

The Path To Follow

Korach

497

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Korach's Scornful Remarks to Moshe

According to what the Sages state in several places (Bamidbar Rabba 18; Tanchuma 2), Korach raised several objections against Moshe in regards to various laws. I would like to explain some of these objections, and why Korach was mistaken.

Korach wanted to serve as Kohen Gadol, but he knew that simple speeches would not convince Moshe to appoint him as such. That is why he also wanted to prove to Moshe that he was a talmid chacham, hoping to convince him in this way. Hence Korach objected to Moshe by stating: "You have said that it is written in the Torah. 'They shall put a thread of techelet upon the tzitzit of every corner' [Bamidbar 15:38]."

He also asked him, "Does a house that is entirely filled with Torah scrolls require a mezuzah, or is it exempt?" Moshe replied that it required one. Korach began to laugh and said, "All the Torah scrolls in a house do not exempt it, but two passages in the mezuzah do?" We also find that Korach sought to raise objections about the red heifer (Midrash Pliyah).

We need to understand something: Korach was intelligent (Bamidbar Rabba 18:2), so what was the meaning behind all these objections? What was Korach's objective in saying such things?

We know that the entire objective of the tzitzit, and the techelet which they contain, is to remember Hashem, as the Sages have said: "Techelet resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of a sapphire, and a sapphire resembles the color of the Throne of Glory" (Chullin 89a; Yerushalmi, Berachot 1:2). Thus Korach believed that if a single thread dyed techelet enabled a man to remember G-d and the Throne of Glory, how much more would an entire tallit dyed techelet bring Him to mind, enabling a person to be even more scrupulous in all the mitzvot!

Likewise a house filled with Torah scrolls would lead a man to cleaving to Hashem, so what was the need for a mezuzah? As for the red heifer, we know that Korach was aware of the reasons behind it, and so he claimed that he was more important than Aaron, who was not aware of all its reasons.

Yet Korach was gravely mistaken in this regard, for there is no need for an entire tallit dyed techelet in order to recall G-d's existence, since all of Creation itself leads to the knowledge of the Creator, as King David said: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers" (Tehillim 8:4). Hence there was no need for an entire tallit dyed techelet. A single thread is all that's needed to recall the existence of the Creator, and more than this would infringe upon the prohibition against adding to the mitzvot (Sanhedrin 29a).

The same applies to a house completely filled with Torah scrolls: Only a mezuzah guards the house and the Torah scrolls within it, as well as any mezuzot that may be on a table inside.

Furthermore, Korach erred in regards to the red heifer, for had he been aware of the reasons behind it, he would have also been aware that its ashes alluded to humility. Yet humility was found with Moshe, as it is written: "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (Bamidbar 12:3).

As a result, Korach should have acted with humility in practice, not just calling for it externally, for actions are more important than explanations (Pirkei Avot 1:17; Zohar III:218a). That said, why did Korach persist in his pride?

Above all, Korach committed a huge error by suspecting Moshe of adultery. He had doubts because Moshe left his wife Tziporah, having separated from her (Shabbat 87a). Korach thought, "How could he do this? Aaron, who is the Kohen Gadol, did not separate from his wife. It's certainly because of another woman!"

However Korach was mistaken. He did not know that Moshe had separated from his wife because the Shechinah could speak to him at any moment, not at a definite time (Shabbat ibid.), as Hashem had told him: "And you, stand here with Me" (Devarim 5:28).

This is why Miriam as well, who had spoken Lashon Harah about Moshe concerning the very same subject, was punished and afflicted with leprosy (Bamidbar 12:10). Although Korach saw what happened to her, he did not learn anything because he did not understand what it was about.

Although he saw what happened to the spies – who also failed to learn anything from what had happened to Miriam, and who were punished – Korach did not regret anything, for he committed the very same mistake and did nothing to properly reflect on things. All this happened because Korach believed that his Torah would allow him to succeed.

That, however, was not the case. Since Korach sought conflict, he ruined everything and damaged the very foundations of Creation, for he did not draw any lessons from the past or reflect upon Moshe's greatness. Hence he arrived at where he was. Evil took hold of him, he separated himself from the entire community and provoked a terrible plague.

All these things are alluded to in the numerical value of Korach's name. The tzitzit dyed entirely techelet are found in his name, for the name Korach ben Yitzhar has the same numerical value as the expression chutei tzitzit ("threads of fringes").

The mezuzah is also alluded to in his name, for Korach has the same numerical value as the Name Sh-dai, which is found in the mezuzot that guard the homes of Israel.

The red heifer as well is alluded to in his name, for the expression parah adumah ("red heifer") has the same numerical value, in adding the words themselves to the value of its letters, to the expression zeh hu Korach ("this is Korach") when adding the four letters of the name Korach.

The suspicion that Korach had of Moshe is also alluded to in his name, for it is written: Vayikach Korach ("Korach took"). This can be read as vai lakach ("woe, he took"), and vai ("woe") has the same numerical value as the letters chet beit vav, the initials of the verse chayil bala vayekiyenu ("he devoured wealth, but will disgorge it" – Job 20:15). This alludes to the middah of yesod, circumcision.

If Korach suspected Moshe of having had forbidden relations, he took vai for himself, without rectifying it, for he spoke Lashon Harah and sought conflict. Since he created division in the world, he was swallowed by the earth in a supernatural way and perished from the world.

The Mysteries of the Sambatyon River Part IV

Summary of previous articles: A delegation led by Rabbi Meir Schatz left a German city and reached the Sambatyon River. Rabbi Meir crossed the river and asked the tribes living on that side to help deliver them from a wicked prince who has been killing the Jews of their community without pity. Rabbi Dan was chosen to undertake this mission, and he crossed the river on his way to Germany to confront this prince in a sorcery competition. Before all the local citizens, Rabbi Dan has been defeating the wicked prince, and his victory seems assured.

The prince's face grew pale, and he began imploring Rabbi Dan not to harm him, even promising to give him every possession in the world. Yet Rabbi Dan, paying no attention to these supplications, simply said: "I will not touch you, nor will I take your life. I will not even touch you with a single finger, even though you killed many of my Jewish brothers and deserve, measure for measure, that I inflict a cruel death on you."

He then pointed to a large nearby tree, and he told the prince: "I will bend this tree towards the ground, and your task will be to keep it bent once I let go. Or, if you prefer, you can bend this tree towards the ground and I will maintain it in that position once you let go, preventing it from returning to its original height."

The prince had gone into this competition thinking that he would certainly be able to answer the odd challenges made by the limping Jew standing before him. However his hopes had been dashed, for all his magic had done nothing for him. In fact all the demons that he had conjured up were burned and disappeared, as if they had never been. When the prince realized that all his attempts were useless, he began weeping bitterly before all the people. Meanwhile Rabbi Dan, growing impatient, wanted to know what the prince had decided: To bend the tree to the ground, or to hold it in that position once Rabbi Dan had bent it?

Having no choice, he decided to let Rabbi Dan bend the tree, while he would hold it in that position. He simply thought that Rabbi Dan would be unable to bend such a thick tree with his hands. However Rabbi Dan quickly and easily bent the tree towards the ground, and then he told the prince to do his part. The prince stepped back, for he never imagined that his adversary would be able to bend it.

Rabbi Dan then addressed the emperor and all the ministers standing before him, bewildered by what they were now seeing: "Look at this power-

ful prince, this hero, this liar. He is not keeping his word before the emperor, his ministers, and all the people gathered here!" Given the tremendous shame that awaited him, the prince could only do what he had said. His head lowered, he approached the tree trunk that was now bending in Rabbi Dan's hands. With lips tightened, he firmly gripped the tree so it would not return to its original shape.

As soon as Rabbi Dan removed his sanctified hands from the tree trunk, the prince was catapulted into the air as the tree swung back to its upright position. The prince's head hung from the metal post that was still hovering in the air, and his entire body was flattened by the two millstones that were also still in the air. A few minutes later, the metal post and two millstones flew from there to a desert of desolation and death, leaving behind no trace, as Rabbi Dan had predicted before his confrontation with the wicked prince. Everyone thanked G-d and Rabbi Dan, the good messenger, who had saved them from death. Jews were jubilant and cheerful.

Hopes Dashed

Years later, an attempt was undertaken to locate the place where the ten tribes dwelled. In the year 5614, a Jew from Sefat volunteered to look for them. His name was the chacham Amram Ma'aravi. He spoke Arabic fluently, and knew their prayers and holy books perfectly well. When he set out, he disguised himself as an Arab scholar, and went out in search of "Jewish scholars" everywhere, but without success. He then returned to Sefat as he had left. Three years later, a Jew by the name of Rabbi David Ashkenazi, from Jerusalem, also volunteered to look for them. His hope was to find the place where the ten lost tribes were now living. However his hopes were dashed after a few months, and although he was disguised and had let his hair grow, unfortunately the Arabs recognized him and shamefully sent him back to Jerusalem. Thus ended the hopes of the Sages of Eretz Israel to find the remnants of the ten tribes.

Close Your Shops, the Time has Come to Welcome Shabbat!

This extraordinary feature of the Sambatyon River, which pursues its furious course by throwing up stones from all sides, is not limited to its riverbed. This feature can be found in every grain of sand and every rock taken from the Sambatyon. Everywhere they are taken, they swirl about with great noise throughout the six days of the week, until Friday at sunset, when they stop and rest, just like the river itself.

What follows is a fascinating description written by Rabbi Shemuel Yaffe, the Av Beit Din of Constantinople and disciple of Rabbi Ben Lev, in his commentary on the Midrash entitled Yaffe Toar (Bereshith Rabba 11:1): "We have already heard that some of this sand was put into a container. It swirled about during all the days of the week, and on Shabbat it stopped."

The philosopher Rabbi Menashe ben Israel analyses the phenomenon of this miraculous river in his book Mikveh Israel. In it, he cites his father as stating that when he passed through Lisbon, he saw a black man with a glass container filled with sand from the Sambatyon River. Every Friday at sunset, with the arrival of Shabbat, he would go Neuve Road, where Anussim lived (Jews who conducted themselves like Christians in public). This black man called them "Jews," summoning them in order to show them the glass container he was holding, saying: "Close your shops, for the time has come to welcome Shabbat."

Furthermore, Rabbi Menashe ben Israel also indicates that he heard from a trustworthy individual, Rabbi Meir HaRofe, that he had seen a black man with a glass container in front of a place where Arabs prayed in the city of Aleppo. A judge passed by and was surprised, inquiring about this container and the sand within it. When he heard the story of the river from where this sand had been taken, a river that seethed with great noise during the six days of the week, but stopped on the seventh, he wanted to take the container away from him. He argued with him and rumbled, "You have not done well, for this will strengthen the Shabbat of the Jews!"

Guard Your Tongue

One Who is Certainly Good and Righteous

If one knows that his listeners will not disparage the person that he is speaking about, for example because they do not know him, then he may praise him, but only on condition that he does not exaggerate.

If one wants to praise someone whom everyone knows is good and righteous, a person in whom there is nothing evil, the speaker may even praise him in the presence of those who detest him or who are jealous of him, for they will be unable to disparage him. If someone tries to do so, everyone will know that he is lying.

To Prevent Death

It is written, “Moshe heard and fell on his face” (Bamidbar 16:4).

In Tiferet Yehonatan, the gaon Rabbi Yehonatan Eibeshutz Zatzal gives an explanation for why Moshe prostrated himself:

“It is written in tractate Nedarim (7b), ‘Wherever the Sages cast their eyes [in disapproval], death or poverty has resulted.’ Now Moshe wanted Korach’s followers to repent, for perhaps they would experience regret and do teshuvah. If he [Moshe] had looked at them, he could have caused their death, which is why it is written: ‘Moshe heard and fell on his face.’”

A New Phenomenon

It is written, “If Hashem will create a phenomenon, and the earth opens its mouth” (Bamidbar 16:30).

Did Moshe have any doubts as to whether the earth would open its mouth? It is an explicit Mishnah: The mouth of the earth was created at sunset on the sixth day of Creation (Pirkei Avoth 5:6)!

In the book Avraham Yagel, Rabbi Avraham Hacoen Zatzal explains that when Cain killed his brother Abel, it was already stated: “the earth... has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood” (Bereshith 4:11).

That said, Moshe asked that a new phenomenon nevertheless be created at that point: “the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they will descend alive to Sheol.”

He Lowers and Raises Up

It is written, “They and all that was theirs descended alive into Sheol” (Bamidbar 16:33).

We need to ask why Korach and all his followers were punished in such an exceptional way, to descend alive into Sheol. After all, nowhere else do we find this punishment.

In his book Yismach Israel, the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Chaim Sofer Zatzal explains this by stating that everything Hashem does to us is measure for measure. Since Korach wanted to ascend to the highest level, namely to attain the high priesthood, he was brought down all the way to Sheol, to the lowest level of Gehinnom.

Another reason for such a punishment was so that afterwards, Korach could fulfill the verse: “Every valley shall be raised” (Isaiah 40:4). Thus Hanna prayed for him by saying, “Hashem brings death and gives life, He lowers to Sheol and raises up” (I Samuel 2:6).

The Same Reward

It is written, “Your terumah will be accounted to you as grain from the threshing floor and as the fruit of the winepress” (Bamidbar 18:27).

Someone who gives tzeddakah from his own pocket, money that he earned by working and toiling for it, has a greater reward than someone who gives tzeddakah from money that he received as a gift, or from an inheritance and the like. In fact such money comes easily, and it is also easily wasted. However money that comes through much effort is also much more difficult to spend.

In his book Imrei Shefer, Rabbi Shlomo Kruger explains the Torah’s promise in this way: “Your terumah will be accounted to you as grain from the threshing floor and as the fruit of the winepress” – this means that since the tithes and offerings given by all Israel do not seem like those of the Levites, since the harvest of ordinary Jews comes through hard work and the sweat of their brow – which is not the case for the Levites, who receive everything from regular Jews – the Levites could think that they would not receive as great a reward as regular Jews for having given to the kohanim.

Hence the verse promises the Levites: “Your terumah will be accounted to you as grain from the threshing floor and as the fruit of the winepress” – as if you had given from your own threshing floor and your own winepresses, not in keeping with the fact that you received them from your brothers, without having made any effort.

By Allusion

Machloket

It is written, “Korach took” (Bamidbar 16:1).

The Sages say in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 109b) that Korach took a bad deal for himself, meaning the evil that clung to his name.

When we add the letters forming the term rah (“evil”) to Korach’s name, we obtain the numerical value of machloket (“dissension”).

– Baruch Avraham

In the Light of the Parsha

Korach’s Eye Deceived Him

Our Sages have gone into great detail to explain why Parsha Korach is juxtaposed to the passage describing the tzitzit. Of the tzitzit it is written, “You shall look upon them and remember all the commandments of Hashem and fulfill them” (Bamidbar 16:39). Yet Korach did not look at the tzitzit, but only at the dynasty that would emerge from him. He even went to the point of scorning the mitzvah of tzitzit by saying: “A tallit that is entirely composed of techelet cannot exempt itself from the obligation, but four techelet threads can exempt it?” (Bamidbar Rabba 18:3).

Since Korach denied the mitzvah of tzitzit, it was as if he had denied the Torah itself, as the Sages have said: “The mitzvah of tzitzit is equal to all the mitzvot of the Torah” (Nedarim 25a). From the teaching which states that Korach and his followers cried out from Gehinnom, “Moshe and his Torah are truth” (Bava Batra 74a), we see that Korach and his followers had actually denied the Torah and no longer recognized the Torah of Moshe. Since he did not properly fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit – which he did not look upon, since he only used his eyes for evil – he eventually found himself in Gehinnom.

It is a general principle: Whoever merits Ruach Hakodesh and sees what no other created being can see, such a person must ask himself whether what he sees is for the good of all Israel or not. If what he sees contains something good for Israel, he has the right to use it. If not, he does not have the right to use it, for man is only shown what has a purpose and what is good for the community of Israel.

This is precisely what happened with Korach: He saw that a great dynasty would emerge from him, and he used this vision for himself by contesting the priesthood. As for Moshe, he acted only for the good of Israel throughout his life, as the Sages have said: Moshe did not deal with his own affairs after speaking with G-d, but went directly from the mountain to the people (Mechilta, Yitro).

Korach did not conduct himself in the same way. When Moshe merited the revelation of the Shechinah, he no longer occupied himself with his own affairs. As for Korach, when it was revealed to him that generations of great men would emerge from him, he used this vision for his own interests and contested the priesthood. This teaches us that Korach did not contest the priesthood because of wickedness or jealousy, but because of the evil eye. Since he possessed an evil eye, he thought that he was greater than Moshe and Aaron, since his descendants would be greater than them. In the end, however, Korach lost on all counts.

What Does Baseless Hatred Lead To?

It is written, “Korach son of Itzhar son of Kohath son of Levi, and Dathan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On son of Pelet, the sons of Reuven” (Bamidbar 16:1).

The Sages of Israel interpret the name Korach as an acronym for kina (jealousy), romemut (exaltedness), and chamad (desire), for Korach possessed each of these flaws.

Jealousy: He was jealous of the greatness and status of Moshe and Aaron.

Exaltedness: He yearned for the position of leading the people because of the honor that came with it.

Desire: He desired and lusted for a status which he did not deserve.

Now our Sages have said, “Jealously, desire, and honor-seeking drive a man from this world” (Pirkei Avot 4:21).

The following story is told by Rabbi Yefet Shvili Zatzal of Yemen in his book Sippurei Edut (“Tales of Testimony”). He states that one day, the Caliph was sitting with one of his ministers. In their conversation, the minister said to him: “Do you know, my lord and king, that in times past the Jews had a great kingdom with a very powerful king at their head? They were not always refugees, nor were they as persecuted as they are today.”

“No,” exclaimed the Caliph, “I didn’t know that!”

The Caliph ordered a Jewish scholar to be summoned, and he asked him: “Did your people really have a great kingdom?”

“In fact we did,” replied the scholar.

“And how was it lost?” asked the Caliph.

“By the sin of baseless hatred, which reigned among us,” said the scholar.

The Caliph was shocked, for a kingdom falls to an external enemy or an internal plot, not because of the sin of baseless hatred! Hence the Caliph thought that this scholar was mocking him, and he imprisoned him for this insult. That same night, the Caliph went down to the sea to bathe. The waves overcame him, one wave after another tossing him about, until he was finally thrown up onto a deserted and isolated shore.

The Caliph stood on solid ground, but was naked and exhausted. He didn’t know how he could walk without any clothes, so he covered himself with sand and fell asleep.

It then happened that a Jew riding a donkey passed by. When he saw the man covered in sand up to his neck, he had compassion on him. This Jew therefore took him in his arms and placed him on his donkey. He brought the man to his home, placing him in a large bed to rest.

The Caliph opened his eyes and saw that he was in a dark room. A strange Jew was leaning over him, and he exclaimed: “Thank G-d, you’re still alive!”

“Where am I?” asked the Caliph in a weak voice.

“You’re my guest. I found you unconscious by the sea, and I brought you to my home. You’ll recover here, and I’ll give you clothes so you can return home.”

“Thank you very much,” replied the Caliph. “But tell me, do you know where the capital is?”

“It’s far from here,” replied the Jew.

“If you bring me there by donkey, I’ll pay you handsomely,” said the Caliph. The Jew willingly accepted his proposition.

The Caliph arose, washed himself, and put on the clothes given to him by his Jewish host. He then got on the donkey of the Jew, who brought him to the capital.

In the meantime, people had been looking for the Caliph in the streets of the capital, but without luck. Since his clothes were found by the shore, it was believed that he had been carried out to sea and drowned. His relatives and servants therefore wept and mourned for him.

When the Caliph and Jew arrived at the gates of the capital, the Caliph said to him: “Accompany me to my home, and I will give you your reward.” However the Jew replied, “My mitzvah will be my reward. The residents of this city detest Jews, and I’m afraid that they’ll stone me. I’ll be cursed rather than blessed!” The Caliph reassured him and said, “There’s nothing to fear. Walk next to me and I will protect you!”

When they reached the gates of the palace, the guards looked at the Caliph but could not believe their eyes: He was riding a donkey and dressed in the clothes of a Jew! Yet there was no doubt about it – the “deceased” Caliph was right before their eyes!

“Long live the king! The Caliph has returned!” the royal family and their servants shouted with joy. They surrounded the Caliph with cries of happiness as the Jew stood nearby, stunned and embarrassed. Was this the actual Caliph? However the latter did not give him time to think, for he took him by the arm and drew him closer. “Let me be,” mumbled the Jew, “I can’t come.”

“Why not?” asked the Caliph with a smile.

“Because...because of my donkey,” he replied.

“Don’t worry. We’ll take care of it,” said the Caliph as he laughed.

He placed the stunned Jew in the care of his servants, ordering them to wash and clothe him in royal garments. Everyone was astounded: “Why is such honor being shown to a Jew?” they asked.

The Caliph replied, “Up to now, this Jew gave me his own clothes to wear. Now I will give him mine.” The Jew was led to the bathes, then clothed in royal garments and brought before the Caliph’s sofa.

The Caliph said to him, “You saved my life. Remain by my side, and you will lack nothing for the rest of your life.”

The Jew replied, “Sire, allow me to return home.”

“As you wish,” said the Caliph, “but tell me what I can give you.”

“I have just one request,” he responded. “I own a vegetable stall at the market, and facing my stall is another Jew who owns his own stall. May the Caliph please have him thrown out of the market.”

The Caliph was stunned: “I wanted to give you a sizeable reward. You could have asked to be the governor of your own province! Yet all that interests you are trivial things?”

The Jew was adamant. He wanted nothing for himself, but just couldn’t tolerate his neighbor.

The Caliph turned to one of his servants and said, “Yesterday I imprisoned a Jewish scholar. Take him out of the dungeon and bring him before me!” The scholar thus stood before him, trembling.

The Caliph addressed him warmly, saying: “Forgive me for how I treated you. Yesterday, when you told me that Jews had lost their kingdom on account of baseless hatred, I imprisoned you because I thought that you were mocking me. Now I realize that you were right, for with my own eyes I have seen that people are willing to lose an entire kingdom because of baseless hatred!”