YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Korach**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

**Controversy for the Sake of Heaven**

Adapted by Yair Oster

Translated by David Strauss

Now Korach the son of Yitzhar the son of Kehat the son of Levi, with Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and On the son of Pelet, sons of Reuven, took men; and they rose up in the face of Moshe, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown; and they assembled themselves together against Moshe and against Aharon, and said to them: “You take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you lift up yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?” (*Bemidbar* 16:1-3)

Our *parasha* opens with a description of the greatness and high rank of Korach's company. It should be emphasized that we are dealing with the princes of Israel, who only a few *parashiyot* earlier participated in the dedication of the *Mishkan*, and with the sons of Kehat, about whom it is stated: "Because the service of the holy things belonged to them; they bore them upon their shoulders." These are people of the inner circle, members of the upper class, who hold public office – "princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown." The Midrash refers to the people whom Korach drew to him as "the great of Israel and the Sanhedrin."

How is it possible that such great people committed this sin?

*Chazal* present three different understandings of the nature of the controversy between Korach and his company and Moshe:

1. Theological – Korach and his company truly believed in the model of "all the congregation are holy."
2. Purely monetary – Korach and his company yearned for the priestly gifts.
3. Desire and honor – Rashi, in the wake of *Midrash Tanchuma,* explains that the dispute stemmed from Korach's personal jealousy, which was stirred up by the appointment of Elitzafan.

**Two Aspects of Aspiration for Greatness**

Man, by nature, aspires to develop, to advance, and to lead. With this trait, he is supposed to develop his world and promote values of incomparable importance. The world could not exist if we all lacked ambition and the desire for greatness. When *Chazal* initially nullified the sex drive, they eventually understood that the world could not exist without it; similarly, we understand that the aspiration for leadership and influence is one of the foundations upon which the world stands. However, as in the case of the sex drive, there lurks great danger with the drive for personal fulfillment and leadership. Sometimes, it is precisely this trait that brings a person to be envious of another person who is above him in the chain of command, and this causes him to relate to him as corrupt and immoral.

Korach and his company find themselves in such a situation. In their eyes, Moshe and Aharon lord over the community in a corrupt manner.

When Moshe hears these charges, he falls upon his face. He does not know how to deal with this new challenge, there having been nothing like it until this point. He consults with God, because he feels that he lacks the ability and the strength to deal with the problem on his own.

Moshe turns to Korach's company and asks them to participate in an experiment: Every man must take his censer and fill it with incense, and in the morning God will make known whom He has chosen. We are dealing with a test that will be impossible to challenge, seeing that it will be God Himself who will define who is near to Him.

Moshe once again turns to Korach's company and says to them:

“Is it but a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the *Mishkan* of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them; and that He has brought you near, and all your brothers the sons of Levi with you? And will you seek the priesthood also? (*Bemidbar* 16:9-10)

Korach and his company already have a higher status than the rest of the people. They are members of the tribe of Levi, who were chosen to minister to God in the *Mishkan* and to stand before Him as representatives of the people. They are not satisfied with this, however, and ask for the priesthood as well. They demand to be elevated to the highest level and are unprepared to content themselves with any other position.

The *mishna* in *Avot* states:

R. Eliezer Ha-Kappar said: Jealousy, desire, and [the desire for] honor remove a man from the world. (*Avot* 4:1)

The jealousy of others and their possessions, the honor that a person thinks should be given to him because of his standing, are what cause him to lose his world. The boundary between true aspiration to develop and to lead, on the one hand, and the passion for personal honor, on the other, is thin and unclear. There are several Biblical characters who walk this thin rope; one example is Shelomo.

**Shelomo and Yerovam**

The book of *Melakhim* describes how Shelomo built the Temple. This was undoubtedly a blessed act. However, a careful reading of the chapters dealing with the building of the Temple points to the fact that Shelomo's actions were driven also by personal desire. Shelomo says: "I have surely built You a house of habitation" (I *Melakhim* 8:13) – that is to say, I Shelomo, built it. In this spirit, the *gemara* relates:

When Shelomo built the Temple, he desired to take the ark into the Holy of Holies, whereupon the gates cleaved to each other. Shelomo uttered twenty-four prayers, yet he was not answered. He opened [his mouth] and exclaimed: "Lift up your heads, O you gates; and be you lifted up, you everlasting doors: And the King of glory shall come in" (*Tehillim* 24:7). (*Shabbat* 30a)

The construction work was completed; all that is left to do is to bring the ark of the Lord inside. At this climactic point, the Temple gates refuse to open. Shelomo stands embarrassed before all the people, begging and beseeching the doors to open. But all is in vain, as the gates stand firm in their refusal.

Shlomo once again implores the gates to open, but is answered in the negative until he says: “It is not for myself that I ask, but for the sake of David.”

Another character who acts out of personal motives and to promote his own interests is Yerovam. As is well known, Yerovam is described in the Bible as a wicked king who sinned and caused others to sin, who "corrupted Israel before their Father in heaven." The *gemara* expounds:

"After this thing, Yerovam turned not from his evil way" (I *Melakhim* 13:33). What is meant by: "after this thing"? R. Abba said: After the Holy One, blessed be He, had seized Yerovam by his garment and urged him: “Repent – then I, you, and the son of Yishai [i.e., David] will walk in the Garden of Eden." (*Sanhedrin* 102a)

Yerovam is a man with tremendous potential for leadership. This is proven by the fact that God Himself appeals to him directly and offers him the deal of his life: Repent and be assured that you will walk with me and with David in the Garden of Eden! Who among us would have refused such an offer, to amble in the Garden of Eden with David, king of Israel, and God? But Yerovam does not hesitate and immediately asks God:

He asked: “And who shall be at the head?” “The son of Yishai shall be at the head.” “If so, I do not desire [it].”

God's answer does not accord with Yerovam's ambition. Yerovam cannot live in a world where he is second, even if it is to David, king of Israel. Therefore, he rejects the proposal, as tempting as it might have been.

Rav Amital *zt"l* used to say that the dispute with Korach is the first controversy that was directed at Moshe personally, out of a desire for honor. Until now, all of the disputes were to the point, between "the people" and "the leadership." Here, the challenge comes from individuals with names, who sharply criticize the standing of Moshe and Aharon. That the controversy was not a matter of substance can be proved from the fact that after the plague in the camp, after the ground opened its mouth and swallowed Korach and his company, and after Aharon was chosen by way of his blossoming rod, the princes still refuse to open their eyes and see reality. The Kotzker Rebbe argues that we are dealing with absolute indifference: "And they looked, and every man took his rod." The only thing that interested them was that their rods be returned to them. Such denial is only possible in the case of a personal disagreement, when a person digs himself into his position despite the contradictions and proofs standing before him.

**Controversy, For or Against?**

We need not reach the conclusion that every controversy is problematic. The *mishna* in *Avot* teaches: "Every controversy that is in the name of heaven, the end thereof is [destined] to result in something permanent" (*Avot* 5:17). The message arising from the *mishna* is that controversy is legitimate only when it remains on the substantive plain and stays clear of personal dimensions. In such a situation, each side tries to hear what the other has to say, takes an interest in his position, and is ready to learn. In such a controversy, it is reasonable to assume that at times the parties will change their positions, and thus it will "result in something permanent." In contrast, when a disagreement turns personal, when it is based on honor and emotions rather than on logic, it will most assuredly lead to disaster.

It is for King David – who does not concern himself with who else but him is permitted to sit in the Temple courtyard – that the Temple gates opens. Yerovam, on the other hand, who is solely interested in his personal standing as opposed to that of others, has no share in the World-to-Come.

(This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Korach* 5776 [2016].)