that moved Ya'akov to pray that his name not be mentioned in connection with it. What, then, is that specific factor?

The simplest explanation can be that Yaa'kov always strove to promote unity among his children, and, therefore, he did not want his name associated with the person who came to personify disharmony in the nation. The midrash tells us that when Ya'akov, in his flight from Eisav, lay down to rest, he dreamt that the twelve stones he placed around his head coalesced to form one stone. This coalition,

continues the midrash, symbolized Ya'akov's future life, in which he would have twelve sons who would join together to form a united family dedicated to serving God. Even though each son would have his own separate talent, they would all be united in their goal of carrying God's name in the world. The conflict with Yosef threatened to prevent this vision from being actualized, but, eventually, the brothers were reconciled. Ya'akov, in the blessings that he gave his children before he died, stressed the theme of unity within diversity. The midrash tells us that, before he died, he asked his sons to acknowledge that they were all dedicated to the service of God, and they responded by saying the first verse of the Shema, "Hear Yisroel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." In light of Ya'akov's life-long quest for unity within the nation, it is understandable that he did not want his name to be associated with Korach, who generated such great disunity. I believe, however, that there is a further reason for Ya'akov's prayer that his name not be mentioned in connection with Korach, that stems from the pledge that Ya'akov made when he woke up from his dream about the unity of the nation. (For more on the theme of unity as reflected in the life of Ya'akov, see *Netvort* to parshas Vayeitzei, 5761).

The Torah tells us that after Ya'akov awoke from his dream, he took a stone that had been beneath his head, set it up as a matzeivoh, a pillar, atop of which he poured oil. And made a vow to God, saying: "If God will be with me, and He will guard me on this way that I am going, and he will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and the Lord will be God to me, then the stone that I have set as a pillar shall become a house of God..." (Bereishis 26:21). Many commentators ask, how could Ya'akov make his service of God contingent on the help he asked to receive? Many answers are given to this question, but I would like to mention the explanation I heard from my teacher, R. Aharon Soloveichik, zt"l. Rav Aharon explained that the word 'im' - if - in the sentence 'If God will be with me,' should really be understood in the sense of 'im ki,' or 'even if.' What Ya'akov was saying, according to Rav Aharon, was that even if God will give him riches, he will still be dedicated to His service. Ya'akov was thereby saying that riches can be a greater test of one's dedication to God than poverty, and he was pledging that even if he would, with God's help, attain wealth, he would continue to serve him.

Based on this explanation of Ya'akov's vow, we can now understand why he did not want his name mentioned in connection with Korach and the controversy he generated.

The midrash tells us that Korach was one of the richest people who ever lived. In fact there is a Yiddish folk expression, 'reich vi Korach,' or 'as rich as Korach,' that reflects this midrashic tradition. How did Korach attain this wealth? The midrash explains that while he was in Egypt, he was a treasurer for Pharaoh, and, in that capacity, he was able to discover part of the treasure that Yosef had hidden during his years of service to Pharaoh.

Real Life is Not Kindergarten

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim, on June 19, 2014)

Rashi quotes the famous Midrash that explains the connection between parshas tzitzis (at the end of Parshas Shlach) and the episode of Korach in this week's Parsha. Korach queried Moshe whether a talis entirely dyed with techeiles needs a techeiles-hued string, and Moshe said yes. Korach and his people laughed at this and said: If one string of techeiles exempts the entire white talis, then the entirely techeiles-colored talis, of course, should be patur. The pashut pshat of that Midrash is to explain Korach's symbolic argument against Moshe. The one requisite string of techeiles was Moshe, the techeiles-colored talis was Klal Yisroel, and his assertion was *Ki kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim u-besocham Hashem—U-madua tisanase'u al kahal Hashem? Why do you need to be different and superior to everyone else? You are not the only one who is special like techeiles. We were all at Har Sinai—we are all techeiles. Korach's basic ta'ana was democracy. We are all equally special—no one is better than anyone else, like a talis that is kulo techeiles. The big question is: Why was Korach wrong? Just read sifrei chassidus. It is actually true—kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim. All Jews are holy and have a relationship with Hashem. So what was the problem with Korach's argument?*

The Rav famously answered this in his lecture about Korach, where he took a distinct perspective on the talis she-kulo techeiles. He says that Korach was right according to common sense. If one string of techeiles exempts the whole talis, of course, if the entire talis is pigmented techeiles, it would be patur. But the Rav said that a big yesod in Judaism—which is a chidush nowadays—is

Rabbi Ya'akov Saakly, a student of the famed medieval Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Shlomo ben Adres, known as Rashba, writes, in his *Toras HaMincha*, that Korach went astray precisely because of his wealth. Because he had such great wealth, he felt that honor was coming to him, and he therefore rebelled against the authority of Moshe. Thus, Korach failed to live up to the pledge that Ya'akov had made when he consecrated the pillar at the time he was fleeing from Eisav, and for that reason he did not want his name associated with him.

that the Torah is not about common sense. There is a book that I very much dislike, called *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Part of the yesod of that book is admirable. The ikar is to have midos and be a nice person, and obviously, to a certain extent, that's true—as we know: *Rachmana liba bo'i*. If everything was not any more complicated than that—don't worry; be a nice, happy person who cares about Hashem—then Korach is right; we don't need Moshe, who is more knowledgeable than everyone else. But as the Rav pointed out, that is not what halachah is all about. Not everything in halachah is about common sense. There is a profound halachic logic. It is significantly more complicated than it seems—things become extraordinarily complex in lomdus. And they are even more intricate than that due to metaphysical, sociological, and philosophical factors. The world is so complex that your gut reactions and feelings, etc.—what you learn in the kindergarten—in the long run, are not enough to figure out the right thing to do *be-eynei Elokim ve-adam*. We need a mesorah from Hashem that teaches us, in an extraordinarily complex way, how to grapple with the complexities of life and how to think very deeply about them. And while it is true that *Rachmana liba bo'i*, that feeling of the heart needs to be focused by very, very profound thought in order to figure out how to deal with the intricacy of circumstances—what the right and wrong thing would be in each situation. And that is why we need Moshe's Torah leadership. The world is complex, and you do not learn that in kindergarten. And to confront this complexity effectively, you need an

exceedingly high intellectual understanding of the Torah. And even though we are indeed all *kedoshim u-besocham Hashem*, not all of us have a sufficiently high level of *havanah*. And not the degree of *havanah* of Moshe, who was *medaber* with Hashem *peh el peh*. We do not have the *havanah* of the experts of the Torah throughout the generations—of whom the *pasuk* speaks: *ve-yagidu lecha es davar ha-mishpat*. And the Rav said this very nicely

Korach: Who Are Your Neighbors?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The “Korach rebellion” arose from simmering unrest centered in the southern flank of the Jewish desert encampment. Korach’s Levite contingent resided to the south, and this region became “ground zero” for political discontent. The disgruntlement travelled quickly and polluted the tribe of Reuven, who also dwelt to the south. The Korach debacle highlights the impact of “peer pressure” at a communal level. Toxic neighbors can yield deadly results. Chazal referred to this condition as “Oy la’Rasha oy l’shecheino” bemoaning the negative influence of morally objectionable neighbors. Ideal communities are distilled around common religious values and similar levels of religious practices.

Sadly, throughout our exile, our choices for communal structure and location were often curtailed by restrictive policies, which dictated to Jews where they could live. The ‘ghetto’ experience ordained who our neighbors would be, leaving us little choice or discretion.

Fortunately, the modern era of Enlightenment offered Jews unlimited residential opportunities, but also brought new challenges. The modern era of secularization reformulated the perennial question of building ‘protected’ communities. The modern world posed a very new challenge: how to protect our communities from the barrage of modern culture which is often discrepant with religious values. The peril is no longer limited to a particular ‘rasha’ but to an overwhelming and often alien cultural force. Our interest in integrating noble cultural values, only complicates the task: How to create ‘protected’ cultural encounters, but not accelerate religious erosion.

The post WWII era has witnessed several attempts at stark insularity for the sake of religious preservation: Rav Aharon Kotler, the founder of the Lakewood yeshiva, specifically chose a remote farmland in New Jersey to establish his “American Yeshiva”. Fearful of the cultural

regarding Korach’s common-sense rebellion against the Torah. Healthy common sense is a necessary prerequisite for everything. But life is more complex than common sense—and accordingly, Torah and *avodas Hashem* need to be suitably sophisticated. That’s what Korach missed. And that is why we need leaders qualified to *pasken* for others—beyond common sense—like Moshe Rabbeinu. Shabbat Shalom.

influences of metropolitan New York, he geographically distanced his nascent yeshiva from the urban influences. The Chassidic world – which was launched in the 18th century as an embracing movement meant to incorporate broad-spectrum communities has, in many cases, retreated into more insular societies, barricading against the encroachment of modern culture.

Throughout history, Jews have always delicately calibrated the balance between insularity and inclusion. Yet whatever balance was struck, Jewish communities were always based upon a similar model: in the face of potentially destructive influences how can ‘protected’ space be carved out. Essentially, every community must build a wall; the only question is the height of the wall and how many windows are embedded.

Life in Israel dramatically alters this equation. If we aim to live in Israel as one family, we must live side-by-side with Jews who are different from ourselves, and whose religious experience is dissimilar to ours. In foreign settings it is clear that we live amongst the “other”. Without vilifying the “other”, we realize that, alongside important shared values, there exist significant cultural and religious discrepancies. In Israel there is no “other”. At the core of “family life” is the notion of shared experiences and shared values. Furthermore, if religiously foreign values pervade Israeli society, they are clearly our “responsibility” and can’t be simply dismissed as values of the “other”.

The first 74 years have brought mixed results in this reimagined equation. So many of Orthodox Jews have been galvanized by the settlement of the entire land of Israel– in particular the settlement of the Biblical corridor of Judea and Samaria which was liberated in 1967. Without question, the return to these lands has reinforced our redemptive conviction and our historical warrant. Yet, these achievements have carried a heavy price- our

settlements (such as my own city of Alon Shevut) have become narrow religious cantons which, in most cases have attracted exclusively religious populations. The repercussions of this insularity have been suffered by both communities: the secular community hasn't benefitted from exposure to Religious Jews. Additionally, some in the Religious community – who haven't experienced sustained contact with the 'other' - have become dismissive or disinterested in "secular Israel".

Additionally, as is true with any insular model, the protective shell sometimes creates grave long-term vulnerability. Severing people from today's mass culture can oftentimes boomerang, when that culture inevitably seeps in through the cracks of "sealed" environments.

Over the past 30 years a more engaging approach has evolved, driven by awareness that life in Israel reconfigures classic communal models. Army life has provided an outstanding "communal structure" to showcase religion to the broader public.

Army life is a great equalizer as army culture is founded upon the equality of all soldiers. This baseline of equality creates "softer" and more easygoing interactions allowing religion to be better appreciated. Within general society, secular Israelis sometimes recoil at what is perceived as invasive and institutionalized religious coercion. Within the more friendly and egalitarian precincts of army experience, less politicized messages about religion are often more agreeable.

Furthermore, a project known as 'garin Torani' has dramatically revised the demography of Israel. Throughout the initial decades of the State of Israel, religious people gradually clustered into predominantly religious cities such as Jerusalem, Rehovot, Petach Tikva and others. Major cities such as Haifa and Tel Aviv spiraled toward more secular conditions. More significantly, development

towns on the Northern and Southern peripheries were not inhabited by large religious populations. It became more and more apparent that merely settling hilltops was insufficient, if we were did not "settle the hearts" of our extended family. Gradually, groups of young religious families relocated to less religious cities including development towns in the periphery. Religious "hubs" were formed with the goal of inspiring religion into these settings. Arguably, the first successful experiment occurred in 1968 when a contingent of students from the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem relocated to Kiryat Shemona in the North. This movement gathered momentum in the 80's and 90's, as many of the southern development towns were settled and dramatically remodeled by these "core groups" of religious families.

In Israel the classic model of creating "distance" from neighbors who are different from us, is slowly being replaced by the concept of "amcha" -one common people.

Furthermore, if we aspire to live as family, it is not enough to spread our own religious values. We aim to live side-by-side with family, role-modelling our own lifestyles, but also learning to appreciate and borrow the values of other "family" members. Oftentimes, traditional or masorati Jews excel at hospitality, family values, and honoring parents, in ways that Orthodox Jews have much to learn from. Secular Jews are often dedicated to social justice, respect for the dignity of Man, and an unqualified desire for peace which sometimes isn't fully enunciated in religious circles.

Family life creates a more bi-lateral sense of shared experience. Walls which always provided shelter to our values, have now become potential barriers to our national family life. Life in Israel challenges us toward more nuanced and measured decisions about whom we choose as our neighbors.

The Surest Way to Lose Everything

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Hashem is described in Tehillim (136:25) as נותן לחם לכל בשר – "giving bread to all flesh." He cares for all people, even sinners. People who betray Him are still fed, still have a roof over their heads, and are still healthy. Hashem is benevolent, kind and forgiving, providing even for those who disobey Him. Indeed, on the morning of חטא העגל, when the people worshipped a

golden calf – a sin compared to a bride who betrays her husband at her wedding – the מן fell. Even when Benei Yisrael betrayed Hashem in the worst possible way, He gave them His credit card, so-to-speak, and took care of their needs.

There is, however, one exception.

The Sheivet Mussar brings a Midrash which teaches that

during the time of Korach's uprising, the מן did not fall. The entire nation went hungry. Hashem is forgiving and tolerant, but not when it comes to machlokes, in-fighting among Jews. This is intolerable.

Parents can easily relate to this concept. They have grown accustomed to tolerating a lot from their kids – disobedience, laziness, and so on. But one thing parents cannot ever accept is fighting among their children. This is something which they do not tolerate. And this is true of Hashem, as well. He understands our weaknesses, and is ready for forgive, but when we fight with one another – this He cannot tolerate.

The Shelah Ha'kadosh (in Maseches Yoma) writes, מחלוקת אחת דוחה מאה פרנסות – a single fight keeps away one hundred sources of livelihood. Fights and conflicts are terribly destructive, and ruin everything. People get into a fight thinking they will gain from it, but in the end, they lose.

The Ponevezher Rav (Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman) tells of the time when a conflict erupted among the shochtim in the town of Radin, and the community became embroiled in controversy. The Chafetz Chaim called a meeting of the entire community. He told them that when a Jew fights with his fellow Jew, he is like a fabulously wealthy man carrying gold coins in his pocket – but with a hole in the pocket, such that as he walks, the coins fall out, until he loses everything. When we involve ourselves in a machlokes, we lose everything we have.

“What's the point of learning Torah and doing mitzvos,” the Chafetz Chaim asked the people of Radin, “if you're

just going to lose it all by getting involved in a fight?!”

The Gemara tells the famous story of On ben Peles, a figure who had joined Korach's uprising, until his wife succeeded in pulling him out. She had him drink wine so that he fell asleep, and she then stood by the entrance to their tent with his hair uncovered, so that Korach's men who came to bring him would not approach. The Gemara applied to this woman the pasuk in Mishlei (14:1), חכמות נשים בנתה ביתה – “The wisdom of women has built her home.” It takes a great deal of wisdom to stay away from machlokes. We all naturally enjoy the thrill of controversy, of being part of a group that fights against another. But in order to build, we need to stay far away from machlokes, which brings only destruction in its wake.

Indeed, the Torah tells that in the end, not only did Korach and his followers perish, but so did their families – even the young infants – and their property was destroyed. Machlokes wreaks havoc with families and ruins livelihoods. It destroys everything.

People love performing “segulos” for a livelihood and prosperity. Some read פרשת המן (the section in Sefer Shemos that tells about the מן), others wear a red string around their wrist, and there are those who put a key in their challa. But the greatest segula for a successful livelihood, as the Shelah Ha'kadosh teaches, is avoiding fighting and conflicts. We need to have the wisdom to resist the lure of controversy, so we can avoid its devastating, destructive effects, and enjoy the unparalleled benefits of peace.

Does a Holy Nation Need Leaders?

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha (in chutz la'Aretz) Parshas Korach, Korach - a first cousin to Moshe and Aharon - leads a rebellion against the rulership of Moshe and the kehunah gedolah of Aharon. Fueled by personal motivations of jealousy, lust and the desire for honor, Korach claims:

כי כל-העדה כלם קדשים, ובתוכם ה'! ומדוע תתנשא, על-קהל ה'.
The entire assembly is holy and G-d is amongst them all (a claim that is correct), and why do Moshe and Aharon raise themselves up over the congregation of G-d (Bamidbar 16:3)?!

While Korach claims a leader is not needed over such an exalted assembly, and Moshe and Aharon took power and

honor for themselves; Korach was the epitome of the most despicable and dishonorable trait of being inconsistent in his inward feelings and his outward behavior. What he really wanted was to be the leader himself.

To “prove” that the mitzvos were fabricated by Moshe, and that they were nonsensical, the Medrash teaches us (as quoted by Rashi in the beginning of the parsha), that Korach took an entirely blue cloak of techeiles to Moshe. “Does this cloak of techeilis need the fringe of techeiles on the tzitzis or not? If you will say that it does, how can it be one string fulfills the obligation of techeiles but an entire garment of techeiles does not!” He further mocked

Moshe by asking: an entire house (or room) filled with Sifrei Torah, does it need a mezuzah or not? How can it be that if the entire room is filled with sifrei Torah, a mezuzah - which contains only a relatively small number of verses from Chumash - would still be needed!?

In his claims, Korach attempted to mock, denigrate and undermine the authority of Moshe and the validity - and Divinity - of the Torah and mitzvos.

Ultimately, as his machokes (quarrel) was not for the sake of Heaven, his rebellion was a failure and the ground opened up and swallowed him (and his people) alive.

What is this Medrash coming to teach us? There must be a deeper lesson than simply relaying a story of a blue cloak, a fringe of tzitzis, a room of sifrei Torah, and a mezuzah.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z'l teaches, "The Midrash is doing more than answering the questions and filling in the gaps. It is telling us something fundamental about the Jewish project itself. There is a perennial temptation in Jewish life to say that we do not need law, halakha, to achieve our religious ideals. There are commands for which a reason is given, and tzitzit is one. It is not a hok, a 'statute', a command without explicit purpose. It is, rather, one of the edot, a 'testimony,' whose purpose is to remind us for certain truths, historical or spiritual... Korach's argument is that there are other ways of remembering Heaven then by attaching a blue fringe to the corners of our clothes. Another is to make a garment entirely of blue - surely a far more visible, eye-catching symbol.

"Korach's argument is logical but not rational. What he forgot is that the essence of the command is the means, not the end. It is precisely by doing things G-d's way that we achieved personal transformation. The apprentice who is impatient with the instructions of the master will never grow, never become a master himself. Apprenticeship is a matter of doing things we do not fully understand until we have undergone the discipline of subordinating ourselves to the instructions of an expert.

"That is the meaning of mitzvah, command. It is our apprenticeship to the Master of the Universe. In telling us this, the Midrash is teaching us something deep not only about the nature of a mitzva, a commandment, but also leadership itself. Korach could never be a leader because he was incapable of being a follower. He did not

understand what it is to obey. Such a person will never get others to obey" (Covenant & Conversation, Numbers, p.198-199).

"...We see how one simple midrash helps us rescue a text from its pastness, for a sad quarrel of thousands of years ago... and showing us the real nature of Korach's error. He was not wrong to say that all people were holy. He was wrong to say that holy people do not need leaders - they do. He was even more wrong to say in public that people do not need leaders while privately seeking to be a leader himself. His populism (political approach) was disingenuous and deceitful" (ibid, p.202).

While Korach was correct that the entire assembly of Israel is holy, he was incorrect in his false claim that holy people do not need holier people as leaders. Even leaders need leaders. Our nation is made up of a large assembly, and yet we all need leaders to guide us, teachers to transmit the mesorah to us, and halachic deciders to explain Jewish law to us.

The greatness of a leader is his humility to submit to his own teachers, and recognize that they are one degree closer to Sinai and the Emes la'Amito than he is.

Rav Mosheh Twersky, zt'l, HYD (a gaon in Torah and middos tovos, Rosh Kollel Yeshivas Toras Moshe, eldest grandson of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l, and murdered in the Har Nof massacre R"L) had tremendous thirst to hear divrei Torah from his rebbe, R' Yisrael Elya Weintraub. "Rav Twersky felt strongly that it was worth traveling from Jerusalem, all the way to Bnei Brak, just to hear his Rebbi speak, even in an address to teenagers. He felt that he could gain from any shiur his Rebbi gave, even if geared towards youngsters who were just starting to learn how to learn. Even in such an address, Rav Twersky could discern a depth and profundity between the lines that could speak to, and educate, him as well. He felt that any words of Torah at all that emanated from his great Rebbi's mouth would certainly contain untold depths of meaning and import" (A Malach in Our Midst, p.116).

May our leaders, and their leaders, continue to guide and teach us, until the End of Days, and may we be humble and grateful enough to accept their leadership with gratitude and grace, showing them the honor they deserve for the Torah they transmit.

Choose Your Own Staff

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

Korach and his followers challenged the political and religious hierarchy of the Jewish people. The rebellion demonstrated suspicion on the people's part about Moshe and Aharon's legitimacy. It also demonstrated the people's strong desire to relate directly to God, without Levite intermediaries. Then things started to happen to the rebels. The ground swallowed up Korach and his associates. The two hundred and fifty people who offered incense in a challenge to Aharon were burned alive. When the people complained that Moshe and Aharon had intentionally killed 'the people of God', they were struck with a plague. By all accounts, God's support for the existing hierarchy should have been crystal clear by this point, but apparently it wasn't.

After all of these drastic and miraculous signs, God tells Moshe to gather staffs from the leaders of all the tribes, each inscribed with their names. These would be placed in the Mishkan overnight. Whoever's staff would flower would be God's clearly chosen leader. Aharon's staff, submitted for the tribe of Levi, won the competition. His staff not only flowered but bore almonds.

After everything that had already happened, why was this sign needed? Why was it effective when the other miracles were not? Let's consider two approaches:

The Dangers of Cynicism

Ramban (Bamidbar 17:6) explains that the Jewish people were in fact still suspicious of Moshe and Aharon. They accepted Korach's punishment as proof that he was not the true leader, because Moshe had clearly communicated God's desire for this punishment. The people also accepted Aharon's claim to the priesthood, since in the past God had miraculously sent fire to burn his sacrifices. What was in question, then, was the status of the Leviyim. Had God really commanded that they alone could serve in the Mishkan? The fact that the incense-offering protesters had been miraculously burned up wasn't proof that they were illegitimate. Perhaps Moshe and Aharon had accomplished

this by some trick. Perhaps this was simply an improperly offered incense of the kind that had resulted in the deaths of Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu.

The only way to settle the people's suspicions was with a sign that was unequivocally from God, and that equally unequivocally communicated God's selection of the Leviyim. This is what the sign of the staffs accomplished. Read in this way, the story highlights the danger of skepticism. While skepticism has its place, it's also a Pandora's box that can totally undermine one's faith in people and institutions. In this case, the people were so suspicious of Moshe and Aharon that only a clear sign from God could help.

Varieties of Jewish Leadership

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner offers a different reading. He explains (Mei haShiloach to 17:17) that Korach and the people's desire to take on the positions of Moshe, Aharon, and the Leviyim stemmed from a misunderstanding of their own spiritual potential. When I desire someone else's role, it's because I don't understand my own role, or perhaps even that I have one.

Collecting symbols of leadership together in the Mishkan symbolized that each tribe would eventually play its own unique role in Jewish leadership. Some of these "staffs", like that of Yehudah which would produce King David, would be greater than Aharon's. But these forms of leadership were down the road; they would have to wait for their time on the historical stage. At that time, the only staff ready to bear fruit was that of the Leviyim. Once the Jews understood that all of them had a role to play in the people's historical relationship with God, the underlying cause for the rebellion dissipated.

This reading emphasizes the importance of understanding our own unique spiritual capacities. We need to embody the roles we were made for, and not seek to stuff ourselves into someone else's.

Korach's Rebellion: Why is the Jewish Community Losing So Many of its Best and Brightest?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parashat Korach, features the fateful narrative concerning the rebellion of Korach and his co-conspirators.

Korach, who comes from a distinguished Levitic family and is a cousin to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, convinces Datan and Abiram, and Ohn the son of Pelet, together with 250 leaders of the tribe of Reuven to rebel against Moses and Aaron. In their complaint against Moses and Aaron they cry out: (Numbers 16:3) רב לָכֶם, בִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֹּלֵם וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קְהַל הַשֵּׁם? “*You take too much upon yourselves [Moses and Aaron], after all, the entire congregation is holy, and the L-rd is among them. Why then do you raise yourselves as if you are above the assembly of G-d?*”

According to the rabbinic tradition, Korach is consumed by jealousy of his cousin, Moses. After all, Moses has become, in effect, the King of Israel, Aaron the High Priest, and a younger cousin, Elizaphan, has just been appointed Prince of the tribe of Levi, while Korach, who was next in line from the point of age, has been passed over. According to this interpretation, Korach had been able to persuade the 250 Reubenites to join his rebellion, because they too had been recently snubbed. Apparently, these 250 Reubenites were actually first-born children (בְּכוֹרִים—bechorim) who should have been appointed to serve as ministers in the Tabernacle, but had been replaced by the Levites, because of the first-born's sin with the Golden Calf.

Another rabbinic tradition depicts Korach as challenging Moses intellectually and halakhically (legally). According to this analysis, Korach had his 250 followers dress up in garments made entirely of blue wool to challenge Moses, demanding to know whether these garments required צִיצִית—tzitzit (fringes). When Moses replied that tzitzit were required, Korach denounced the logic of his decision. Confronting Moses a second time, Korach demanded to know whether a mezuzah is required to be placed on the doorpost of a room that is full of Torah scrolls. Moses responds in the affirmative, and Korach, once again, dismisses the logic of requiring a mezuzah.

Parashat Korach abounds with rabbinic and Midrashic traditions, providing a multitude of alternate reasons for Korach's rebellion. Virtually all presuppose that Korach

was a great scholar. As Rashi notes in his comments on Numbers 16:7: וְיִקְרַח שֶׁפָּקַח הָיָה, מָה רָאָה לְשִׁטּוֹת זֶה? But Korach, who was a wise and learned person, how did he come to commit such a great folly? Rashi suggests that Korach had been informed through prophecy that his future descendants would be great people, leading him to incorrectly assume that his rebellion would succeed.

Perhaps by examining the history of Jewish apostasy throughout the millennia and centuries, we may discover a possible alternate reason for Korach's straying.

Despite the many tens of millions of Jewish victims of antisemitism, pogroms, and murderous attacks on Jews throughout history, many more Jews have been lost to Judaism due to apostasy and assimilation. In fact, over the millennia, the observant Jewish community has lost countless of its best and brightest to other faiths and beliefs and to a host of diverse causes. Elisha ben Abuyah—the great young Rabbinic sage became a pagan believer, and the well-known Jewish philosopher Spinoza—became the founder of Pantheism. Similarly, many great Jewish leaders and scientists, and many young people in contemporary times have walked away from their Judaism.

Why does this happen?

On June 4, 1999, a news write-up appeared on the front page of the Forward newspaper, reporting that the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Prof. Baruch Blumberg, a graduate of the Yeshiva of Flatbush, would be coordinating a special NASA research project to search for the origins of life. Prof. Blumberg himself announced that in his search for answers to this question he intends to consult Talmudic and Biblical sources. Yet, the Forward also noted that over the years, Prof. Blumberg had become less and less observant, and now attends synagogue “infrequently.”

How painful it is to watch as we lose so many of our best young people. Perhaps the story of Korach can provide some insight into the reasons for these defections.

The great sage of the past century, the Chofetz Chaim, in his commentary on the Code of Jewish Law, known as the “Mishna B'rurah,” points out in the section of rules concerning the recitation of the Shema prayer, that there are two kavanot—awarenesses, that a person must bear in mind when performing a mitzvah:

1) An awareness to fulfill the mitzvah as a commandment of G-d.

2) An awareness in one's heart, regarding the mitzvah itself.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we're losing our best and brightest is that our educational system often places too much stress on the first awareness—that G-d has commanded us to behave in a certain manner, that we better toe the line and act properly or else we will face dire consequences: punishment, suffering, or worse.

Unfortunately, our schools and our teachers often place little emphasis on the second awareness, on the inner fulfillment and inner joy that one experiences from the performance of meaningful religious acts. Without the sense of inner fulfillment, few Jews will ever want to affirm or reaffirm their ties to our faith system, especially if they view our religion as preoccupied with dread, fear and

punishment.

Our young people are looking for inner meaning and self-fulfillment, certainly not dread. And while Judaism has so much positive to give in this realm, somehow, we've neglected to communicate it. Perhaps this is what happened to Korach.

We can win back the Korachs, together with the Elisha ben Abuyas, the Spinozas and the Blumbergs, but we need to redirect the focus of Jewish education, to make certain that we sufficiently emphasize the myriad positive, joyous aspects of our tradition. It is imperative that every Jewish child and adult be made fully aware of the beauty and revolutionariness of our wonderful heritage.

We can win back the masses, by winning back their hearts and their souls to Torah. As the psalmist, in Psalm 34, sings, טעמו וּרְאוּ, כִּי טוֹב הַשֵּׁם, *Come, taste and see, that G-d is good.*

Between the Eidah and the Kahal

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

On the morrow of Korach's uprising, during which he and his men were killed, the people once again complain. In response to this, a plague breaks out, which is only stopped by Aharon taking ketores (incense) and running into the midst of the assembly. There are some verses describing these two days which are quite similar to each other in theme and content, but which nevertheless contain some differences in their phraseology.

1. On day one of Korach's rebellion, Moshe and Aharon are told *הִבְדִּילוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה*, *separate yourselves from amid this assembly*. On day two, the verse says *הֲרִמוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה*, *remove yourselves from the assembly*. What is the difference between *הבדלו* and *הרומו*?

2. In both of the above verses, the offending assembly is called *עדה*, an assembly, whereas when Aharon takes the ketores, the verse says *וַיִּרְץ אֶל תּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל*, he ran into the midst of the congregation. Why does the reference change from *עדה* to *קהל*?

After the plague had been halted, the verse says:

*וַיְהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר אֶלְפֵי וּשְׁבַע מֵאוֹת מִלְּבַד הַמֵּתִים
עַל דְּבַר קִרְח.*

Those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of the matter of Korach.

Why does the verse need to emphasize that the number

who died on the second day was aside from those who died on the first day? Isn't it obvious?

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin reveals an entirely new dimension in these verses. We know that on account of Aharon bringing the ketores among the people, the plague stopped. Now, we are not told exactly how many more people would have died had Aharon not stopped the plague, but perhaps we can find out...

On the first day, the entire Jewish people were under the decree of being wiped out, but this was rescinded when Moshe pleaded for mercy on their behalf. On the second day, when the complaining persisted, the original decree of destruction was brought back. Here, too, however, there was a measure of mercy, whereby instead of the entire people being wiped out, they would be represented by a core group of people. The smallest representation of an entity in Torah is *Terumah* (תרומה). In this instance, in order to take the place of the entire nation, the *Terumah* had to be the most desired amount, which is one fortieth. This is why, on the second day, Hashem did not use the original term *הבדלו* to denote separation, but rather the term *הרומו*, which is related to the word *תרומה*.

How much is "Terumah" of the Jewish people? The counting of the people in Parshas Bamidbar tells us that they numbered 603,550. A fortieth of that number is

15,088. From whom was this number comprised? The verse informs us that those who died in the plague were 14,700. This leaves 388. However, since this was essentially the same decree as that of the first day, those who died on that day are also reckoned in this amount. This is why the verse specifies that those who died in the plague were “aside from those who died relating to the matter of Korach.”

And how many people died on the first day? There was Korach himself, Dasan and Aviram and the 250 men, totaling 253. Adding this to the 14,700 of the second

day gives us 14,953. However, this still does not give us the total of 15,088, for there are still 135 missing. What happened to them? The answer is, these men were the ones who were spared by Aharon taking the ketores and running into the midst of the people. We noted that, unlike the earlier verse which uses the term *קהל*, this verse says that he ran into the midst of the *קהל*. Why the shift in phraseology? Because the numerical value (gematria) of the word *קהל* is 135, indicating the number of people who were saved by this act.

The Children of Korach, Dasan and Aviram

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

In the course of presenting the genealogy and census of B’nei Yisroel in Parshas Pinchas, the Torah tells us, “And the children of Korach did not die.” (Bamidbar 26:11) Explaining how they survived the calamitous event of being swallowed up by the earth along with their father and his crew, Rashi cites the Gemara in Sanhedrin (110A) that Korach’s children had misgivings (“*hirschurei teshuva*”) for having been involved with their father’s rebellion, and they therefore merited to be saved and were miraculously provided with some type of elevated platform to remain upon when they descended with their father and his crew into the earth, such that they did not sink deep into the ground and were saved.

In contrast with Korach’s children, the children of Dasan and Aviram, the main co-conspirators in Korach’s rebellion, were swallowed up in the earth and perished. There is no record of these people having done *teshuva* and being spared. Why the difference? Why did Korach’s children have *hirschurei teshuva* and the children of Dasan and Aviram apparently expressed no remorse?

An attitude of defiance toward Moshe Rabbeinu and support for Korach’s insurrection on the part of the children of Dasan and Aviram is pretty evident, for the Torah recounts in Parshas Korach that “Dasan and Aviram exited and stood at the entrances of their tents, with their wives and children” (Bamidbar 16:27), whereupon the *Tanchuma* (cited by Rashi) and *Targum Yonasan ben Uziel* explain that Dasan and Aviram came out of their tents to brazenly engage in blasphemy (with their families by their sides). It appears that the wives and children of Dasan and Aviram did not object to the conduct of Dasan and Aviram

and were in a sense culpable by association and support of these men’s evil words and actions. This incident further compels us to ask why the children of Korach disassociated from their father’s evil campaign, whereas the children of Dasan and Aviram did not do so. (Korach’s wife was another story; Chazal tell us [Sanhedrin *ibid.*, Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3] that she was a major source of instigation in Korach’s rebellion.)

Despite what some people might assume, prior to his uprising, Korach had been a man of great Torah prominence. The *Medrash* (Bamidbar Rabba *ibid.*, s. 3) relates, “Korach was a great sage and was a bearer of the Aron (the Holy Ark).” The *Radal* elaborates that all those who bore the Aron were eminent *talmidei chachamim*, great Torah scholars. It is clear that prior to his rebellion, Korach was a towering spiritual figure.

In contrast, we have no such record regarding Dasan and Aviram, whose backgrounds were quite different than that of Korach. Chazal tell us that the two Jewish slaves who were engaged in a violent fight in *Mitzrayim*, broken up by Moshe, and who thereupon informed Pharaoh about Moshe’s killing the Egyptian who was beating a Jew, resulting in Moshe nearly being executed (Shemos 2:13-15), were none other than Dasan and Aviram. So, too, Chazal relate that it was Dasan and Aviram who accosted Moshe and Aharon and wished bad upon them for their having confronted Pharaoh to demand that he free B’nei Yisroel, which resulted in hardship for the people (*ibid.* 5:20-21), and we are also told that the individuals who violated Hashem’s command by leaving *Manna* (Manna) overnight (*ibid.* 16:20) were Dasan and Aviram.

Furthermore, it is clear from the words of the Torah and Chazal that the interactions of Korach and of Dasan and Aviram with Moshe were quite different; Korach spoke in grand platitudes with false notions of holiness as he launched his rebellion, and he made outlandish allegations against Moshe – whereas Dasan and Aviram addressed Moshe head-on with vile contempt and sheer chutzpah (e.g. Bamidbar 16:12-14).

Please now imagine the examples set at home for the children of Korach and for the children of Dasan and Aviram. Before his insurgency, Korach was an illustrious Torah personality. Growing up prior to his rebellion, Korach's children undoubtedly were exposed to powerful positive influences; although Korach's children initially went along with his rebellion and only reconsidered their support of it at the last moment, they had absorbed an adequate dose of proper Torah values to inspire them to withdraw from their father's misguided and sinful campaign of usurpation. Furthermore, even when engaging in his malicious rebellion, Korach remained a bit more dignified and did not stoop to the base and coarse level of expression as that of Dasan and Aviram; Korach's previous Torah stature continued to rub off somewhat on his personality, and the upbringing of his children during his tenure as a distinguished Torah leader clearly affected them for the long term.

In contrast, the children of Dasan and Aviram were exposed to their fathers' patterns of negative actions from the start. Although every person has free will, the children of Dasan and Aviram were subjected to repeated negative examples by their fathers and lacked a sufficient amount of positive stimuli to cause them to instinctively reject the malicious ways of their fathers. This is why Korach's children harbored feelings of remorse for having been involved with their father's rebellion and were therefore spared punishment, and why the children of Dasan and

Aviram did not follow the ways of Korach's children.

A few crucial lessons emerge from this all. Firstly and quite obviously is the impact that parents' conduct has on their children. When children are raised in strong Torah homes and they see their parents' unwavering commitment to Torah over the course of many years, it impacts and is likely to exert influence even if the parents later veer off the path. We have witnessed how the children of fellow Jews who left Torah observance often continue to follow the Torah, due to their years of proper Torah training, despite their parents' later actions. But when children witness their parents doing that which is wrong, particularly as a long-term way of life, it is far rarer for the children to stick to the right path.

Another lesson is the incredible impact that positive exposure to Torah can have, even if the person is also absorbing messages that are antithetical to the Torah. One never knows if a moment of inspiration will be fondly recalled later and will make an important future impact. Countless stories abound of people who experienced one or two highly inspirational events, which eventually changed their lives.

While we obviously do not seek to emulate the examples of Korach or of Dasan and Aviram, let us recognize the difference between them and appreciate the stark impact of positive exposure to Torah, which can win the day in the face of the most adverse of opposing forces. 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.

Any Dispute For The Sake Of Heaven

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

Two couples, both new parents, enjoyed a rare evening out. They naturally spoke about parenthood, with its many joys and challenges. When one of the mothers asked the other how their baby was sleeping, the other replied, "through the night without a peep." The husband of the first mother looked at her incredulously and said, "You're not parents, you're

babysitters!"

His meaning was amusing but clear. To be a "real" parent was to endure the difficulties of parenthood which, in his estimation, included impossible nights.

So too any role of leadership and responsibility. If leading was easy, anyone could do it. Leadership always entails confronting challenges and conflicts. Moshe

certainly knew this only too well. Indeed, a good and wise leader understands that conflict – difficult as it might be on its face – can often be beneficial. As our rabbis teach, “Any dispute for the sake of heaven will be for everlasting value...”

When Korach and his fellow rebels challenged Moses and Aaron, they seemed, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, both true and principled. “What was wrong with Korach and his fellow rebels? On the face of it, what they said was both true and principled. ‘You have gone too far,’ they said to Moses and Aaron. ‘The whole community is holy, every one of them, and God is with them. Why then are you setting yourselves above God’s congregation?’”

Who could argue their point? God had summoned the people to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Moses himself had said, “Would that all God’s people were prophets, that He would place His spirit upon them” (Num. 11: 29). These are radically egalitarian sentiments. Considering them, Korach and the others were right to question why there was a hierarchy, with Moses as leader and Aaron as High Priest?

Such would have been the dispute had it been for the sake of heaven. But this dispute was not for heaven’s sake at all.

Korach. Dathan and Aviram. Two hundred and fifty Israelites of rank within the community. All had grievances.

For his part, Korach was mounting a leadership challenge. He aspired to be Kohen Gadol. And why not? As Moshe and Aaron’s cousin, son of Yitzhar, he had every right to wonder why all the leadership positions should go to just one family from the Levites. He demanded equality. Dathan and Aviram. Reubenites. How could it be that they, children of Yaakov’s first-born son, had no prominent position? And the two hundred and fifty? Men of rank, still rankled that after the sin of the Golden Calf, leadership went from the first-born of each tribe to just one...

Each with a specific grievance. Each allied with the other two to “strengthen” their challenge to Moshe’s authority and Aaron’s leadership. Perhaps if their cause had been just, for the sake of heaven, their alliance would truly have strengthened them. But they were given voice to personal and petty grievances, grievances that spoke to their jealousies and their desire for power.

Had Korach “won out” the others would certainly have continued to rebel. So too had Dathan and Aviram prevailed, Korach would have joined with the two hundred

and fifty to continue the effort to overthrow the leadership. These rebellious souls were not allies; they were aligned by convenience.

Moshe, a great leader, was not dismayed by the challenge posed by these men. He did not underestimate the fear, stress and interpersonal dynamics that roiled the Children of Israel. He did not minimize what they had been through, both the glorious and the frightening. He was not surprised by the people’s urge to rebel. Whether rebellion in the pursuit of honor, prestige or recognition, he understood human nature and could deal with the situation. However, Dathan and Aviram went too far.

When Moshe realized that he was unable to make any progress in his dealing with Korach, he summoned Dathan and Aviram, thinking and hoping that he might be able to reason with them. As Rashi notes, Moshe knew how machlokes undermined the community. Therefore, he sought to avoid discord at all costs. If meeting with the rebels would maintain the calm, he was more than ready to meet with them. They, however, refused to come to speak with Moshe. He did not yet know that they had been sowing discord already, castigating him as a failed leader. They went so far as to libel Moshe with outright lies. “Isn’t it enough that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert! and now you want to lord it over us! What is more, you have not brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you think that you can pull something over our eyes? We will definitely not come!”

The astonishing arrogance of their lies is nearly impossible to stomach! They castigated him for taken them out of the richness, and the luxury of Egypt! They dared to describe the land of their enslavement with the same words God uses to describe the Land of Israel! They lied and then they enlarged the lie by swearing, “Even if you would gouge out the eyes of those men, we shall not go up.” As Sforno explains, they were saying to him, “Do you think you can blind us to your failures?”

Their audacity is truly breathtaking!

Their goals were evil. Their words were false. And yet, they were already practiced in rhetorical spin. As Sivan Rahav-Meir observes, “Anything goes. If you tell a lie, but package it nicely, it will sell.” White is black. Good is bad. In the Talmud, this confusing reality is called “an upside-down world.” Their words epitomize “false advertising” and fake news.

This “Dathan-Aviram phenomenon” was not unique to their time. We see it all around us today. Look at how the BDS movement incorrectly and unfairly maligns Israel. As Rabbi Sacks notes, we are in dangerous waters when, “... truth is sacrificed to power...”

Like Moses, who recognized that conflict – however unpleasant – can be beneficial, Judaism celebrates argument and differences of opinion. It is not for nothing that people say that when two Jews gather, there are three points of view! We value opposing viewpoints. The Oral law is based on opinions and views exemplified by Hillel and Shamai searching and seeking truth. Our tradition celebrates argument, even taking the argument to God Himself! Is that not what Job does in demanding a witness to his suffering?

We argue. We challenge. We needle, and we poke. All in the service of truth and justice. But when truth and justice cease to be the goal, when we no longer argue “for the sake of heaven” then we expose only our greed and unseemliness. Korach and Company had no use for the truth. Their aim was power, ego, self-aggrandizement.

How can we tell the difference between the one who would grab power for his own ego versus he would lead for the good of the people? How can we differentiate when “the land flowing with milk and honey” refers to Israel and not Egypt?

Ultimately, the one who seeks power for power’s sake betrays that. Moshe is indeed a king, but we never refer to him as such. He is “Rabeinu”, our greatest of teachers. Aaron is indeed the high priest, but he is also a great teacher, as are all the true kohanim. “For a priest’s lips shall guard knowledge, and teaching should be sought from his mouth.” (Malachi 2:7)

The people learn to fear the autocrat, but students cling to their teachers and love their rebbe. Their devotion is not in any way related to his authority, power, or prestige, but because such teachers share of themselves, of their knowledge and, yes, just as much, their warmth, care and concern. Moshe had not, in any way, raised himself above the people. He did not place himself on a pedestal as Korach accused him of doing. It is the community that raised him up, seeing in him a leader who loved them. He didn’t run for office. He did not “buy” any votes. He demeaned no man and mocked no rival.

He was elevated by God and the people.

But Korach... he would have been easily recognized in our ugly, angry political scene. He might even have

prevailed!

Such is the reward of an age that fails to reward teaching and true leadership, that does not value “the sake of Heaven”.

Thinking about all this, I am reminded of the “20th century Moshe Rabeinu”, the Posek of our generation, Rav Moshe Feinstein Zt’l. He was the absolute halachic authority of our time, the acknowledged halachic arbiter of the entire Jewish community.

How did he rise to such an incredible position of esteem and leadership? Was there a ballot drawn? A committee formed? How was it that everyone agreed that he was the last word on halachic issues?

Did he simply wake up one morning with such leadership imposed upon him? Of course not! His leadership was based on an intelligence and a command of halakha, that other scholars found awe-inspiring. As much as his mighty intelligence, rabbis and scholars were in awe of his remarkable humility. His phone number was listed in the phone directory, and he was available for calls from average followers of Orthodoxy, as well as its authorities.

He was thoughtful, kind and modest. In a 1975 interview, he explained in his own way how he had come to his standing, “You don’t wake up in the morning and decide you’re an expert on answers,” he said. “If people see that one answer is good and another answer is good, gradually you will be accepted.”

Step by step, you earn your respect and standing. Then, one day, you come to see that you have become accepted as rabeinu.

Rav Moshe Feinstein followed the “Moshe Rabeinu path” not the “Korach path”. He never demanded respect and acknowledgement. He earned it.

He argued for the sake of heaven and in return he knew heaven’s reward.

