**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KORACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The final section of Parashat Korach discusses the various *matenot kehuna* – gifts which must be given to a *kohen*. This section concludes with the command of *terumat ma’aser* – the ten-percent donation that *Leviyim* must give to a *kohen* from the *ma’aser rishon* tithe which they receive from *Benei Yisrael*. Beyond the standard obligation of *teruma*, which requires everyone to donate a small portion of their produce to a *kohen*, *Leviyim* bear a special obligation to separate ten percent of the gifts they receive, and give that portion to a *kohen*.

The Torah instructs that this portion of grain which the *Leviyim* separate from the tithes they receive has the same status as standard *teruma*. God commands Moshe to tell the *Leviyim*, “Your donation shall be considered for you like the grain from the granary and the ripened produce from the winery” (18:27) – meaning, the *Leviyim*’s donation to the *kohanim* will be just like the rest of the nation’s gifts to the *kohanim*. Thus, the *halakhot* that apply to *terumat ma’aser* are the same as those which apply to *teruma*.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch of Zidochov found in this verse an allusion to the way people of stature as to perceive their position. The word“*terumatkhem*” (“your donation”) in this verse can be interpreted to mean “your distinction,” in which case the Torah calls upon people of stature to view their distinguished status like the status of *teruma*, the hallowed portion of grain given to a *kohen*. Just as this special portion has no reason to boast over its distinction, as it was coincidentally chosen by the owner of the produce, similarly, people of stature should not see themselves as necessarily greater or more important than others because of their status. Every person has a role to fill in our world – and some will fill roles that bring fame and prestige, while the majority of people will not. A person’s worth and success are measured not by his or her public stature, but rather by the extent to which the person maximizes his or her potential and excels in the particular role he or she is meant to fill. Therefore, those who were chosen as the “*teruma*” – as the prominent figures – should view their relationship to the rest of the people as the relationship between *teruma* and the rest of the produce. Their role involves prominence and prestige, but that does not make their role any more important than those of the commoners.

This Chassidic reading was offered in reference to a verse in Parashat Korach – the *parasha* that deals mainly with the tragic consequences of lusting for power and prestige. Korach felt dissatisfied with his role as a *Levi*, and sought a leadership position. His followers similarly desired the privileges of the high priesthood, thus prompting them to confront Moshe and Aharon and challenge their authority. Their mistake was the assumption that their value and importance as people depended upon the status of distinction that they achieve. The downfall of Korach and his followers shows us that we don’t need to pursue honor and prestige in order to live meaningfully, that our worth has nothing at all to do with status. Craving notoriety and prominence reflects a fundamentally mistaken perspective on what success means, a lack of appreciation for the vitally important role that each and every individual has as part of *Am Yisrael*. Our aspiration must be to fill our individual roles to the best of our ability, rather than coveting other roles which are not meant for us and for which we are not suited.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Korach enumerates the many different “*matenot kehuna*” – gifts that *Benei Yisrael* are required to give to the *kohanim*. After presenting this list, God spoke to Aharon and commanded, “You shall not inherit in their land, and you shall not have a portion among them” (18:20). This appears to be an explanation for why Aharon and his descendants – the *kohanim* – are to receive gifts from the people: because they were not granted a portion of the Land of Israel. While the rest of the country received land to till for producing food, the *kohanim* were to devote themselves to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and to the study and instruction of Torah. The rest of the nation thus supported the *kohanim* to enable them to perform their duties as the ministers of the Temple and religious guides of the people.

However, as noted already by the *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi, God here makes two pronouncements: “You shall not inherit in their land,” and “you shall not have a portion among them.” To explain this seeming redundancy, the *Sifrei* explains the section phrase – “you shall not have a portion among them” – as referring not to the Land of Israel, but rather to the spoils of war. Just as the *kohanim* did not receive a portion of *Eretz Yisrael* when the land was distributed among the twelve tribes, it likewise would not receive a share in the spoils brought by the nation’s army from the defeated enemies.

Netziv, in his *Ha’ameik Davar*, makes an insightful comment explaining this policy. The *kohanim* were denied agricultural lands in *Eretz Yisrael*, as mentioned, so they would be free to serve in their clerical capacity, without the responsibilities of producing food to support themselves. The spoils of war, however, were denied to the *kohanim* for a different reason. These possessions, by and large, were luxuries, not necessities. The booty seized from enemy nations during warfare was brought not to provide basic sustenance, but as luxury items. The *kohanim* do not receive a share in these items, Netziv writes, because, as God proceeds to explain in the next part of this verse, “I am your portion.” Netziv explains: “Your enjoyment is through the service of God and diligence in Torah [study], and there is no love like the love of God and the love of Torah… All external forms of enjoyment disrupt the pleasure of the soul…” As the nation’s spiritual guides and role models, the *kohanim* were to derive pleasure and enjoyment not from material luxuries, but from the diligent, intensive study of Torah. Their role included showing the rest of the people not to look to wealth and indulgence for satisfaction and enjoyment, but rather to find fulfillment in the devoted service of God. To this end, they were denied a share in the luxuries seized during warfare, so they would teach by example that “there is no love like the love of God and the love of Torah,” and the greatest of all pleasures is “the pleasure of the soul.”

The Torah does not discourage wealth and physical indulgence per se, but does warn against excessive preoccupation with these pursuits. It is perfectly acceptable to enjoy comforts, luxuries, and the pleasures of this world, as long as we ensure not to allow them become the focal point of our lives, and to look primarily to Torah study and *mitzva* observance as our source of meaning, joy and fulfillment.

Monday

Parashat Korach tells the famous, tragic story of Korach’s uprising against Moshe and Aharon, which resulted in the death of Korach and his followers. One group of followers were consumed by fire, while others were devoured by the ground (16:33-35).

Later in Sefer Bamidbar (26:11), we read that Korach’s sons did not die along with their father. And in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (6:18), we read that Korach’s descendant, Heiman, was one of the *Leviyim* who led the singing during the times of King David. There in Divrei Hayamim (6:24) we also read of a relative of Heiman, a Levi named Assaf, who also led the singing, and who is commonly identified as the Assaf who composed a number of chapters of Tehillim.

*Tosafot*, in Masekhet Kiddushin (31b), cites a fascinating Midrash that associates one of the Psalms composed by Assaf with Korach’s tragic fate. Chapter 79 of Tehillim is a prophetic dirge lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, and it is introduced with the words, “*Mizmor Le-Assaf*” (“A song by Assaf”). Although this chapter describes the fall of Jerusalem, it is introduced as a “*mizmor*,” a term normally used in reference to joyous song. The Midrash cited by *Tosafot* explains that Assaf “celebrated,” in a sense, the destruction of Jerusalem because this tragedy ensured the ultimate redemption of his relative, Korach, who was devoured by the ground many years earlier. To illustrate this point, the Midrash draws an analogy to a peasant woman whose earthenware jug fell into a well. She began bemoaning the loss of her jug when she saw a princess come to the well to fetch water with an exquisite, gold pitcher, which she mistakenly dropped into the well. The peasant woman felt relieved, confident that somebody will go into the well to fetch the gold pitcher from the palace, and figuring that once that person is already going down into the well, he will retrieve her earthenware jug, too. Similarly, the Midrash comments, Korach’s family assumed that he was lost forever, condemned to be forgotten. But at the time of the Temple’s destruction, “its gates sank into the ground” (“*Tav’u ba-aretz she’areha*” – Eikha 2:9). Assaf knew for certain that God will one day retrieve the Temple gates from the underground, and he thus felt assured that once God was in any event “going underground” to bring back the gates, He will bring back Korach, too.

Chida, in his *Devash Le-fi* (*Ma’arekhet Kof*, 28), cites another Midrashic passage which relates that when the gates of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* fell beneath the ground, Korach grabbed hold of them. And thus at the time of the nation’s redemption, when the gates will be retrieved, Korach will, by necessity, come along.

How might we explain this notion, of Korach being “retrieved” together with the Temple gates?

One possibility emerges from the fact that guarding the gates of the Temple was one of the jobs assigned to the *Leviyim*. These Midrashim might perhaps be teaching that Korach’s mistake can be corrected only when he accepts and “grabs hold” of the role assigned to his tribe. Korach erred by seeking to extend beyond his assigned role, by aspiring to perform the rituals reserved for the *kohanim*. The redemption of Korach can occur only together with the “gates” – with his commitment to fill his assigned role. The kind of ambition and bold determination exhibited by Korach are valuable – but only if they are expressed within the limits set for us by the Torah. And thus the Midrash describes how Korach is redeemed together with the gates which he was to guard, symbolizing the “redemption” of his passion and courage through accepting limits and a commitment to excel within the framework of one’s role.

We might also suggest an additional explanation. Nobody was banished further from *Benei Yisrael* than Korach and his cohorts, who were deemed so evil and damaging to the nation that they were driven underground. Korach thus represents those who find themselves at the furthest possible point from the Jewish Nation, and at the lowest possible spiritual depths. The Midrash perhaps seeks to teach us that our redemption cannot unfold without each and every member of our nation being “retrieved.” The retrieval of the “gates,” the restoration of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, must include the retrieval of all our fellow Jews – including the “Korachs,” those who have strayed as far as possible from our tradition and our values. The process of the Temple’s rebuilding will be accompanied by a process of rebuilding of *Am Yisrael* – and this requires the spiritual retrieval of each and every member of our nation, even those who have fallen to the lowest imaginable depths.

The image of Korach grabbing hold of the Temple gates teaches us that the retrieval of those gates cannot be separated from the retrieval of all our fellow Jews, each and every one of whom is to play a vital role in our nation’s ultimate redemption, and must therefore be included in the process of our national renewal.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Korach of the uprising led by Korach against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. In response to the challenge posed by Korach and his followers, Moshe instructed them to bring an incense offering by the entrance to the *Mishkan* together with Aharon, and the offering of the one chose by God as *kohen* *gadol* would be accepted (16:7).

When Korach’s followers prepared their incense pans by the *Mishkan*, Korach assembled the entire nation to watch (16:19). God then turned to Moshe and Aharon and commanded, “Separate from this congregation, and I will annihilate them in an instant” (16:21). Moshe and Aharon then pleaded, “Shall one man sin, and You will enraged against the entire congregation?!” (16:22). In response to their cry, God spoke to Moshe and told him to warn the people to distance themselves from the tent of the three leaders of the revolt – Korach, Datan and Aviram (16:24). Later, the ground opened underneath their tent, devouring them and their families, and a fire consumed the 250 followers who offered incense.

The simple reading of the text is that God initially decreed annihilation upon the entire nation for supporting Korach’s uprising. As noted, Korach summoned the people to the area of the *Mishkan*, and they agreed, tacitly lending him their support, or at least considering lending him their support. God therefore sought to annihilate the nation – a decision He then reversed in response to Moshe and Aharon’s plea that the nation not be punished for being misled by Korach. Accepting Moshe and Aharon’s petition, God decided to kill only the main instigators – Korach, Datan and Aviram, as well as the 250 people who vied for the high priesthood and offered incense. The rest of the nation was warned to keep away from these rebels in order to protect themselves. This is how the Ramban (16:21) explains the sequence of events.

Rabbeinu Chananel, however, as cited by the Ramban, understood the text differently, claiming that Moshe and Aharon misunderstood God’s initial command, “Separate from this congregation, and I will annihilate them in an instant.” They thought that God intended to destroy all of *Benei Yisrael*, when in truth, He referred only to the “congregation” of rebels led by Korach. In other words, according to Rabbeinu Chananel, even from the outset, God’s plan was to kill only the active participants in the uprising, and not the onlookers who tacitly expressed support. And so in response to Moshe and Aharon’s plea – which was, actually, not necessary – God clarified to Moshe that He meant that they should “separate” not from the entire nation, but from the participants in Korach’s revolt. (This general approach is taken also by *Keli Yakar*.)

The Ramban dismisses this interpretation, raising several objections, including the argument that “I will annihilate them in an instant” sounds too dramatic to refer only to the deaths of a small group of rebels. Moreover, the Ramban finds it inconceivable that Moshe and Aharon misunderstood God’s command.

A variation of Rabbeinu Chananel’s approach is offered by Rav Asher Freiman, in his *Peninei Asher*. He notes that several verses earlier (16:18), where the Torah tells of Korach’s 250 followers who sought the high priesthood and prepared incense pans to “compete” with Aharon, the Torah emphasizes that Moshe and Aharon stood together with them by the entrance to the *Mishkan* (“*…u-Moshe ve-Aharon*”). At that point, Rav Freiman explains, God instructed Moshe and Aharon to leave the area where the rebels stood, because He was going to annihilate them – and, indeed, those 250 men were consumed by fire (16:35). Moshe and Aharon responded by pleading on behalf of the 250 men, noting that they were lured by Korach to challenge Moshe and Aharon, and they therefore should not be blamed. As Rav Freiman notes, one of Rashi’s interpretations of the opening words of the *parasha* – “*Va-yikach Korach*” – is that Korach persuaded these 250 men to challenge Moshe and Aharon’s authority and vie for the position of *kohen gadol*. And thus Moshe and Aharon pleaded on their behalf, asking, “Shall one man sin” – referring to Korach, the instigator – “and You will enraged against the entire congregation” – referring to the 250 men whom Korach succeeded in persuading to rise against Moshe.

According to this reading, God did not accept Moshe and Aharon’s prayer. His response was to issue His next command – to warn the people to keep a distance from the area where the ground would open to devour Datan and Aviram. Although Moshe and Aharon pleaded to God to spare the 250 men who were lured by Korach, God rejected their prayer and decided to punish these men, holding them accountable for their actions despite the fact that they were misled by Korach’s rhetoric against Moshe and Aharon.

Wednesday

Parashat Korach begins with the challenge mounted by Korach and his followers against Moshe, demanding the privileges of the priesthood, which were reserved for Aharon and his descendants. Moshe responded by proposing a “contest” of sorts, whereby Aharon and Korach’s group would all offer incense, and the one whose offering was accepted would be determined to be the individual chosen as the *kohen gadol*. Korach’s 250 followers agreed, and, tragically, they were killed by a miraculous fire that erupted after they brought their incense offerings (16:35).

Rashi (16:6), citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, relates that Moshe gave a more elaborate response to Korach and his followers than that which appears in the Torah. He explained to them, “Among other nations, there are many rituals and many priests, and they do not all assemble in a single building. But we only have one God, one ark, one Torah, one altar, and one high priest. You are 250 people seeking the high priesthood. I, too, want this!”

The point Moshe was making according to this Midrashic account is clear – that unlike other ancient religions, *Am Yisrael* had only one *kohen gadol*, and thus 250 men cannot all earn this special role. We might wonder, though, why Moshe added, “I, too, want this.” Of what relevance is this point to the message Moshe was conveying – that *Am Yisrael* has only a single *kohen gadol*?

Perhaps, Moshe was expressing to Korach’s group that desiring additional opportunities to serve God is in itself admirable. Korach and his cohorts might have argued, or thought to argue, that accepting the status quo, whereby they were barred from the priestly duties, would bespeak an attitude of apathy and complacency. They likely saw themselves as displaying greater piety and religious passion than the rest of the nation, who felt comfortable being excluded from the rituals of the *Mishkan*. And it is to this perspective, perhaps, that Moshe responded by revealing that “I, too, want this.” The passion and fervor displayed by the rebels was noble, and was felt even by Moshe himself. However, this did not make their argument correct. Although we are encouraged to energetically and enthusiastically seek to expand our current “repertoire” of *mitzvot* and find more opportunities to serve the Almighty, we must accept the limits on those opportunities. Not every inherently good deed is necessarily for us to perform. All *mitzvot* are subject to certain parameters and guidelines, and thus not all *mitzvot* are necessarily appropriate for all people at all times. Accepting these restrictions in no way reflects laziness, indifference or complacency. We are to constantly be seeking to grow in our religious devotion and discover new ways to serve God and to contribute to *Am Yisrael* and the world – but while recognizing and respecting the limits that restrict us, and finding the channels of *avodat Hashem* that are appropriate and suited for us.

Thursday

Rashi, commenting on the story of Korach’s uprising against Moshe (16:7), cites the question posed by the *Midrash Tanchuma*: “Korach, who was intelligent – what did he see [that led him] to this foolishness?” The Midrash’s answer, as Rashi writes, is “*eino hita’ato*” – “his eye misled him.” Korach prophetically foresaw that his descendants would include the great prophet Shmuel, as well as *Leviyim* who led the singing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. He thus said to himself, “Is it possible that all this greatness will emerge from me in the future, and I will remain silent?!” And so he proceeded to demand a more prestigious status.

The Midrash’s comments should perhaps be read in the light of the famous proverb, “*Eizehu chakham, ha-ro’eh et ha-nolad*” – “Who is wise? He who foresees the outcome” (Tamid 32a). One of the signs of wisdom is the ability to anticipate long-term results and consequences, as opposed to viewing things from a narrow, short-sighted perspective, seeing only the present moment. Korach, the Midrash observes, was a wise man, and so we would have expected him to foresee the catastrophic consequences of his uprising against Moshe. The Midrash thus explains that it was precisely Korach’s long-range vision that misled him – he looked well into the future, and saw the greatness of his descendants, which prompted him to take action and assert himself beyond the status to which he was presently entitled.

Many have noted that Rashi writes, “***eino*** *hita’ato*” – that Korach was misled by his “eye,” as opposed to both his eyes. We might explain that a human being’s two eyes symbolize the two different forms of “seeing” with which we are to live. We must have one “eye” focused on the here-and-now, on managing our current situation in the best possible way, and another “eye” seeing the “*nolad*,” looking into the future with long-range vision. If we look with only the first eye, we will act in a way that might seem beneficial now but will cause long-term harm, and we will fail to dream and aspire, to plan for a future of greatness. On the other hand, if we look only at the “*nolad*,” dreaming and aspiring without tending to our immediate needs and addressing our current circumstances, we will never reach the glorious future of which we dream.

Korach’s mistake was looking with “*eino*” – with one eye, without the other. He harbored long-range ambitions without respecting his present limitations. He saw the “*nolad*” but did not see the present; he had big dreams, but he closed his other eye to his current obligations, which were to serve as a *Levi*, and not as a *kohen*.

If so, then the Midrash’s depiction of Korach’s mistake teaches us of the delicate balance that must be maintained between idealism and pragmatism, between bold ambition and a recognition of limits. We must live with both eyes wide open and sharply focused, seeing both ambitious, long-term goals, as well as the limits of reality within which those goals must be pursued.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Korach lists the various gifts which *Benei Yisrael* are required to give to the *kohanim*, and then mentions the obligation of *ma’aser rishon* – the tithe given annually from agricultural produce to the *Leviyim*. This tithe, the Torah explains, is given to the *Leviyim* “in exchange for their work which they perform” in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* (18:21). Two verses later, the Torah commands, “*Ve-avad ha-Levi hu et avodat Ohel Mo’eid*” – “But the *Levi* – he shall perform the work required in the Tent of Meeting…” (18:23).

The word “*hu*” (“he”) in this verse appears to place emphasis on the *Levi*’s exclusive role to serve in the *Mishkan*. Rav Saadia Gaon thus explains that the Torah here emphasizes that only the *Leviyim* should serve, and not the rest of *Benei Yisrael*. The point being made – particularly in light of the tragic story of Korach – is that God selected one tribe for the role of ministering in the Temple, and the others are represented by that tribe and should not make attempts to usurp this role.

The *Sifrei* reaches a number of halakhic conclusions on the basic of this phrase – “*ve-avad ha-Levi hu*.” First, it instructs that a *Levi* is not given the option of foregoing on *ma’aser rishon* and thus absolving himself from the obligation to serve in the *Mikdash*. Since the Torah describes the tithe as the *Levi*’s compensation for his service, we might have assumed that *Leviyim* reserve the right to excuse themselves from their obligations in exchange for waiving their privileges. The Torah therefore emphasized that the *Leviyim* are required to perform this service, and do not have the option of declining. The *Sifrei* further establishes on the basis of this verse that the *Leviyim*’s obligations apply even in *shemitta* years, when they do not receive tithes, and they have the same rights to the land’s produce as the rest of the nation. Although they do not enjoy the special privileges of being *Leviyim* during that year, they nevertheless continue to bear the special obligations assigned to their tribe. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, adds that this verse indicates that even if a *Levi*, for whatever reason, does not receive adequate amounts of produce from the people – who have the option of giving their tithes to any *Levi* of their choice – he must nevertheless serve in the *Mikdash*. Although he unfortunately is not able to enjoy the privileges of the *Leviyim*, he does not have the right to excuse himself from his responsibilities.

The *Sifrei* also infers from this phrase that if it ever happens that no *Leviyim* are able to perform their assigned duties in the *Mikdash*, the work should not be done by the *kohanim*. Although we might have assumed that the *Leviyim*’s responsibilities should be transferred to the *kohanim* under such circumstances, the *Sifrei* understood from the phrase “*ve-avad ha-Levi* ***hu***” that these jobs are assigned exclusively to the *Leviyim*, and may not be performed by anybody else, regardless of the circumstances.

Finally, Rav Chaim Mordechai of Nadvorna, in *Devar Chayim*, suggests that the word “*hu*” in this phrase indicates that a *Levi* should serve in the *Mikdash* as though he were alone, without anyone watching. The *Leviyim* are instructed to serve with the exclusive goal of fulfilling the Almighty’s commands, without seeking to impress people, to draw attention to themselves, or to elicit praise for their work. This verse thus warns us not to turn religion into a means of earning respect and making a name for ourselves, that we are to focus on doing what God expects of us, and not on drawing attention to ourselves or achieving honor and prestige.

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