**S.A.L.T. – PARSAHAT KORACH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

After Korach’ revolt, which resulted in the death of his 250 followers who sought the privileges of the priesthood, God commanded Moshe to make a special covering for the altar from the firepans used by these 250 men for their illegitimate incense offering. The purpose of this covering, God explained, was to serve as “a reminder for the Israelites so that no foreign person, who is not from the offspring of Aharon, shall approach to offer incense before the Lord, and shall not be like Korach and his followers, as the Lord spoke through Moshe” (17:5).

Rashi, citing from the Midrash, associates the phrase “*be-yad Moshe*” (“through Moshe,” or, literally, “in Moshe’s hand”) with an incident that occurred much earlier, when Moshe’s hand turned leprous. As we read in Sefer Shemot (4:6), when God first instructed Moshe to go to Egypt and lead *Benei Yisrael* to freedom, He equipped him with three miraculous “signs” with which he would prove to the people that He was indeed sent by God. One of these signs was that his hand miraculously became entirely white, and then afterward regained its normal, healthy color. Rashi comments that the phrase “*be-yad Moshe*” in reference to Korach’s revolt alludes to the fact that non-*kohanim* who seek the privileges of the priesthood are liable to be stricken with *tzara’at*, like Moshe’s hand.

How might we explain this association drawn by the Midrash between Korach’s revolt and Moshe’s leprous hand?

Rashi, in his commentary to Parashat Shemot, writes (based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*) that Moshe’s leprous hand served as a punishment for his initial refusal to accept the mantle of leadership, claiming that the nation would not trust him. In a sense, Moshe at that time committed the opposite of Korach’s followers’ mistake. He refused to accept a leadership position that was assigned to him, whereas Korach’s followers coveted and demanded the rights to a position that was barred from them. Moshe deemed himself unworthy of, or unsuitable for, a prestigious post for which he was destined, while Korach’s group insisted they were deserving of a post that was reserved for others.

The Midrash perhaps seeks to convey the message that we must avoid both these mistakes. We must neither covet roles and positions that lie beyond our reach, that are not meant for us, nor shy away from challenging responsibilities which we are capable of filling. Our hand – the symbol of our potential, of the contributions we are capable of making – becomes “leprous,” it loses its strength and vitality, when we refuse to take on roles we should be taking on, and also when we seek roles for which we are unsuited. We must all try, to the best of our ability, to carefully determine our strengths and talents and commit ourselves to maximizing our potential, without lazily declining or being distracted by the pursuit of goals we are not meant to pursue.

Sunday

Parashat Korach begins with the story of Korach’s revolt against the authority of Moshe and Aharon, which resulted in the death of Korach and his followers.  The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (110a) adds a startling aspect to this story which is not mentioned in the Torah, telling that during Korach’s uprising, the people suspected Moshe of engaging in adulterous relationships (“chasheduhu mei-eishet ish”).  These rumors reached the point where the men all warned their wives not to be secluded with Moshe, in accordance with the halakhic procedure of kinui, whereby a suspicious husband warns his wife not to be secluded with the man in question.

Rav Matzliach Yechiel Ovadya, in his [Chazon Ovadya](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=22699&st=&pgnum=269&hilite=), suggests a novel, euphemistic reading of the Gemara’s comment.  He cites the Midrash’s striking comment in the Pesikta (22), “Whoever accepts upon himself authority in order to benefit from it is like an adulterer who benefits from a woman’s body.”  If a person assumes a leadership position for personal benefit, in order to enjoy the perks and prestige of authority, then he is comparable to no less than an adulterer, who violates other people, entering into their private lives in order to benefit from that which is most precious to them.  The Pesikta cites in reference to such figures the verse in Mishlei (6:32), “An adulterer with a woman is heartless.”  A leader who accepts his position for personal gain is “heartless,” seeking to benefit off the backs of innocent people, using what is theirs for his own purposes and interests, like an adulterer.

In light of this comparison, Rav Ovadya suggests, the Gemara’s comment regarding the people’s suspicions of Moshe may be interpreted allegorically.  The Gemara perhaps describes in graphic terms the nature of Korach’s revolt, how he succeeded in garnering such widespread support for his audacious, ill-advised and ill-fated campaign.  He did this by depicting Moshe as a “heartless” leader who uses his position for personal gain, who governs and rules not out of genuine concern for the people, but rather to further his own interests.

Korach’s accusation, of course, was false, but nevertheless, this interpretation of the Gemara reminds us of the acute danger of insincerity particularly in the area of leadership and influence.  Chazal in the aforementioned passage use the harshest possible terms to describe a person who assumes a position of influence for personal benefit, rather than out of sincere idealism.  If a person exerts authority or influence to boost his own ego or satisfy his craving for honor and prestige, then he is, in the eyes of the Midrash, violating and using his charges.  Positions of influence must be reserved for people who follow the example of Moshe Rabbenu, the humblest man on the face of the earth, who assumed his leadership role ambivalently, and with a sincere desire to work for the people’s best interests, rather than his own.

Monday

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b-110a) tells the famous story of On ben Pelet, who is identified in the opening verse of Parashat Korach as a participant in Korach’s uprising against Moshe and Aharon. As On’s name is never again mentioned in the narrative of the ill-fated revolt, it appears that he withdrew from the campaign. The Gemara explains that On’s wife saved her husband by giving him wine, which made him sleep. She then stood outside their tent with her hair exposed, and when Korach’s men came to bring him, they turned away, not wanting to look at his wife with her hair uncovered. The Gemara applies to On’s wife the verse in Sefer Mishlei (14:1), “*Chakhmot nashim banta beitah*” – “The wisdom of women has built her home.” The purpose of citing this verse in reference to On’s wife, seemingly, is to laud her for her “wisdom” in rescuing her husband from the fate suffered from Korach’s followers.

How might we explain *Chazal*’s implied depiction of On’s wife as “wise”? What special “wisdom” was there in foreseeing the looming catastrophe and stepping in to save her husband?

One of the unique aspects of the story of Korach, as it emerges from the Midrashim and commentaries, is the pious stature of the “bad guys.” *Chazal*, as Rashi (16:7) cites, describe Korach as a man with prophetic insight, who was shown through prophecy that he would beget righteous descendants. Undoubtedly, a man with prophetic capabilities was both knowledgeable and righteous – quite different from the familiar image of a villain. We might also note the Gemara’s ironic account of Korach’s men refusing to approach a woman with uncovered hair. These were people who adhered to strict levels of piety, even as they set out to depose Moshe. In fact, Netziv, in his *Ha’amek Davar* commentary, writes that the 250 men who demanded the right to perform the rituals assigned to the *kohen gadol* were driven by genuine spiritual ambition. These were righteous men who pined for the opportunity to serve the Almighty at the highest level, and this is what led them to covet the privileges of the priesthood. Indeed, Rashi (16:1), citing the Midrash, identifies thee 250 sinners as “*rashei sanhedra’ot*” – leading rabbinical judges. The rebels who challenged Moshe and Aharon were not the riffraff, but rather the nation’s scholarly and spiritual elite.This is likely reflected by the people’ complaint after the death of Korach’s cohorts, when they angrily turned to Moshe and Aharon and cried, “*Atem hamitem et am Hashem*” – “You have killed the Nation of the Lord” (17:6). The rebels were “*am Hashem*” – devoted servants of God, who made a tragic mistake to betray God by challenging Moshe.

The special “wisdom” of On’s wife, perhaps, is rooted in her ability to distinguish between the right and wrong camps, to recognize that as “religious” and “spiritual” Korach and his followers seemed – and, in fact, were, until they launched this campaign – they were, in fact, evil sinners who launched an assault on the system that God had commanded. She had the insight and intuition to recognize the wickedness of outwardly pious individuals who acted wrongly. When other people looked upon this group of people who conducted themselves piously and earned a reputation for greatness, they were naturally led to support them. On’s wife, however, displayed great wisdom – as well as courage – by understanding that their campaign was absolutely wrong, despite the outward piety and seeming sincerity of its leaders and participants.

Tuesday

Rashi, commenting on Parashat Korach (16:7), cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* as noting that Korach was, inherently, too intelligent to make the foolish mistake of mounting a revolt against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. He was capable of such a mistake, the Midrash explains, only because “*eino hitato*” – “his eye misled him.” Endowed with prophetic insight, Korach foresaw that his progeny would include the prophet Shemuel, as well as distinguished Levites singing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Seeing this greatness that awaited his family, Korach assumed that already then he deserved a position of leadership and distinction, and so he set his sights upon deposing Moshe.

An insightful explanation of the Midrash’s comments is suggested by Rav Moshe Greenwald, in his [*Arugat Ha’bosem*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=39276&st=&pgnum=202&hilite=). Rav Greenwald notes *Chazal*’s timeless proverb in (Tamid 32a), “*Eizehu chakham – ha-ro’eh et ha-nolad*” – a “wise” person is one who foresees and anticipates the future outcome of his decisions. The precise meaning of the word “*nolad*” is discussed in Masekhet Nedarim (30b), where the Gemara demonstrates that this term can refer to either those who have already been born, or those who will be born in the future. And thus when *Chazal* define “wisdom” as the ability to see the “*nolad*,” Rav Greenwald asserts, they refer to the ability to keenly observe the present and also anticipate the future outcome of present conditions. One cannot anticipate how present conditions will unfold without accurately understanding those conditions. And thus the “wisdom” of being “*ro’eh et ha-nolad*” necessarily includes a keen perception of the present, an indispensable prerequisite for preparing for the future.

Returning to Korach, Rav Greenwald notes that the Midrash, as cited by Rashi, speaks of Korach’s vision in the singular form: “***eino*** *hitato*” – “his **eye** misled him.” Korach was a man of vision who could see into the future, but he failed to first properly assess the present. He used his “future eye” to see his descendants rise to prominence, but he did not utilize his other “eye” to see what was right there in front of him – the obvious reality that Moshe was God’s loyal prophet who faithfully and selflessly led the nation in accordance with the will of the Almighty. Korach saw keenly with one eye, but not with the other; he had the exceptional ability to look ahead to the future, but failed to see what was right in front of him.

We must ensure not to allow ambitious goals and dreams to blind us to more basic and immediate matters. Before we dream and aspire to greatness, we must first tend to our elementary obligations, laying the foundations upon which we can then build to seek the towering heights of which we dream.

Wednesday

Following the tragic episode of Korach’s revolt against Moshe’s authority, which included a demand by 250 of his followers to be given the rights of the *kehuna* (priesthood), God speaks to Aharon and affirms his right to the various *matenot kehuna* – priestly gifts. He lists the many different donations that the people are to make to the *kohanim*, through which the *kohanim* – who were not given agricultural lands in *Eretz Yisrael* – were supported and provided with a livelihood.

Rashi (18:8), citing the *Sifrei*, observes that God introduces this section with the term “*hinei*” (generally translated as, “behold”). This term, as Rashi demonstrates from elsewhere in the Torah, has a connotation of joy. *Chazal*, it appears, found it worthwhile to emphasize that this *mitzva* – the obligations of the *matenot kehuna* – was given to the *kohanim* with special joy.

The obvious question arises as to the particular significance of joy in this context. Why would *Chazal* seek to draw an association between the *matenot kehuna* and joy?

The Tolna Rebbe explained that this section was presented in response to the tragedy of Korach’s revolt. As Rashi proceeds to explain, God speaks here to Aharon to confirm his and his children’s rights to the privileges of the *kehuna* after it had been challenged and protested by Korach and his followers. For this reason, the Rebbe suggested, *Chazal* wanted to emphasize the quality of joy and contentment in this context. The antidote to “Korachism,” to the insatiable lust for power and prestige that led to the downfall of Korach and his followers, is contentment. *Chazal* sought to draw our attention to the fact that part and parcel of God’s response to the unfortunate event of Korach’s revolt was the lesson of *simcha*, of feeling content and satisfied with one’s lot, rather than focusing on what others have that he does not have. Beyond affirming that Korach was wrong, that the rights of the *kehuna* were reserved only for Aharon and his children, God found it necessary to underscore the vital importance of feeling happy and content with what one has, rather than constantly feeling dissatisfied, looking around to observe other people’s blessings, and desiring more.

We might add that the verse cited by the *Sifrei* to demonstrate the association between “*hinei*” and joy is a very significant one in this context. The *Sifrei* points to God’s remark to Moshe at the burning bush, informing him that Aharon would come out to greet him upon his return to Egypt (“*Hinei yotzei likratekha*”) and would be overjoyed to see him (“*ve-ra’akha ve-samach be-libo*” – Shemot *4:14*). As Rashi famously comments (there in Sefer Shemot), Aharon rejoiced over his younger brother’s appointment as leader of the nation, without feeling any resentment or envy, and was rewarded for his selflessness with the privilege of wearing the priestly breastplate (*choshen*) upon his chest. Appropriately, in the context of God’s response to Korach’s revolt, *Chazal* make reference to Aharon’s genuine happiness over his younger brother’s position of prestige. He felt perfectly content and joyous knowing that his brother received such distinction, rather than feeling angst over having not been chosen himself for this position. This is precisely the kind of *simcha* that is needed to avoid the pitfall of Korach, the dangers of jealousy and perennial dissatisfaction that could lead us to irrational behavior and foolish measures. We must follow the example of Aharon, who was capable of seeing the blessings of others without feeling envious, and of experiencing genuine joy and contentment with his lot, even when others around him had more.

Thursday

In his commentary to Parashat Korach (16:7), Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* as explaining the flawed rationale that drove Korach to launch his uprising against Moshe. A great man endowed with prophetic insight, the Midrash explains, Korach foresaw the greatness destined for his progeny. Specifically, he saw Shemuel, the great prophet and leader who succeeded in turning the people’s hearts away from idolatry and laid the groundwork for the dynasty of King David. Additionally, Korach saw his descendants singing beautiful music in the *Beis Ha-mikdash*. Korach thus asked himself, in Rashi’s words, “Is it possible that all this greatness will arise from me in the future, and I will be silent?” He therefore decided to garner support for his effort to depose Moshe.

How might we understand Korach’s question, “…and I will be silent”? Why did the future greatness of his descendants necessitate, in his mind, bold action in the present? Why did he assume that he needed to seize the reins of leadership now in order to pave the way for his descendants’ rise to prominence?

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa explained that the Midrash refers here to Korach’s quest to serve as *kohen gadol*. He mistakenly assumed that he needed to spiritually prepare his family for greatness by rising already then to his own position of greatness. In order for him to beget righteous descendants, he argued, it was necessary for him to lay the spiritual foundations, which he could accomplish only by performing the priestly rituals in the *Mishkan*. And thus he led a protest against Moshe’s reserving these rituals exclusively for Aharon and his sons.

One of the lessons that can be learned from Rav Simcha Bunim’s analysis is that we achieve greatness by working to excel in our own roles, rather than seeking to perform other people’s roles. We are all given our own individual sets of talents and skills, and placed in our own sets of circumstances in which to maximize those talents and skills. Sometimes, in our quest for excellence, we might look around to observe the roles filled by others, and then assume that these are the roles we, too, need to fill in order to feel accomplished and fully actualize our potential. The best thing Korach could have done to prepare his descendants for spiritual excellence is to perform the role assigned to him at the highest level, as opposed to trying to usurp the *kehuna*. Greatness is achieved not by trying to be somebody else, but by trying to be the best we can be under the current conditions and circumstances, utilizing to the fullest all the skills, resources and opportunities that God gives us.

Friday

We read in Parashat Korach that when Moshe heard Korach and his followers voice their complaints, and insist that they should all be granted the privileges of the *kehuna*, he fell to the ground helplessly (“*va-yipol al panav*” – 16:4). Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains that whereas in previous instances where *Benei Yisrael* angered God, he was able to pray on their behalf, he now felt he could no longer petition for them, considering how many times they had sinned.

The Kotzker Rebbe, after citing Rashi’s comments, suggests a clever explanation for why Moshe felt unable to pray for the people in the wake of Korach’s uprising. Some sources tell that after the sin of the golden calf, Moshe successfully petitioned on the people’s behalf by claiming that they were unaware of the prohibition against idol worship. The Ten Commandments were said in the singular form, and thus the people perhaps presumed that the commands were issued specifically to Moshe. Hence, they were unaware that the first two commandments – to believe in God and not to worship other deities – were not binding upon them. As such, they should be forgiven for worshipping a graven image. This argument, however, instantly lost its validity the moment Korach and his cohorts came to Moshe and proclaimed, “*…kol ha-eida kulam kedoshim*” (16:3) – that the entire nation is holy, which Rashi explains to mean, “They all heard words from the Almighty at Sinai.” Once the people themselves “confessed” that they, like Moshe, received the divine commands at Sinai, Moshe could no longer excuse the golden calf by claiming that the people did not consider themselves bound by the prohibition against idol worship. Therefore, the decree of annihilation issued in the wake of the golden calf resurfaced, and Moshe felt helpless.

Underlying this clever insight is a profound understanding of the fundamental difference between these two episodes. The sin of the golden calf was borne out of the people’s sense of helpless dependency on Moshe. The moment it appeared to them that he was not returning, they frantically searched for an alternative, and this led them to produce and worship an idol. The cause of the golden calf was the people’s sense that they could not directly relate to God, as only Moshe was capable of receiving the divine command, and thus their connection to God was shattered once they concluded that he was gone. Korach’s revolt reflected the precise opposite mindset, one of complete confidence and an inflated sense of independence. As Rashi cites from the Midrash, Korach argued to Moshe that a garment dyed entirely with *tekhelet* does not require a *tekhelet* string of *tzitzit*, and that a room full of Torah scrolls does not require a *mezuzah*. His claim was that all *Am Yisrael* were sacred and had no need for religious leadership or a priestly class. They were all equally capable of serving the Almighty properly without any guidance or inspiration from leaders, and thus they did not need Moshe and Aharon filling their respective roles.

Moshe was able to petition on the people’s behalf after the sin of the golden calf, but not in response to Korach’s uprising. If the problem is extreme insecurity and lowliness, a sense that God’s word is relevant only to “Moshe” – to the exceptionally righteous – then the malady can, with time, be cured through education and training. If we fail because of despair, because we feel incompetent and incapable of meeting God’s expectations, there is the possibility of growth and learning, whereby we can gain the strength and resolve needed to fulfill our obligations. But in the case of Korach’s revolt, Moshe felt helpless. If we err because of overconfidence, because we assume we have all the answers and have nothing more to learn, then we cannot learn. And so Moshe could pray for the people after the golden calf, but not after Korach’s revolt. The precondition to growth and improvement is recognizing the need for growth and improvement. And thus while the tragedy of the golden calf demonstrates the grave dangers of under-confidence and despair, it was, at least in one sense, less grievous a mistake than the overconfidence that was put on display during Korach’s revolt, which can very easily quash all hopes of improvement and growth.

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