

KORACH

BEDROCK OF FAITH

A

Korach's Fierce Rebellion

Korach led a rebellion against Moshe. According to the tradition of our Sages, Korach was a great man—a wealthy *talmid chocham* with great *yichus*, coming from the finest family of Levi, the same family as Moshe himself. He had a prestigious job, carrying the *aron* when the Jews traveled in the desert. According to Rashi, he even had *ruach hakodesh*, just short of prophecy. How could such a great Jew foment a rebellion against Moshe, the person whom God had chosen to bring the Torah to the Jews?

Korach stated his arguments so strongly that he seems to have denied the very prophecy of Moshe. Together with his co-conspirators Dasan and Aviram, they denied the fact that Moshe was God's messenger to bring the Jews out of Egypt. Korach and his followers seem to express significant elements of *kefira*, denial of the fundamental elements of the Torah. They denied the very truth of the Torah and Moshe as the giver of the Torah, that *Moshe emes v'soraso emes*.

This is very hard to understand. These people were eyewitnesses to the events involving Moshe. They themselves experienced the exodus from Egypt and the ten plagues. They themselves marched out of Mitzrayim into the Red Sea and saw the Egyptians

drown. They themselves stood at Har Sinai and heard Hashem speak to Moshe telling him to convey the Ten Commandments to the people. How could they deny the truth of these events?

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 99a) says that an atheist or someone who denies the truth of Moshe's prophecy loses his share in the world to come. He will not experience the messianic redemption and revival of the dead. If, in fact, Korach and his followers did deny these fundamentals of belief, why does the Gemara elsewhere (Sanhedrin 109) record an opinion that Korach and his followers have a share in the world to come?

B

Puzzles

The Shem Mishmuel quotes a Midrash that says that Korach lost the honor that had been his before the rebellion. But Korach lost much more than his honor—he lost his life! Why do Chazal emphasize the loss of his honor?

Another Midrash, cited by Rashi (Bamidbar 16:1), relates that in order to delegitimize Moshe's authority, Korach and his followers came dressed in a *tallis* that was completely *techeiles* and asked Moshe, "Does this kind of *tallis* require *techeiles* strings in the *tzitzis*?" A regular *tallis* with four corners needs to have white and *techeiles* strings. The *techeiles* string seems to be the most important of the strings; it is the unique one. If you have a *tallis* that is completely *techeiles*, shouldn't it be exempt from a single string of blue? They asked another question, too. "Does a house full of holy books need a *mezuzah*, a tiny scroll on the doorpost?" Moshe responded "Yes" to both questions. They countered, "The *tallis* is made totally of *techeiles*—what could one blue string add? Similarly, the house is full of books! The whole point of the *mezuzah* is to remind us of Hashem. But if the house is full of holy books that

discuss Hashem, or if a person who lives in the house is a scholar and studies God's words, why should the house need a *mezuzah*?"

Through these analogies, they meant to say that all Jews are equally holy. "We all heard God speak to us at Har Sinai. Since the whole nation is holy, who needs Moshe? We don't need him to interpret the law for us, just like a house full of books doesn't need a *mezuzah*."

Why did Korach choose these two analogies of *techeiles* and *mezuzah*?

C

Physical Flip Flop

The Shem Mishmuel quotes a Midrash that discusses Moshe's first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush. Hashem told Moshe that he was the only person who could redeem the Jewish People. Essentially, Moshe's mission was to lead them to Sinai to get the Torah. God told him as much, "When you take the people out from Mitzrayim, you will serve Hashem on this mountain" (Shemos 3:12).

The Midrash understands that no one before or after Moshe had the ability to bring the Torah down from heaven and deliver it to the Jewish People. What was Moshe's uniqueness? What special quality did he have that made him the only person capable of being the conduit between Hashem and the Jewish People?

We know that human beings are a combination of physical and spiritual/intellectual elements of the body and the soul. There is a tremendous conflict between the physical and the spiritual. The physical side of the person is subject to radical changes, similar to the physical world, which is full of radical changes. Water turns into vapor and clouds, which then transform into rain that falls into rivers, which then evaporates and start the cycle all over again. A clear, hot, sunny day with a clear blue sky can quickly

change into dark gray and black, and suddenly a thunderstorm crashes.

Due to our physical side, humans are also subject to such radical changes, particularly regarding their personality. If uncontrolled, these changes can be very destructive. A person can be a loyal spouse for years and then suddenly betray that loyalty. A person can have a job for years and, one morning, wake up and quit to go to do something else.

The Egyptians of old were prone to this instability. When Moshe went to Pharaoh and brought plague after plague, the Torah describes an unusual phenomenon. After each plague, Pharaoh and his advisors were shaken. Pharaoh ran to Moshe several times and begged him to remove the plague, promising to release the people. This happened, for example, after the plague of frogs. Moshe *davened* to Hashem and removed the plague. Immediately, Pharaoh changed his mind and said he would not release the people. He changed his attitude radically from enslavement to freedom and back to slavery. It took ten plagues for Pharaoh to finally stick to his decision to free Israel.

Pharaoh and his people were completely antithetical to the Torah. They were a physical society. They valued physical success: conquest, building huge pyramids, and even in their relationships they overemphasized the physical. Physicality and the personality it breeds are unstable. The Torah, in contrast, teaches a stable system of values. It primarily addresses the Jewish soul, which can be stable. It comes from God's breath, as it were. "*Vayipach b'apav nishmas chaim*. God blew a spirit of life into Adam's nose" (Bereishis 2:7). Since God is unchanging, so is the human soul. If the human soul can succeed in insulating itself from the changes that involve the physical body in which it lives, then it can also retain its natural stability.

D

The Flashing Sword and the Tree of Life

The Shem Mishmuel teaches a beautiful interpretation of an intriguing *pasuk* in Bereishis. After Adam was driven out Gan Eden, the Torah says that Hashem placed the “*lahat hacherev hamis’hapeches lishmor es derech Eitz Hachaim*. He placed a fiery revolving sword to guard the road to the Tree of Life” (Bereishis 3:24). We know that the Tree of Life is really the Torah, as the *pasuk* says, “*Eitz chaim hi lamachazikim bah*. It (the Torah) is a tree of life for those who cling to it” (Mishlei 3:18). Life here means eternal life. This is the ultimate stability.

On the other hand, the revolving sword is instability. The Zohar explains the nature of the flashes of light that this revolving sword generates. They are the switches from good to evil and from evil to good, from mercy to judgement, and from peace to war. We encounter so many paradoxical forces that oppose each other. Our own lives also switch back and forth. This is the test. Can people go through life and find a way to resolve these paradoxical impulses with which we live? Can we attain the stability of the *derech Eitz Hachaim*, of a Torah life? Without Torah, we are unstable. Torah gives us the anchor of stability.

E

The Instability of Our World

We live in a world where most people are living without Torah. Unfortunately, our society is, to a great extent, godless. We see so much instability and insanity. Things that were almost completely prohibited by our society have turned rather quickly into accepted and even lauded values. For example, same-gender relationships used to be completely shunned by our society, and now they are accepted and even appreciated as a positive and heroic value. We

live in an unstable world. The values of our society are constantly changing. There was a time not so long ago when people valued making a contribution to society. Today, many people live only for themselves.

Not so long ago, even most non-religious Jews accepted the concept of the State of Israel as important for the Jewish People. Today, many Jews have abandoned the idea of a Jewish state. Even Jews who lived in Israel their whole lives have begun to question this. This instability stems from a lack of Torah. The Torah is the only anchor that we have to keep our Jewish values and society stable.

This revolving sword and its fire are destructive. It is the destructiveness of an unstable lifestyle and unstable values. Our goal is to reach the Eitz Hachaim, the tree of eternal life, to live forever with stable, real, and correct values. This is a difficult road to travel.

Moshe, according to the Maharal, was a person who was blessed not to have this struggle. He was taken out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter. She called him Moshe, meaning "pulled out" of the water. This represents that he was pulled out of the physical side of the world, out of the instability of the physical experience. Moshe possessed the ultimate stability. His commitments were absolute and solid. Since the purpose of Torah is to bring stability, it had to be delivered by someone who was completely at peace with his beliefs and had no possibility of self-doubt. Even as a child Moshe displayed this gift of the stability and steadfastness of a Torah personality. Many of us struggle our whole life to be firm and reliable no matter what challenges and tests we go through. Moshe did not struggle with this at all.

This explains why Hashem told Moshe that no one other than him could give the Torah. There is a revolving fiery sword that every Jew has to confront in his or her life. There are many confusing moments for all of us. We need to have an anchor. "Moshe," Hashem was saying, "you are the one who has the power to be this

anchor for the Jewish people. You are the only one who can be My messenger to give the Torah.”

F

Moshe's Familiar, Stable Soul

The Shem Mishmuel explains the Chassidic concept of the merging of souls. A great soul such as that of Moshe can, according to Kabbala, touch and become part of other souls. Every Jew, especially if he studies Torah, has a little bit of Moshe inside of him. As we study Torah, the spirit of Moshe goes into us. It grants us stability and strength of commitment. It helps us attain a knowledge of Hashem and the essence of this world. We can only get these through Moshe. In this sense, Moshe still lives. Without Moshe's power within us, we could not achieve the goal of having the Torah be the anchor of our lives, the Eitz Hachaim.

The Ramban explains that a time will come in days of Mashiach when people will feel this stability. People will not feel the emotional, psychological, and intellectual conflicts that are part of our current daily existence. The *pasuk* says that, eventually, Hashem will implant in our hearts “*L'hava es Hashem Elokecha v'laleches bidrachav kol hayamim*.” To love Hashem and to walk in His ways all of the days” (Devarim 19:9). The Ramban says that this *pasuk* refers to the time of Mashiach. Everyone will walk in God's ways. We will not need a support system. People's personalities will become inherently stable.

Until then, in this world, we are unstable. We have ups and downs, good and bad times. We need a support system to help us through the instability. This is nothing to be ashamed of, since we are all human beings. This is part of our condition. We are not perfect nor absolutely stable like Moshe. We should draw our support from the Torah, from Moshe's teachings, to help us with the constant changes of daily living.

The Jewish People who study Torah know that the power of the Torah is what gives us this stability. When we were about to receive the Torah, Hashem told us, “*V’atem tihyu li mamleches kohanim v’goy kadosh*. You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Shemos 19:6). The concept of priests is also a concept of stability. Aharon does not change, as Rashi writes (Bamidbar 8:3) that Aharon was “*Lo shina*, he did not deviate.” Moshe led the Jewish People on an intellectual level, and Aharon led on the emotional level. But they both represent stability and withstanding the challenges of daily life.

G

Dependable Defense

In the Shabbos morning Shemoneh Esrei, we describe Moshe as “*eved ne’eman*,” the trustworthy servant of Hashem whom He could count on no matter what was happening. Moshe lived through dramatic episodes. Consider the story of the *eigel*. Moshe was told suddenly by Hashem that the people were worshipping a golden calf just a few days after the climactic experience of Har Sinai. A normal human being would have broken down and collapsed. Moshe, though, remained completely in control. He knew he had to defend the Jewish People, and that is what he did.

When the *meraglim* returned with their demoralizing report, a normal person would have been stunned by the spies’ abandonment of the values of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. The spies had totally betrayed Moshe, who had sent them on this mission. At this moment of crisis, though, Moshe stayed loyal to the Jewish People’s mission and to his own mission as their leader. He prayed to Hashem not to destroy the people and to allow them to enter the land. Even though Moshe himself would not be allowed to enter the land, he maintained his loyalty, no matter how much the people of Israel had betrayed him and Hashem.

We can take an amazing lesson from these words of the Shem Mishmuel. When we make commitments to other people—be it our spouses, children, family, or to other Jews—we have to stick to them. In the desert, Bnei Yisrael betrayed Moshe in the worst ways. Nevertheless, Moshe never abandoned his total commitment to the Jewish People. We have to follow his model and maintain our commitments to other Jews no matter what they do. We must have faith that all Jews deserve our deepest commitment. Even when we deal with Jews who are sinners, we must know that, deep down, they are good.

The Shem Mishmuel notes that we specifically mention this concept of Moshe as an *eved ne'eman* on Shabbos, which is itself a day of stability. The six days of the week are like the *cherev hamis'hapeches*, the fiery sword turning every which way, filled with paradoxes, contradictions, and opposing pressures. Shabbos is a day of peaceful stability and spirituality. Shabbos is like the Eitz Hachaim.

H

Korach's Mistake

Korach thought that he and his tribe were different than the rest of the Jews. After all, the rest of the Jews had sinned at the golden calf. They were unstable. But he and the rest of Levi had not sinned. They had maintained their stability and commitment to Hashem. Korach believed that just as Moshe could be the source of stability for the Torah of Hashem, other people could become sources of stability.

Moshe was given this gift at birth and stood above the paradoxes of daily life. Korach, though, thought that the tribe of Levi had attained the same standing. Levi originally had sinned in the time of Yaakov. Against the wishes of his father, he and Shimon wiped out the city Shechem. After being berated by his father, though,

Levi did *teshuva* and became the great leader of his brothers. His family then produced great people like Moshe and Aharon. Korach came from this exalted family as well. Korach thought that he was better than Moshe and Aharon because he had developed his greatness on his own. Moshe received this personality as a gift, but Korach worked on it. And so, Korach thought, “I deserve to be the leader of the Jews!”

The Ari Hakadosh explains that Korach picked up a piece of the soul of Kayin, the son of Adam. Kayin committed the first murder in history when he killed Hevel. Kayin was driven by *ga'ava*. His name is similar to *kinyan*, ownership—he felt he owned the world.

Truly, Korach did achieve a lot. But he let his achievements lead him to too much pride. He congratulated himself too much. He was subject to the blindness that pride causes and denied that God had chosen Moshe to the exclusion of all others. Just as Kayin couldn't imagine that Hashem chose Hevel over him, Korach couldn't understand why Hashem would choose Moshe instead of him.

Here is an important point. No matter our achievements, we have no claims on God. He will give us our just reward, but we have no right to demand A, B, and C from Hashem. Korach certainly deserved a reward from Hashem for his great accomplishments. But Korach demanded to be the leader. God, in His infinite wisdom, had chosen Moshe to be the leader. Hashem saw something in Moshe that Korach didn't see, and perhaps Moshe himself didn't see it either. Hashem wanted Moshe, not Korach, to be the one to teach Torah to Am Yisrael.

Due to his excessive pride and false expectations, Korach started a rebellion against Moshe. Korach meant well. He wanted to show the people that they could achieve great things on their own, that they shouldn't just rely on the greatness of Moshe. But he made a mistake, because he questioned Hashem's justice. His pride blinded him to the truth that Hashem had chosen Moshe

instead of him. We have to understand that Hashem prescribes a certain path, and our job is to humbly follow His ultimate decisions.

I

Korach's Extra Emotion

This will help us understand what Korach meant with the argument of the blue and white strings. White, according to Kabbala, is the color of love. Blue, *techeiles*, is the color of *din*. Korach said that we don't need any one person to be the rock, the standard of justice, commitment, and stability for us, like the *techeiles* string. It is enough to have just the white strings, the love of every Jew for Hashem. Every Jew can do it on his own without the strictness of Moshe, because every Jew can achieve the stability of Moshe. The *mezuzah*, too, is a certain kind of *din*. It is a scroll of Torah written according to strict rules. It has a fixed text, and every Jew must write the exact same text in every *mezuzah*. Korach said every Jew can build a house of love on his own. Every Jew can express his love without the control and judgment of Moshe.

His initial argument with Moshe was not about the truth of Moshe's prophecy; it was more about Moshe's role. He didn't see Moshe playing a pivotal role in Judaism. "Now that we have accepted and grown from the Torah," Korach argued, "we don't need Moshe anymore." But once Moshe rejected Korach's thesis, Korach's emotions carried him away. So, he adopted the argument denying the truth of Moshe's prophecy and actions. This led to other heretical statements. His punishment, though, was not as severe as a regular heretic. Korach had a saving grace. His original argument did not include heresy, and only his emotions pulled him to heretical statements. Korach was not a true heretic, and that is why the Gemara says that he still receives a share in the

world to come. A regular heretic who denies Moshe's Torah does not get to the world to come, but Korach does.

J

We Need Our Teacher

Korach had a good point, but he was wrong. Despite the achievements of individual Jews, we cannot lose our connection to Moshe. We still call him Moshe Rabbeinu, our living teacher. *Moshe emes v'soraso emes*; we call it the Torah of Moshe, and Moshe as our anchor is a fundamental part of the Torah. Perhaps when Mashich comes, the Shem Mishmuel hints, we all will be able to stand on our own without being so dependent on the model of Moshe. Now, however, despite our achievements, we are still very unstable. As we experience the vicissitudes of daily life, and especially as the Jewish People, we need to have the anchor that Moshe provides. We see in our times that some of our fellow Jews have tried to replace the teachings of Moshe with other concepts, such as communism and humanism. They have fallen victim to the changes and instability that affect the rest of the world that doesn't have the Torah.

A hundred years ago, most of our parents were living on a different continent. Now, Europe is a huge Jewish graveyard, and there are millions of Jews living in America and millions in Israel. Who knows what will be in another fifty years? Moshe himself went through a tumultuous personal life, from Mitzrayim to Midyan to the desert and the great events that happened there, including the Ten Commandments, the *eigel*, and the *mergalim*. Moshe was always the rock, the *eved ne'eman*, the true and trusting servant of Hashem. He is our model. We are privileged that part of his great soul touches every person who is loyal and dedicated to Torah.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Was Korach a true heretic? Explain.
2. Why did Hashem choose Moshe to receive the Torah?
3. What is the meaning of the revolving sword on the road to Gan Eden?
4. What is the meaning of the Eitz Hachaim?
5. What negative emotion led Korach astray?

EXERCISES

1. Discuss stability and instability in your life.
2. How can you increase your own loyalty? Develop a program for yourself.

