

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Korach

Consumed – Understanding Korach's Motivation

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח... וְדָתָן וְאַבְיָרָם... וַיִּקְמוּ לְפָנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמְּשִׁים וּמֵאֲתָיִים

Korach took... and Dasan and Aviram... and they rose up before Moshe, with two hundred and fifty men from among the Children of Israel.¹

INTRODUCTION: BENEATH THE SURFACE

The major part of our parsha deals with Korach's rebellion against Moshe's authority as Hashem's emissary. Rashi, citing the Midrash, reveals Korach's underlying motive for initiating the dispute:

ומה ראה קורח לחלוק עם משה, נתקנא על נשיאותו של אלצפן בן עוזיאל שמינהו משה נשיא על בני קהת על פי הדיבור. אמר קורח אחי אבא ארבעה היו... הבכור נטלו שני בניו גדולה, אחד מלך ואחד כהן גדול, מי ראוי ליטול את השניה, לא אני שהוא בן יצהר שהוא שני לעמרם, הרינו חולק עליו ומבטל את דבריו

What did Korach see to wage a dispute against Moshe? He was envious over the office of Eltzafan ben Uziel, whom Moshe had appointed as prince of the family of Kehas by Divine command. Said Korach: My father's siblings were four... the firstborn (Amram) saw his two sons (Moshe and Aharon) assume positions of greatness, one the king and the other the Kohen Gadol. Who should assume the next position? Not I, who am the son of Yitzhar, the second sibling to Amram?... Behold, I will wage a dispute against him [Moshe] and nullify his words.

REFLECTING ON RASHI

These words of Rashi are most striking, for it emerges that the underlying cause of the dispute was the fact that Korach felt he had been overlooked for office! Understandably, there is room here to ask a couple of questions:

1. What leads Rashi to make this comment regarding Korach's motivation? After all, there is no explicit mention in the Torah of this idea. As such, perhaps he was motivated for the same reason the others in faction were, namely, in order to be able to perform the avodah in the Mishkan!

¹ Bamidbar 16:1-2.

2. Rashi's comment regarding Korach's motivation is not actually made while commenting on Korach, but rather within the course of his comments on the next phrase in the verse – “and Dasan and Aviram.” This is also very strange. Rashi has plenty to say about Korach, why not include this most fundamental point regarding his motivation in those comments which are actually about Korach?

It would appear that these two questions actually answer each other. Korach faction was itself made up of sub-factions, for not all who joined had the same goals in mind. Let us consider these groups:

- ▷ The Two Hundred and Fifty Men: these were men of distinction and pure motivation. They could not come to terms with the fact that they had been excluded from the avodah, to the extent that they were prepared to dispute Moshe over this, risking everything in the process. These men are referred to in the verse as “הַחֹטְאִים בְּנַפְשֵׁיהֶם” – having sinned with their souls,² i.e. their spiritual desire for more than was appropriate for them. In this regard, the way in which they were punished – consumed by a holy fire – was as apt a description of them in life as in death.
- ▷ Dasan and Aviram: these were simply interested in engaging in dispute with Moshe. They did not have – nor did they need – any other reason. Whatever was the dispute of the day was perfectly acceptable for them. The way they met their end was not through holy fire, but simply by the ground beneath them opening up and swallowing them, as if they never existed.

It is fascinating to consider that, under any other circumstances, these two groups would never be seen within a hundred yards of each other! And yet here they were, unlikely allies in Korach's camp.³ The only one who has yet to be considered in that camp is Korach himself: of the two drastically diverse factions that he had brought together, with whom did he have more in common? Who were his primary co-protagonists and who were secondary and incidental?

The answer can be found in the first two verses of our parsha. The Torah first mentions Korach, the one who brought everyone together. It is reasonable to expect that whoever were Korach's true partners in this dispute will be mentioned next, with others being mentioned after that. As it happens, the next people mentioned are Dasan and Aviram! Indeed, the two hundred and fifty men who wanted the avodah are not only mentioned straight after Korach, they aren't even mentioned in the same verse! This alerts us to the idea that while Korach may have officially contested the avodah like those other men, his real motives were much more in accord with those such as of Dasan and Aviram.

This is the basis of Rashi's comment and moreover, we now understand why it appears within Rashi's comment on Dasan and Aviram. At the point when it has only mentioned Korach, we are not entitled to assume that his motivation is anything other than what he says it is, and therefore Rashi makes no comment at that stage. It is only when the verse proceeds to present Dasan and Aviram that Rashi's sensors are now raised, and hence he “reopens Korach's file” to discuss underlying issues in his *machlokes*!

THE HOUR OF TRUTH

What is particularly terrifying about Korach's designs is just how far he was willing to go and how much damage he was willing to cause in order to achieve his position of power. He was prepared to launch a nationwide rebellion aiming to topple the entire infrastructure of the Jewish people which was based on the authenticity of Torah so that in the aftermath he could step in and assume office. This is what Rashi

2 See 17:3.

3 See Commentaries of Malbim and *Haamek Davar*, beginning of Parshas Korach.

refers to in his concluding words, “Behold I will wage a dispute against him and nullify his words,” i.e. Korach hoped that the dispute about the avodah would lead to the nullification of *all* Moshe’s words, including those who had been appointed by him as *nasi*.

What makes matters all the more distressing is that Korach cynically waged his campaign under the guise of championing the people’s rights to the avodah, enlisting their religious fervor as a tool with which to undermine Moshe’s authority. In addition to the appalling abuse of a spiritual idea for temporal gain, this was particularly vexing, since as long as Korach was hiding behind the demand for avodah, this rendered Moshe unable to address the core issue with Korach and remonstrate with him about what he really wanted – the office of *nasi*.

Tragically, it was only when things came to a head with Moshe calling upon Hashem to verify his role of Divine emissary with an unprecedented miracle, he prefaced by stating: “בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי ה' שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת: אֵת כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי לֹא מִלְּבִי – through this you will know that Hashem sent me to perform all these acts, and it was not from my own heart”⁴ Commenting on use of the plural form – “all these acts” – Rashi explains: “To give the high-priesthood to Aharon, with his sons as deputies and to make Eltzafan the *nasi* of Kehas.” With these words, Moshe was saying to Korach, “Your subterfuge did not allow me to openly talk about it, but do not imagine that I didn’t recognize that your primary objective from the outset was not the avodah, but the office of *nasi* that had been given to Eltzafan.”⁵

FRINGE STATEMENTS AND PARCHMENT PLAYS

In truth, Korach’s exploitation of religious ideas for power and prestige did not stop at the Avodah, they insinuated themselves into the words of Torah as well. Korach is famous for confronting Moshe with questions such as:

- ▷ If an entire garment is made of *techeiles* wool, does it still need a thread of *techeiles* at its corner?
- ▷ If an entire room is full of Torah scroll, does it still require a mezuzah at its doorpost?

The commentators explain that in addition to attempting to diminish respect for Moshe by eliciting answers which appear unreasonable, Korach intended these question as an attack on Moshe and Aharon themselves. He was, in effect, claiming: “We, the Jewish people, are the garment that is entirely *techeiles*, and the room that is full of Torah scrolls. As such, we do not need you as our *techeiles* thread or mezuzah!

Here, too, if confronted, Korach could innocently respond that he only wanted to discuss Torah matters with Moshe! Yet these Torah questions were cynical maneuvers designed to attack all those who stood in Korach’s way in his quest for power.

THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

The Gemara⁶ relates a famous episode regarding Korach and his men:

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah was approached by a certain Arab guide who said, “Come, I will show you where Korach’s men are buried.” He took him to a place where there was a crevice in the ground, and there was smoke rising up from it.

The guide then took a piece of wool, dipped it in water, and wrapped it around the tip of a

4 Verse 28.

5 Gur Aryeh loc. cit.

6 Bava Basra 74a.

spear. He lowered the spear into the crevice, and when he withdrew it, the wool had been singed.

The merchant said to him, "Put your ear to the ground." He did so, and heard voices [of Korach and his men] saying, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true, and we are liars."

This entire episode is most enigmatic: What was the purpose of the exercise of lowering the soaked wool into the crevice? Why was there a need to experience the effects of the fire firsthand? Was the smoke rising from the crevice not evidence enough?

R' Yaakov Ettlinger⁷ explains that this mysterious Arab guide, who clearly was no ordinary person and possessed great knowledge and insight, was looking to allegorically illustrate and explain what lay behind Korach's rebellion.

He took some wool...

Wool in the parlance of the Rabbis represents honor, for it is the standard material from which clothing is made, which brings honor to the person.⁸ Korach's honor was at the "tip of his spear," i.e., it was the cause of his war against Moshe. However, he did not present it as such. Rather, first he

... dipped it in water and wrapped it around the tip of the spear.

Water is a common metaphor for Torah.⁹ Korach dipped his honor in words of Torah, and then attached it to the tip of the spear which he thrust toward Moshe. He presented his attacks as being motivated by a sincere desire for Torah knowledge.

He lowered the spear into the crevice, and when he withdrew it, the wool had been singed.

Fire represents the destructive effects of *machlokes*. As the confrontation developed and "heated up," Korach's presumed interest in Torah evaporated, and his quest for honor came to the fore, whereupon he met his end, and all his political aspirations went up in smoke.

CONCLUSION: TROUBLES AND THEIR TAKEAWAYS

The tragic episodes in the Torah are not written for our information, or even for our edification, but for our education. Parshas Korach puts us on alert to the fact that *machlokes* can present itself in many forms, each one holier than the next, with the real motivation rarely being the slogan that is put on the official placard. No dispute has ever officially introduced itself as being Not For the Sake of Heaven, yet somehow these still manage to make up the vast majority of disputes. Additionally, even beyond the realm of *machlokes* per se, the parsha teaches us to be truthful in our enlisting, espousing and practicing of Torah values; to see to it that the our aim as we promote these values is not merely to demote the person next to us. As surely as Korach was ultimately forced to admit that "Moshe and his Torah are true," we too, should not only champion ideas that are true, but we ourselves should be true in how we do so.

7 Author of *Aruch Laner*, in his *Derashos Minchas Ani*, Parshas Korach.

8 See *Shabbos* 113b.

9 See *Taanis* 7a.