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INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

Parashat Korach – Democracy and Demagoguery

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Korach son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi, and Datan and Aviram sons of Reuven, and On son of Pelet, son of Reuven, all arose before Moshe along with two hundred and fifty men from the people of Israel, every one of them princes of the congregation, members of the assembly, and men of renown. They gathered against Moshe and Aharon and said: "Don't you have enough?! The entire congregation is holy and God is in their midst. Why, then, do both of you exercise rule over the congregation of God?!" (BeMidbar/Numbers 16:1-3).

Thus begins Parashat Korach, introducing the most serious popular challenge to the leadership of Moshe and Aharon to have arisen since the Exodus. Accused of despotism and nepotism, the two brothers are harshly condemned by Korach and his disgruntled cohorts, as the congregation of Israel menacingly rallies around them and considers their words. Some of Korach's followers are genuinely aggrieved at the election of the Levites to the service of the Tabernacle, in place of the firstborn. Korach, himself, however, is more distressed by the appointment of Aharon and his descendants to the office of the Priesthood, a singular honor bestowed upon the aged prophet by Divine fiat.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

While Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) removes the episode from its immediate chronological context and instead assigns it to the sojourn at Sinai, the Ramban (13th century, Spain) persuasively argues that Korach's rebellion breaks out in the aftermath of the sin of the Spies:

"This incident took place in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh Barnea after the debacle of the Spies…While the people of Israel were in the wilderness of Sinai they experienced nothing negative, for even in consequence of the sin of the Golden Calf, relatively few Israelites perished, and Moshe succeeded in averting God's wrath by imploring His mercy for forty days and forty nights. At that time, the people of Israel loved Moshe as themselves, and would not have tolerated any insurrection against his leadership. Therefore Korach silently endured the election of Aharon to the priesthood and the appointment of Elizaphan his (Korach's) junior cousin to the leadership of the clan of Kehat (see BeMidbar 3:30), and the first born tolerated the appointment of the tribe of Levi in their place."

However, after entering the wilderness of Paran, the people suffered a number of setbacks at Tav'era and Kivrot HaTa'avah. After the episode of the Spies, Moshe did not pray fervently on their behalf nor succeed in overturning the decree that the generation would perish in the wilderness and not enter the Land. Then the people of Israel become embittered, and began to entertain thoughts that Moshe's leadership only brought trouble upon them. It was then that Korach chose his moment to act, correctly surmising that his attempted coup would enjoy broad support among the masses." The Ramban detects support for his commentary in the words of Datan and Aviram. These two supporters of Korach sarcastically contrast the 'land (of Egypt) flowing with milk and honey' from which Moshe had led them out, to the barren wilderness in which the people now found themselves, despairing of ever entering the Land to secure 'a plot of field or vineyard' (BeMidbar/Numbers 16:13-14). In other words, Datan and Aviram and their respective party were less distressed by the election of the Levites, than by the thought of the dismal denouement that awaited them in the wilderness.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RAMBAN'S READING

In the end, of course, Korach's challenge is roundly defeated: Datan, Aviram and all that is theirs are suddenly swallowed by an earthquake announced by Moshe, while the two hundred and fifty men of renown are incinerated along with their provocative offerings of incense. Korach's fate is no more fortunate, though the text refrains from explicitly spelling it out. By directly linking the events of the Parasha to the debacle of the Spies, the Ramban succeeds in explaining the timing of the revolt, for it was intense feelings of disappointment and dejection that propelled forward the plans of the malcontents. Ramban's linkage has thematic implications as well, for both incidents, that of the Spies and that of Korach, have at their core the same smoldering cinder of dissatisfaction with the leadership of the people. The Spies railed against Moshe's confident counterclaims that Israel could enter the land and triumph (see Devarim/Deuteronomy 1:29-33), while Korach bitterly questions the sincerity of his illustrious cousin's motives in appointing Aharon to the position of High Priest, and the Levites to the office of serving God at His house.

But while the inflated claims of the Spies as well as their operational recommendations are roundly refuted and effectively undermined by two men from their own midst (though the people at large remain unconvinced), no one offers a reasonable rebuttal of Korach's claims. What of the impassioned manifesto advanced by him and his party? What of the eminently equitable assertion that "the entire congregation is holy and God is in their midst. Why, then, do both of you exercise rule over the congregation of God?!". Democratic in tone and populist in content, Korach's words strike a resonant chord in the hearts of the people. Why are those words expunged from the collective memory of Israel, just as surely as Korach and his reckless retinue disappear from sight?

INSINCERE MOTIVES AND GENUINE REFORM

Commenting in the Mishna (Tractate Avot 5:17), our Sages offered the following pertinent observation:

All disagreements that are for the sake of Heaven will in the end be established. However, disagreements that are not for the sake of Heaven, will not be established. What is an example of a disagreement that is for the sake of Heaven? That of Hillel and Shamai. What is an example of a disagreement that is not for the sake of Heaven? That of Korach and all of his cohorts.

The Mishna here draws a sharp distinction between disagreements that are joined by protagonists that are animated by sincere motives, versus arguments that are initiated by pugnacious parties that may couch their claims in populist jingles but really have narrow, sectarian interests in mind. As the 16th century commentator Ovadia of Bertinoro (Italy) explains:

If the objective and final purpose of the dissenters is to ascertain the truth, then such an argument will bear fruit, for out of disagreement and sincere discussion the truth will emerge. Thus, the divergences between Shammai and Hillel eventually led to the conclusion that the Halacha follows the House of Shammai. A disagreement that is engaged with insincere motives, however, such as with the goal of securing rule or for the love of supremacy, will yield nothing of permanence. Thus, Korach and his supporters sought honor and power for themselves, and in the end they perished.

According to the above, while the claims of Korach may have had merit, since they were animated by impure and insincere motives, they were disqualified and achieved nothing. The desire for a more equitable distribution of offices and a more democratic process for the selection of leaders, the essential elements of Korach's platform, strike us as positive and welcome developments, and rightly so. However, when the objections to the existing structures are initiated by power-hungry populists harboring self-serving and ultimately anti-democratic sentiments, then the damage that is unleashed by their calls for 'reform' is frequently much more severe than the existing wrongs that they claim ought to be set right. Human history offers us innumerable examples of demagogues who have seized power under the banner of improving the lives of the masses, but then turned that power against the very people that they alleged they came to 'serve'.

SAMUEL, DESCENDANT OF KORACH

In Rabbinic literature, Korach is portrayed as an individual excessively caught up with his own illustrious lineage, talent and dreams for the future:

Korach, who seemed so wise, what caused him to act so foolishly? In fact, he was led astray by his visions of the future. He saw that from him would descend a famous dynasty, for Shemuel/Samuel the Prophet was among his progeny. This is the same Samuel whom the text equates with Moshe and Aharon, as it says: "Moshe and Aharon were His priests, and Samuel called by His name" (Tehillim/Psalms 99:6)…Korach said: "Is it possible that all of this greatness will issue from me and I will remain silent?" He did not, however, discern properly, for his children did teshuva and Samuel descended from them, but Moshe was able to ascertain…

Significantly, the Rabbis perceived an important link between Korach the anti-hero of our Parasha, and Samuel the 11th century BCE prophet who was his direct descendant. According to the somewhat confusing pedigree preserved in Divrei HaYamim/Chronicles 1: 6:7-13, Samuel the Prophet was in fact a fifteenth-generation descendant of Korach:

The descendants of Kehat: Aminadav his son, KORACH his son, Asir, Elkana and Aviasaf his sons, Asir's son Tachat, Uriel his son, Uziah his son, Shaul hi son, Elkana his son, Amasai and Achimot his sons, Elkana his son, Tzofai his son, Nachat his son, Eliav his son, Yerocham his son, Elkana his son, and SAMUEL his son…

While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the life and times of Samuel the Prophet, let is suffice to say that he presided over one of the most tumultuous periods in Biblical history. The people of Israel had already entered the land some four hundred years earlier, had settled it and had adopted to an agrarian life, but had failed to achieve tranquility. The period of the judges that preceded Samuel had been characterized by instability, disunity and lengthy stretches of moral and religious decline. The Canaanite gods and the anti-values that they championed exerted a powerful influence over the people of Israel. The Tabernacle had stood long at Shilo, but its priestly and Levitical hierarchy, though held in awe by the people, corruptly plodded on in woeful ignorance of the august responsibilities of their office. While Samuel was a still a youngster, the holy precinct had been destroyed by the marauding Philistines, an event that had the welcome side-effect of shattering the people's illusions that Divine assistance could be secured through shallow devotions.

Into the vacuum created by the loss of the national shrine, the abject absence of credible political leadership or impartial religious guidance, stepped the young Samuel, full of Divine inspiration, sincere motivation and honest concern. During the course of his tenure, he arrested the spiritual decline, held off the Philistine onslaught and provided the people with a credible model of administration. Perhaps most importantly, Samuel presided over the transition from the period of the Judges to the age of the Monarchy, for it was under his able tutelage that Shaul/Saul, the first king of Israel, was selected and invested into office.

TWO OPPOSING MODELS

The connections between Korach and his able offspring are thus not at all arbitrary, but in fact reflect two antithetical models of social change. Korach, though he mouths slogans of concern and catchphrases of indignation, is in reality an egocentric soapbox orator consumed with his own visions of grandeur. Though he agitates for change, for an overthrow of the 'oppressive' priesthood and its replacement with a more egalitarian arrangement, his real agenda is self-advancement. His initiative fails because it is driven by conceit.

Samuel his direct descendant, a member of the same honored caste and in possession of his forebear's coveted genes, is also provided with the opportunity to effect a social revolution. Motivated by sincerity and selflessness, he succeeds, not by the violent overthrow of the unjust order that precedes him but rather by its incremental and steady repair. How significant indeed that it is Samuel who eventually presides over the appointment of the first king, a radical development that soon has the consequence of weakening the tight grasp of the priesthood upon the people's loyalties, by providing the very sort of 'checks and balances' that Korach had so many generations before demanded! Thus, in a way, Korach's reforms do not die. Though he perishes due to self-absorption and narcissistic pride, the equitable plan of which he speaks lies dormant in the national conscience. There it waits a very long time, to be reintroduced in not-unfamiliar guise through the agency of a descendant who possesses the nobility of character and care for the people that Korach so glaringly lacked. And that makes all the difference.

Shabbat Shalom