

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

This weekly sheet is brought to you by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman of the New West End United Synagogue in conjunction with Shapell's/Darché Noam

PARSHAT KORACH

DVAR TORAH: BE OPEN TO GREAT MOMENTS

“Why did a smart person like Korach do something that seems so absurd?” asks the midrash (Tanchuma Korach 5), and answers that Korach’s רוח הקודש, his mystical insight that enabled him to see the future, led him astray. He saw that he would have descendants like the prophet Shmuel – described as parallel to Moshe and Aharon in Tehillim 99:6 – and twenty four groups of high level Leviim serving in the Beit Hamikdash. If these all came from him, he thought, it must be he that will triumph in his uprising against Moshe and Aharon.

How did Korach end up with such illustrious descendants? Korach, according to this midrash, seems to have thought it was a result of his own greatness. The midrash just states it as a fact we know from Tanach and takes it as a given. But the Rambam’s father, Harav Maimon Hadayan, זצ”ל, in his אגרת הנהמה, “The Letter of Consolation,” quotes a statement of Chazal (formulated slightly differently than on Sanhedrin 111a) that puts a twist on the entire story.

At the moment when Korach’s sons decided to repent and break with their father’s revolt, Rav Maimon quotes, they merited great levels of רוח הקודש, they gained a lofty level of mystical insight: “Our rabbis tell us that when Asir, Elkanah, and Aviasaf, Korach’s sons, left their straying father and followed the true prophet, the Divine Spirit rested upon them and the word was placed in their mouths.”

This is a striking example of a phenomenon in עבודת ה', service of God, that one moment can create a major transformation in a person’s life. Alongside the day to day service of God – slow and steady growth, hard work on character, regular learning, verse by verse, mishnah after mishnah, prayer by prayer – we are sometimes presented with moments when we have the potential to rise from good and solid to great and lofty. The sons of Korach were presented with such a moment when they jumped off the Korach train that was heading for destruction. They had a הרפור תשובה, a thought of repentance, and thereby merited radical change. The Divine Presence rested upon them.

There are those who only merit such moments immediately before their deaths, like the penitent Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordia (Avodah Zarah 17a) and the Roman minister Ketiya bar Shalom who saved the Jewish people from destruction (Avodah Zarah 10b) who “acquire their world in one moment.” But the adventures of life also present people with opportunities for radical change during their lifetimes. Along with slow and steady growth is the opportunity for growth spurts. See, for example, the biographical introduction of Rav Chaim Tchernovitz’s Sidduro Shel Shabbat, where a merchant guest of Rav Chaim Tchernovitz, 1817 -1760) זצ”ל had an opportunity to do an extreme act of tzedakah and merited a blessing that enabled him to experience Shabbat on a higher level than he had ever dreamed of.

May we merit taking advantage of the special opportunities we are presented with and the special growth that comes with them, just as the Bnei Korach did.

SOURCE GUIDE: 12 PARTICIPANTS IN THE KORACH REVOLT

According to a midrash, the נשיאים, the 12 princes of Israel, the heads of tribes, play a prominent part in the Korach story. These same 12 great people whose sacrifices were a major component of the dedication of the Mishkan now joined forces with Korach. This source guide, inspired by a section of a drashah on Korach by Harav Shlomo Fisher, שליט"א (Beit Yishai Drashot pp. 427-429), discusses how that came about. It asks why they ended up getting consumed through burning incense and why Moshe requested that their portion of the daily sacrifice should not be accepted.

These two verses are the basis of the midrash, followed by the midrash itself:

<p>1. Bamidbar 16:2 They rose up before Moshe, along with two-hundred and fifty men of the children of Israel, princes of the congregation, those called to the assembly, men of renown.</p> <p>Bamidbar 1:16 These are the ones called by the congregation, princes of the tribes of their fathers, heads of thousands of Israelites.</p>	<p>במדבר טז:ב וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתָּים נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי שָׁם.</p> <p>במדבר א:טז אֵלֶּה קְרִיאֵי \{קְרוּאֵי\} הָעֵדָה נְשִׂאֵי מִטּוֹת אֲבוֹתָם רְאֵשֵׁי אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵם.</p>
<p>2. Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 13:30 Rabbi Yehudah son of Simon quoted Rabbi Levi son of Partah: This is likened to a son of a nobleman who stole in the bathhouse. The bathhouse keeper was afraid to mention his name. Nevertheless he made him known by saying "There was a youth wearing white clothing ..." Thus even though the names of the princes who, along with Korach, opposed [Moshe] were not publicized, they were publicized through a hint. "Princes of the congregation, those called to the assembly, men of renown." This refers to when it says, "These are the ones called by the congregation, princes of the tribes of their fathers ..." [They are] men [who are] named [elsewhere].</p>	<p>מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה יג פסקה ה אמר רבי יהודה ב"ר סימון בשם ר' לוי בן פרטה: משל לבן פולוטמנין שגנב במרחץ והיה הבלני מתיירא לומר לו שמו. אעפ"כ פרסמו בחור אחד לבוש לבנים. כך אע"פ שלא פירש שמותן של נשיאים שחלקו עם קרח והלכו עמו פירסמן ברמז, "נשיאי עדה קריאי מועד אנשי שם", כמה דתימא (במדבר א) "אלה קריאי העדה נשיאי מטות אבותם וגו'" "אנשי שם."</p>

A. Why the Nesi'im Thought They Would Succeed

Rav Shlomo Fisher suggests that the princes misinterpreted why their incense was previously accepted:

<p>3. Beit Yishai Drashot p. 428 ... For they saw that Nadav and Avihu offered personal incense (incense is a communal sacrifice) and they were burned, whereas they (the princes) offered personal incense (at the dedication of the Mikdash) and it was accepted with love. They (mistakenly) thought that it was because of their greatness, and were sure of themselves, assuming that the same would happen now ...</p>	<p>בית ישי דרשות עמ' תכה ... שהם ראו שנדב ואביהוא הקטירו קטרת יחיד ונשרפו, ואילו הם הקטירו קטורת יחיד ונתקבלה באהבה, וסברו שזה בגודל מעלתם, והיו בטוחים בעצמם שגם עתה יהא כך ...</p>
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What was the real reason that the princes' incense at the dedication of the Mishkan was accepted?

<p>4. Sifri Zuta 7:84 Rabbi Shimon says: What do the words 'from the princes of Israel' teach us? They teach us that even though each one donated of his own, yet their sacrifices were equal and no one offered more than another. For if anyone had offered more than another their sacrifice would not have pushed aside Shabbat. The All-Present said: You gave honor one to another, and I give you honor. Thus it says, "Hashem said to Moshe: One prince per day, one prince per day [should offer]."</p>	<p>ספרי זוטא ז: פד ר' שמעון אומר: מה ת"ל "מאת נשיאי ישראל"? אלא מלמד שנתנדבו מעצמן והיה קרבן כולן שוה ולא הקריב אחד מהן יותר על חברו. שאלו הקריב אחד מהן יותר על חברו לא היה קרבן אחד מהן דוחה את השבת. א"ל המקום: אתם חלקתם כבוד אחד לחברו ואני חולק לכם כבוד שני, "ויאמר ה' אל משה נשיא אחד ליום נשיא אחד ליום."</p>
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The Zayit Raanan commentary suggests that because they all offered as a unified group their offerings (that included incense) were given the status of a **communal** sacrifice. Whereas Nadav and Avihu offered as individuals, the princes, at the dedication of the Mishkan, offered as a communal unit.

In contrast to the unity of the princes' incense offerings during the dedication of the Mishkan, when these same princes led Korach's two-hundred and fifty men their incense offerings were divisive. Their incense was therefore not accepted and it brought about their deaths.

Moshe even prayed, says the midrash quoted by Rashi, that the Korach group's portions of the communal sacrifices should not be accepted. Commentators find this very difficult to understand – aren't communal sacrifices offered by all of Israel as one indivisible unit? This was exactly Moshe's point, says Rav Shlomo Fisher. These men don't view themselves as unified with all of Israel, said Moshe to God. In their eyes Israel is only a collection of individuals, so let their "portions" of the sacrifices not be accepted.

B. Why Incense?

Why was the true Kohen determined through the incense? The midrash asks the question:

<p>5. Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar 18:8 What caused him (Moshe) to say that to them (to test through burning incense)? He said to them: Among the nations there are many rituals and many priests that gather together at the same time. We only have one God, one Torah, one law, one altar, and one High Priest, כהן גדול. You two-hundred and fifty men all want high priesthood?! I also would want it! Therefore this is what you and your congregation should do – take pans, Korach and his entire congregation. Here is the most beloved [priestly] vehicle, the incense, the most beloved of all the sacrifices, and the potion of death is placed within it, for Nadav and Avihu were burned through it.</p>	<p>מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה יח פסקה ח מה ראה לומר כן? אמר להם בדרכי הגוים יש נימוסין הרבה וכומריין הרבה כולן מתקבצין בבת אחת. ואנו אין לנו אלא ה' אחד ותורה אחת ומשפט אחד ומזבח אחד וכ"ג אחד. ואתם מאתים וחמשים איש מבקשים כהונה גדולה?! אף אני רוצה בכך! "לכן אתה וכל עדתך זאת עשו קחו לכם מחתות קרה וכל עדתו." הרי לכם תשמיש החביב מן הכל הוא הקטרת חביבה מן כל הקרבנות וסם המות נתון לתוכו שבו נשרפו נדב ואביהוא.</p>
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Incense is especially tied up with unity. The Hebrew for incense, קטרת, is not only connected with smoke, but is also related to the Aramaic word for tying and a knot, קטר (Zohar 3:151b). The 250 men's divisiveness made the "potion of death" within the incense lethal and they were consumed by fire. The incense can only be successfully offered by truly unifying people like Aharon. But when those same princes were unified at the dedication of the Mikdash, their incense was accepted and was elevated to the status of communal sacrifice.

IS IT REALLY GOOD TO BE THE KING? BY RABBI YAAKOV LYNN

The Chofetz Chaim (R' Yisroel Meir Hakohen of Radin, 1838-1933) once advised one of his students to accept a position as a community leader. The student protested, saying he was too afraid to accept such a responsibility. The Chofetz Chaim replied, "Who should assume the position— someone who is not afraid of the responsibility?" In this week's Haftarah portion (Shmuel I 11:14-12:22), the prophet Shmuel prepares the Jewish people to accept their first King, Saul, whom Shmuel anointed with Hashem's consent, in line with the Torah's commandment that "You shall surely place upon yourselves a king" (Devarim 17:15).

Even though this was a fulfillment of a Torah commandment, in Shmuel's "inauguration speech" he chastises the Jewish people for requesting a king: "And when you saw that Nachash, King of the children of Ammon, came upon you, you said to me... 'Let a king rule over us!' But Hashem, Your G-d, is King!" (12:12). And, later on: "...I shall call to Hashem and He will send forth thunder and rain – then you shall recognize and see that great is your wickedness that you have perpetrated before the eyes of Hashem, to request for yourselves a king!" (12:17)

Why did Shmuel criticize the Jewish people, suggesting that their desire for a king rejected G-d as the true King? Surely G-d Himself acknowledged that there is a need for human leaders as well! In Shmuel's speech, we learn more about the relationship between a human King and faith in G-d: "...Behold, Hashem has set a king over you. If you will revere Hashem, and serve Him, and listen to His voice, and you will not rebel against the word of Hashem, but you and the king who reigns over you will follow after Hashem, your G-d..." (12:13-14). It is clear that there is only one true Jewish Leader – Hashem. Any human Jewish leader is only an agent to direct the people to come closer to Hashem.

But Jewish tradition teaches that finding the balance between being a leader and remaining only a conduit to G-d's leadership is so difficult that one should "hate positions of leadership" (Pirkei Avos 1:10). The Talmud (tractate Sotah 13a) states that of Yaakov's twelve sons, Yosef was the first to die, because he assumed positions of leadership. The Maharal of Prague (1526-1609) asked: Why should being a leader shorten one's life? His answer is very telling about the role of a Jewish leader. He explains that G-d is the Source of all life in this world. Therefore the definition of "life" is being a "receiver" from G-d. When one becomes a leader, his life's focus switches from being a "receiver" to a "giver," thereby leaving him closed off to receiving. When one cannot receive life from the Source of all life, he cannot continue to exist (Derech Chaim 1:13)

How, then, can one succeed as a Jewish leader? The answer is that a Jewish leader does not give of himself – he merely turns himself into a vessel to continue to receive life from G-d and to help others become open to receiving from G-d as well. He must constantly be aware that he has nothing to give to those in his charge; all he can hope to do is to help them tap into the wellsprings that the true Source of life has to offer. In light of this, it is not surprising that Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, 1707-1746), in Mesilas Yesharim, teaches that leadership positions are "a massive burden on the shoulders of the one who carries them" (Chapter 22). He goes on to state that one who accepts a leadership role in order to gain pleasure from it is compared to an adulterer, since he is gaining pleasure from something that is not rightfully his.

With all this in mind, Shmuel's rebuke to the Jewish people seems very appropriate. While Shaul had a very important role to play as king, the Jewish people's enthusiasm about appointing him was inappropriate and signaled a lack of recognition of the true essence of a king's role. His inauguration could therefore only be accompanied by poignant reminders that there is only one true Jewish leader; and the role of anyone else is only to enhance the nation's ability to accept Hashem as our King.

This issue is dedicated in memory of
Rafael Michael Sirel ben Tzvia Dubbah, ז"ר

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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