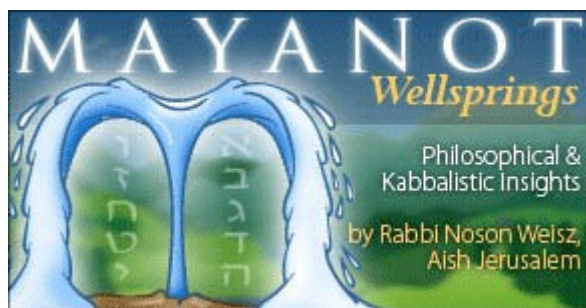


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Follow the Leader

Contrary to popular belief, the people of Israel accepted Moses as **the** prophet, the only human being authorized to transmit God's laws, not because of the miracles he performed, but because of the way they all saw him interact with God at Mount Sinai. The entire Jewish people saw Moses approach the Cloud of Glory; everyone heard the Divine voice speaking to him and instructing him to instruct *them*. As Maimonides explains:

How do we know that the meeting at Sinai was the proof of the truth of his [Moses'] prophecy? Because it is written, "*Behold, I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever*" (Exodus 19:9). We see then, that prior to this event

they did not have the type of belief in him [Moses] that would last forever, and only had the type of belief which is affected by doubts and second thoughts. (Maimonides, Yesodei Hatora, 8:1)

The implication: subsequent to the Sinai experience, the Jewish people **did** have the type of belief in Moses' prophecy that lasts forever. So how do we account for Korach and his fellow rebels? Weren't they also present at Mount Sinai? Why didn't they believe that it was God who told Moses prophetically to appoint Aaron as the High Priest? And if they did believe it, why did they challenge the appointment? If the rebellion was caused by the fact that Moses never informed the Jewish people that it was God's idea to appoint Aaron, why didn't he simply declare when Korach questioned him, "Listen, it was not my idea to appoint Aaron, God instructed me to do it"?

The Ohr Hachaim Hakodosh, the well-known Kabbalistic commentator on Chumash, offers an intriguing answer: Korach and his followers did believe that God told Moses to appoint Aaron; the conflict arose because they didn't believe that the appointment was God's idea. They were certain that God consented to the appointment, but their contention was that the idea of Aaron's appointment originated with Moses, and did not come from God.

Korach and his followers never contended that Aaron was unfit to serve as the High Priest. They maintained, however, that there were other people who were equally qualified. It was their theory that the

background to Aaron's appointment was Moses' very special relationship with God. God loved Moses; if Moses suggested his brother for the office of High Priest, and Aaron was a suitable candidate, why wouldn't God sanction the appointment? As Aaron was eminently suitable for the job, the mere fact that Moses desired his brother's appointment would be sufficient to tip the scales in Aaron's favor.

It was the opinion of the rebels that it would have been equally acceptable to God to appoint some other suitable person had it been suggested to Him, or to set up a rotation system for the office of High Priest, or to eliminate the office of High Priest altogether and have a few people officiating at the same time instead of just one person had such a request been put to Him. This contention is evident in the way they voiced their complaint:

"It is too much for you! For the entire assembly - all of them - are holy and God is among them; why do you exalt yourself over the congregation of God?"
(Numbers 16:3)

The explanation of the Ohr Hachaim certainly answers some knotty questions but it raises some new problems. If this was indeed the problem why couldn't the conflict with Korach be resolved peacefully without any loss of life? Why didn't God simply declare that the appointment of Aaron was truly His idea and not Moses'? Why was there a need for such massive turmoil to solve what would appear to be a simple problem in communication?

THE HEART OF THE DISPUTE

We need some more background on the Korach story to fully understand the incident and the lesson it is meant to teach us.

The Midrash tells us that Korach's rebellion was not provoked by the appointment of Aaron as the High Priest but by the appointment of Korach's cousin, Elzafan ben Uziel, as the head of the Kehas family of Levites.

Korach's grandfather, Kehas, had three sons: Amrom, Yizhar, and Uziel. Jewish inheritance law awards a double portion to the first-born. Amrom, being the first-born was thus legitimately entitled to a double share, and Korach was not bothered by the fact that Amrom's sons, Aaron and Moses were awarded the priesthood and the leadership of the Jewish people respectively. But following the same Jewish laws of inheritance, the next person in line for a position should have been a descendant of Yizhar, the second born. As Yizhar's son, Korach reasoned that he should have been appointed the head of the Kehas family instead of Elzafan, who was the son of Uziel, the youngest of the three brothers.

The Ohr Hachaim explains further that this Midrash does not mean to attribute the rebellion to simple jealousy; on the contrary, it comes to explain that Korach had a very serious issue. Korach argued that fundamental principles of justice demanded that appointments be made on the basis of some objective standard. Moses' appointments demonstrated that he was following no objective standard and

therefore deserved to be rejected.

If the standard chosen was the standard of merit, the position of High Priest should have been awarded by lot, as everyone was deserving, for the entire congregation was holy. If positions were awarded on the basis of following the laws of inheritance according to the lines of descent, also an objective criterion whose suitability we have explained in previous essays, he, Korach should have been appointed as the spiritual head of the Kehas family in place of his cousin Elzafan.

It was therefore evident that Moses was employing neither of these standards and was selecting people to fill positions arbitrarily on the basis of his own personal preference. To allow Moses to make appointments as he saw fit, following his own whims, based on no objective criteria, was to grant him dictatorial powers. Korach's argument was that no one had appointed Moses as dictator.

But before we get carried away by the compelling beauty of this explanation we must ask ourselves how all this is relevant. What does any of this have to do with God? Moses was only a prophet after all, how could anyone directly under God's control ever be accused of usurping dictatorial powers? We need to examine the issues at still greater depth to emerge with understanding.

SPIRITUAL LEADER

Temporal political power originates with the people over whom it is exercised and it is they who must award it. For this reason,

democratic principles demand that the people themselves select their leaders in free elections such as the practice in our society. Theoretically, other systems of selecting leaders can also be devised - panels of experts, laws of inheritance, training philosopher kings as suggested by Plato. The method is not the point, as long as the people sanction the process. If they do not, their power is being usurped - the basic definition of dictatorship. It is irrelevant whether the dictator is benevolent or not; his use of power is always illegitimate - all dictators usurp the power that belongs to the body politic without its consent.

But spiritual leaders represent God. Prophets like Moses serve as intermediaries between God and the Jewish people. As such, they are conduits for the transmission of Divine messages.

At first glance it would appear that the selection of such people legitimately belongs to God; prophets are His representatives after all. However, the issue is rather more complex due to the fact that prophets serve as a conduit for a lot more than God's messages. They are also the conduits for God's miracles and as such the personality of a prophet can impact heavily on the sorts of miracles that he can deliver. For example, we pointed out in Parshat Be'halot'cha that Moses was unable to serve as the conduit for the delivery of meat; he could only act as a conduit for supplying manna.

This idea is clearly stated in the very last verses in the Torah where Moses is

eulogized:

"Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom God had known face to face as evidenced by all the signs and wonders that God sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and all his land, and by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel." (Deut. 34:10-12)

The quality of Moses' miracles is clearly correlated to the level of his prophecy; only a prophet on Moses' incomparable uniqueness was able to serve as the conduit for the delivery of the miracles of the Exodus.

But miracles have political implications because they affect people. Witness the Jewish people's reaction to the miracle of the incense that established the legitimacy of Aaron's priesthood but which proved so lethal to those who contested it:

"The entire assembly of the Children of Israel complained on the morrow against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You have killed the people of God.'" (Numbers 17:6)

On the face of it, this was a very bizarre reaction to a miraculous event, which was presumably controlled entirely by God. How could the Jews accuse Moses and Aaron for killing the people of God when it is obvious that their deaths were the direct consequence of a miracle provided by God Himself? Obviously, in the eyes of the

people God could not be held accountable for these deaths; the prophet serves as the conduit for the delivery of miracles, and only those miracles for which he constitutes an open channel can be delivered. If Moses had devised a less lethal test for the Divine verification and vindication of Aaron's priesthood, God would have provided a benign miracle to validate Aaron's priesthood and no one would have died.

PROPHET SELECTION

Because prophecy has political ramifications as well as spiritual ones, the issue of the proper selection process of a prophet becomes complex. It is not unreasonable for the Jewish people to argue that they should be involved in the process of the prophet's selection, or at least in the selection of those who occupy spiritual positions under him.

This then is the full explanation of the position adopted by Korach and his followers. They claimed that Moses was a dictator; the fact that he was God's choice as prophet did not automatically erase the legitimacy of their demand to have a say in the distribution of spiritual positions that clearly had political implications.

He was the people's prophet as well, and since his actions and his personality impacted directly on their quality of life, principles of justice demanded that the people have some say over the manner in which he conducted his office. They obviously couldn't have their say at the Divine end of the process, it was God who decided who He would talk to, but why couldn't they have a say at the human end

of the equation and express their interest in controlling the human spiritual appointments involved in the overall interaction with the Divinity?

The story of Korach's rebellion can only be fully understood if we view it as a power struggle with God Himself. In fact this is precisely how Moses reacts to the demands of the rebels:

"Therefore, you and your entire assembly that are joining together are against God! And as for Aaron - what is he that you protest against him?" (Numbers 16:11)

Moses disagrees with Korach's position; in his opinion it is solely up to God to select the people who will serve as the conduits for spiritual inputs. This decision does not legitimately belong to the Jewish body politic who is merely the recipient of such inputs. Later, God Himself officially adopts this position when he tells Moses to take a staff from each tribe:

"It shall be that the man whom I shall choose - his staff will blossom; thus shall I cause to subside from Me the complaints of the Children of Israel, which they complain against you." (Numbers 17:20)

The passage demonstrates that God recognizes that the complaints against Moses are really complaints against Him: *"subside from Me ... they complain against you"* - this rebellion is really God's political struggle, not Moses'. God recognizes that it is His responsibility to clarify how the

principles work in setting up His spiritual machinery. Unlike the incidence with the incense God comes up with the suggestion of the twelve staffs on His Own initiative; one from each tribe, *"to subside from Me the complaints of the Children of Israel."*

THE CONSTITUTIONAL PRECEDENT

This analysis returns us to the overall theme of the Book of Numbers. Once again we are involved with the establishment of constitutional norms that will serve as the basic fabric of the Jewish body politic through the ages.

The Korach story has enormous historic implications. It teaches us that the principles of democratic process cannot be applied to spiritual interactions. Accepting a spiritual relationship with God necessarily means leaving Him with the decision making power of selecting the people who will serve as the channel for the communications and inputs that originate from Him. The choice of selecting the conduits to God, despite the fact that it is laden with earthly political consequences, is not a power that constitutionally inheres in the Jewish body politic. The appropriation of such power by God's chosen representatives does not constitute an unjust appropriation of powers that belong to the Jewish nation.

GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE

This principle has fascinating implications, for the person who serves as Israel's conduit to God is not merely a passive representative but has independent powers of his own.

One of the better-known illustrations of the powers possessed by such people is provided by the following passage of Talmud:

The daughter of Nechemia, the well digger, [he was noted for digging wells to supply fresh water for the influx of pilgrims who flocked to Jerusalem on the occasion of the tri-annual holidays] fell into a well and was in danger of drowning. They came to inform Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa; he assured them that she was safe. An hour later she was still in the well and they came to ask him again; he told them she was still safe; an hour later they came again. This time he told them that she had been rescued in the last hour; it turned out that he was perfectly correct. They asked him how he knew; did he possess the gift of prophecy?

He explained that although he was not a prophet he knew she was rescued because he could not believe that a person who devoted his life to good works that involved the digging of wells would ever lose his daughter through drowning in a well. As no one could survive for three hours in a well, he was certain that she was rescued in the third hour. The Talmud goes on to say that despite R'Chaina's certainty regarding Nechemia's immunity from being injured by water, Nechemia's son died of thirst. (Baba Kama 50a)

Tosefos wonders at this - was Rabbi Chanina wrong then? After all, his contention was that it was impossible for any harm to come to Nechemia's children through water seems to have been verified by the daughter's miraculous rescue. Tosefos answers: By the time the son died of thirst, Rabbi Chanina had himself passed away. As long as he was alive, God conducted the world according to R' Chanina's understanding. When he passed away, God reverted to running the world according to His own policies once again.

In effect God also surrenders power to the person whom He selects as His conduit. After He chooses His representative, He Himself abides by the representative's decisions.

If we trace the steps of the passage of power, it goes like this:

1. The Jewish people hand over power to God.
2. God hands this power on to His representative.
3. The ultimate decision power over how to run the universe ends up in the hands of God's representative!

THE POWER OF THE TZADDIK

This manifestation of the power held in the hands of God's representatives is specifically recognized in the following passage of Talmud:

The God of Israel has said, 'The rock of Israel has spoken to me. Become a ruler over men, a righteous one, who rules through the fear of God.' (Samuel 2, 23:3) Rabbi Avohu said, "What

does this verse mean? The God of Israel has said, 'The rock of Israel has spoken to me, "I reign over man, but who reigns over Me? The righteous one. Because, when I issue an edict, the righteous one has the power to overrule Me."' (Talmud, Moed Katan 16b)

It is on account of this power held by the tzadik that so many Jews go to such great lengths to solicit the blessings of *tzaddikim* at crisis points in their lives.

LEGAL POWERS

But there is a second even more profound manifestation of this power that is illustrated by the incident presented in a famous passage of Talmud, (Baba Metzia, 59b) concerning a circular clay oven that was sliced into sections:

Rabbi Elazar ruled that such an oven is ritually clean; the majority of rabbis ruled that it was ritually unclean. [The actual point of law is rather esoteric and irrelevant to the point under discussion in this essay; it concerns the laws of Tamei in clay vessels.]

Rabbi Elazar said: "If the *halacha* is like I say, the carob tree should move a hundred cubits." The tree duly moved but the rabbis said, 'you cannot prove your point from a tree'. Then Rabbi Elazar said: "Let the river run upstream to show that I am right." The river duly reversed its course but the rabbis remained unimpressed. Then Rabbi Elazar said, "Let the walls of the study

hall show that I am right." The walls began to collapse. At this point Rabbi Yehoshua rose and said: "Walls of the study hall, if rabbis argue with each other about the *halacha* what business is it of yours?" The walls stopped collapsing to honor Rabbi Yehoshua, but did not straighten in honor of Rabbi Elazar. Finally Rabbi Elazar said: "If I am right let Heaven confirm it." A heavenly voice issued saying, "Why do you contend with Rabbi Elazar when the *halacha* is always like him?" Rabbi Yehoshua rose again and said, "It [The Torah] is no longer in heaven!"

What does this mean? Rabbi Yirmiah explained, "The Torah was already given on Mount Sinai and the heavenly voice no longer has authority. The Torah given on Mount Sinai already stated the applicable rule, *Follow the majority* (Exodus 23:2)"

Rabbi Noson bumped into Elijah and asked him, "What did God say when Rabbi Yehoshua made his statement?" He told him, "God smiled and said, 'My children have overruled me, My children have overruled me.'"

Torah tradition maintains that Torah law rather than natural law is the law that governs the universe. As the Zohar states, He studied the Torah and created the world. (Introduction, 5a) The rabbis who decide Torah issues effectively hold the reigns of the universe in their hands. Even God cannot decide against the consensus of

rabbinic opinion!

This arrangement of the constitutional powers not only of the body politic but also of the entire universe is unique to Judaism. The severest critics of the legitimacy of rabbinic authority readily admit that it is the position occupied by the scholar and the *tzaddik* in Jewish society that imparts Orthodox Judaism its unique flavor. The translation of spiritual power into temporal authority is the valuable legacy bequeathed to us by Korach. By challenging Moses and God, he brought down the teachings that clarified these thorny issues forevermore.

This legacy of teachings also lies at the very heart of our survival as a unique people.

While the rest of the world is swept along by the powerful tides of changing ideas, where the politically correct position never stands still, Judaism has remained substantially unaltered from the days of the confrontation between Moses and Korach. The rabbis have proven themselves quite adept at wielding their mediating power between God and man.



You Say You Want a Revolution

The time was ripe for a power grab: The frightful report of the spies and the unequivocal sentence handed down were still ringing in the peoples' ears; the Promised Land never seemed farther away. The strategy was simple: Foment unrest, and stage a takeover. The tactics employed were cynical: Collect the disheartened, and create the facade of a united opposition. The message was populist: "All the people are holy." (B'midbar 16:3). The results were disastrous: Death and even greater despair. The leader of this uprising was none other than Moshe's own cousin, Korach.

What may have seemed like a unified revolt was more like a chimera, an impossible confederation between Korach, from the tribe of Levi, a trio of Reuvenites, and a larger group of other men, presumably all firstborn sons who, like the Reuvenites, considered themselves wrongly displaced priests: Until very recently, it would have been the firstborn sons who would have been the *kohanim*, religious and political leaders who served God in the newly-built Mishkan. Members of the tribe of Reuven, the eldest of Yaakov's sons, as well as the firstborn sons of other families, forfeited this

honor through poor judgment and sin; the Levites were appointed in their stead.

Korach was both power-hungry and an opportunist; in addition, he was a first class manipulator. He was well aware of the heartfelt disappointment of those who had been passed over, and set out to use it to his advantage. In what may have seemed an act of historic reconciliation, he, a member of one of the most illustrious families of the very tribe that had displaced the firstborn, reached out to form a coalition with them. As the new *kohanim*, and the stewards of the Mishkan, the Levites were more than simply those chosen to replace the firstborn who had sinned; they were actually complicit in what Korach must have described as Moshe's greatest act of "infamy," his call to wipe out the perpetrators of the sin of the golden calf. Foremost among those perpetrators were the firstborn; the people who sprang into action and carried out Moshe's order to kill the sinners were from the tribe of Levi - arguably, even Korach himself had taken sword in hand. To make matters even worse, Korach pointed out, there was one guilty party in the golden calf debacle who had gotten off "scot free:" Moshe's brother Aharon seems to have benefitted unduly from his family connections; Aharon, then, was the weak link on Moshe's team.

Korach argues that the firstborn, despite their sin, are still holy. This statement, coming from a member of the privileged clan of Levi, had tremendous impact on those who felt wronged. Charmed by his words and seduced by his apparent sincerity and empathy for their loss, two

hundred and fifty men mobilized to shore up Korach's rebellion. Yet the two other heads of this three-headed monster cannot be easily reconciled with one another. If Korach himself will become the new high-priest, how does this help the three Reuvenites who stood shoulder to shoulder with Korach? If they are to reclaim the role of the *kohanim* for their tribe, where does that leave the firstborn sons of the other tribes?

The person who saw through the deception and realized that Korach's words were no more than demagoguery was the wife of one of the original conspirators, On, son of Pelet - a man who is not only a *hapax legomenon* but a complete mystery in terms of his disappearance. As the rebellion takes shape, Korach bands together with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On son of Pelet - all from the tribe of Reuven. And yet, as the rebellion unfolds, On seems to vanish. In the final act, all the other co-conspirators perish, while On is never heard from again.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109b-110a) fills in the details of On's disappearance, and identifies On's wife as the heroine of this cautionary tale. On's wife sees that Korach is taking advantage of the feelings of guilt, frustration and loss that are running rife among the firstborn men. She understands immediately that Korach is making cynical use of their anguish, and using them as pawns in his own game. She understands that although Korach, too, feels he has been slighted, allowing him to feign empathy for the others, he will not hesitate to cast his allies aside when his own

desires are fulfilled. She sees that the endgame is poorly conceived and unrealistic; the chimera really has only one head, and that is Korach; the others are being played. Mrs. On spells it out for her idealist husband: "You will never be the leader. You have only one choice to make: Will you follow Moshe, or Korach?" "My 'comrades' will soon be here to collect me, so that we may march together in protest," he worries. She gives him a drink, puts him to bed, and says, "I will take care of this." Knowing that the battle cry of this revolution is "Everyone is holy," (16:3) she stands at the entrance to their tent and brushes her uncovered hair. The other rebels arrive; upon seeing a married woman's uncovered hair, they quickly turn around and walk away rather than cast their eye on such immodesty. These "holy" people were willing to rebel against Moshe, to slander Aharon, to cast aspersions on those chosen by God Himself, and to undermine the faith of the entire nation - but they were not willing to look at a married woman's hair.

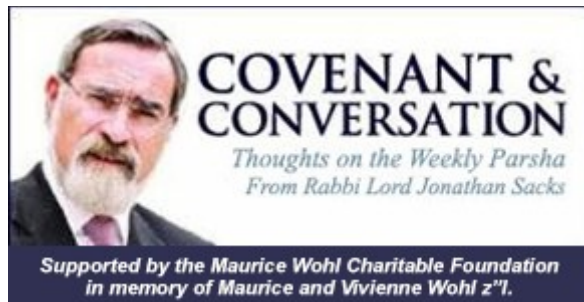
This Talmudic passage gives full expression to Korach's manipulation and to the tragic gullibility of his followers. Korach convinces them that they are as holy, if not more holy, than Moshe and Aharon. He convinces them that they should be the ones to don the clothing of the *kohen*. He convinces them to take incense in hand and approach the Mishkan - despite the fact that even bona fide *kohanim* who brought incense when not specifically commanded to do so had perished in the Sanctuary. And like Nadav and Avihu, the 250 faux-*kohanim* perish. Korach, Datan and Aviram, who

sent their duped followers to their deaths, do not make that mistake. They never put on the clothing of the *kohen*, nor do they bring incense; they know what the consequences will be.

In fact, for these three men, the entire charade had very little to do with holiness; that was merely the bait they used to lure in their supporters. For Korach, Datan and Aviram, the rebellion had been about leverage and power from the very start. They hoped that Moshe would retire in order to preserve unity. They expected that this modest, selfless public servant would retreat, and take Aharon with him.

Korach, Datan and Aviram had a very different agenda than the other participants in the rebellion, and different fates awaited them. The two hundred and fifty men who joined Korach in a desperate and misguided attempt to serve God had been led astray by a man who sought glory, power, honor - not holiness. This naive but misguided group truly sought holiness, and like Nadav and Avihu, they were consumed by a fire that came from God. They departed in a blaze, like a sacrifice on the altar. Korach, Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, sunk into ignominy. They fell into a never-ending abyss. Only one of the conspirators lived through this episode: On, the son of Pelet, was saved by his wife's keen insight and decisive action. She understood Korach's strategy, and saw through his tactics. She understood the tragic, warped piety of the firstborn men who joined the rebellion, men who saw themselves as holier than Aharon, holier even than Moshe - so holy that they could

be stopped in their tracks by a few strands of hair.



The Leader as Servant

Korach had a point. "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you *set yourselves above* the LORD's assembly?" (Num. 16:3). At the heart of his challenge is the idea of equality. That surely is a Jewish idea. Was not Thomas Jefferson at his most biblical when he wrote, in the Declaration of Independence, that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"?

Of course Korach does not mean what he says. He claims to be opposed to the very institution of leadership, and at the same time he wants to be the leader. "All are equal, but some are more equal than others" is the seventh command in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, his critique of Stalinist Russia. But what if Korach had meant it? If he had been sincere?

There is, on the face of it, compelling logic to what he says. Did God not call on Israel to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," meaning a kingdom each of whose

members is a priest, a nation all of whose citizens are holy? Why then should there be a cadre of priests and one High Priest?

Did not the military hero Gideon say, in the era of the judges, "'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:23)? Why then should there be a single life-appointed Moses-type leader rather than what happened in the days of the judges, namely charismatic figures who led the people through a particular crisis and then went back to their previous anonymity, as Caleb and Pinchas did during the lifetime of Moses? Surely the people needed no other leader than God Himself?

Did not Samuel warn the people of the dangers of appointing a king? "He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots ... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves ... When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day" (1 Sam. 8:11-18). This is the biblical anticipation of Lord Acton's famous remark that all power tends to corrupt. Why then give individuals the power Moses and Aaron in their different ways seemed to have?

The Midrash Tanhuma, quoted by Rashi, contains a brilliant commentary on Korach's claim. It says that Korach gathered his co-conspirators and issued Moses a challenge in the form of a halakhic question:

He dressed them with cloaks made entirely of blue wool. They

came and stood before Moses and asked him, "Does a cloak made entirely of blue wool require fringes [*tzitzit*], or is it exempt?" He replied, "It does require [fringes]." They began laughing at him [saying], "Is it possible that a cloak of another [colored] material, one string of blue wool exempts it [from the obligation of *techeleth*], and this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, should not exempt itself?" (Tanhuma, Korach 4; Rashi to Num. 16:1)

What makes this comment brilliant is that it does two things. First it establishes a connection between the episode of Korach and the immediately preceding passage, the law of *tzitzit* at the end of last week's parsha. That is the superficial point. The deep one is that the Midrash deftly shows how Korach challenged the basis of Moses' and Aaron's leadership. The Israelites were "all holy; and God is among them." They were like a robe, every thread of which is royal blue. And just as a blue robe does not need an additional fringe to make it bluer still, so a holy people does not need extra holy people like Moses and Aaron to make it holier still. The idea of a leadership hierarchy in "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is a contradiction in terms. Everyone is like a priest. Everyone is holy. Everyone is equal in dignity before God. Hierarchy has no place in such a nation.

What then did Korach get wrong? The answer is contained in the second half of his challenge: "Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"

Korach's mistake was to see leadership in terms of status. A leader is one higher than the rest: the alpha male, the top dog, the controller, director, dominator, the one before whom people prostrate themselves, the ruler, the commander, the superior, the one to whom others defer. That is what leaders are in hierarchical societies. That is what Korach implied by saying that Aaron and Moses were "setting themselves above" the people.

But that is not what leadership is in the Torah, and we have had many hints of it already. Of Moses it says that "he was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). Of Aaron and the priests, in their capacity as those who blessed the people, it says "So they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them (Num. 6:27). In other words the priests were mere vehicles through which the divine force flowed. *Neither priest nor prophet had personal power or authority.* They were transmitters of a word not their own. The prophet spoke the word of God for *this* time. The priest spoke the word of God for *all* time. But neither was author of the word. That is why humility was not an accident of their personalities but of the essence of their role.

Even the slightest hint that they were exercising their own authority, speaking their own word or doing their own deed, immediately invalidated them. That, in fact, is what sealed the fate of Moses and Aaron later, when the people complained and they said, "Listen, you rebels, *must we* bring you water out of this rock?" (Num. 20:10). There

are many interpretations of what went wrong on that occasion but one, undeniably, is that they attributed the action to themselves rather than God (see Hizkuni ad loc.).

Even a king in Jewish law - the office that comes closest to status - is commanded to be humble. He is to carry a Torah scroll with him and read it all the days of his life "so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and *not consider himself better* than his fellow Israelites" (Deut. 17:19-20; and see Maimonides, Laws of Kings, 2:6).

In Judaism leadership is not a matter of status but of function. A leader is not one who holds himself higher than those he or she leads. That, in Judaism, is a moral failing not a mark of stature. The absence of hierarchy does not mean the absence of leadership. An orchestra still needs a conductor. A play still needs a director. A team still needs a captain.

A leader need not be a better instrumentalist, actor or player than those he leads. His role is different. He must coordinate, give structure and shape to the enterprise, make sure that everyone is following the same script, travelling in the same direction, acting as an ensemble rather than a group of prima donnas. He has to have a vision and communicate it. At times he has to impose discipline. Without leadership even the most glittering array of talents produces, not music but noise. That is not unknown in Jewish life, then and now. "In those days there was no king in Israel.

Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25). That is what happens when there is no leadership.

The Torah, and Tanakh as a whole, has a marvellous, memorable way of putting this. Moses' highest honour is that he is called *eved Hashem*, "the servant of God." He is called this, once on his death (Deut. 34:5), and no less than eighteen times in Tanakh as a whole. The only other person given this title is Joshua, twice. In Judaism, a leader is a servant and to lead is to serve. Anything else is not leadership as Judaism understands it.

Note that we are *all* God's servants. The Torah says so: "To Me the Israelites are servants; they are My servants whom I brought out of Egypt" (Lev 25:55). So it is not that Moses was a different kind of being than we are all called on to be. It is that he epitomised it to the utmost degree. *The less there is of self in one who serves God, the more there is of God.* Moses was the supreme exemplar of Rabbi Johanan's principle, that "Where you find humility, there you find greatness."

It is one of the sadder features of Judaism we tend to forget that many of the great ideas appropriated by others are in fact ours. So it is with "servant leadership," the phrase and theory associated with Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990). Greenleaf himself derived it from a novel by Hermann Hesse with Buddhist undertones, and in fact the Jewish concept is different from his. Greenleaf held that the leader is the servant of those he leads. In Judaism a leader is the servant of God, not of the people; but

neither is he their master. Only God is that. Nor is he above them: he and they are equal. He is simply their teacher, guide, advocate and defender. His task is to remind them endlessly of their vocation and inspire them to be true to it.

In Judaism leadership is not about popularity: "If a scholar is loved by the people of his town, it is not because he is gifted but because he fails to rebuke them in matters of heaven" (Ketubot 105b). Nor is a true leader eager for the job. Almost without exception the great leaders of Tanakh were reluctant to assume the mantle of leadership. Rabban Gamliel summed it up when he said to two sages he wanted to appoint to office: "Do you imagine I am offering you rulership? I am offering you *avdut*, the chance to serve" (Horayot 10a-b).

That, then, was Korach's mistake. He thought leaders were those who set themselves above the congregation. He was right to say that has no place in Judaism. We are all called on to be God's servants. Leadership is not about status but function. Without *tzitzit*, a blue robe is just a robe, not a holy garment. Without leadership, the Jewish people is just a people, an ethnic group, not a holy nation. And without reminders that we are a holy nation, who then will we become, and why?



Korach's Unique Punishment

Bamidbar, 16:30-32: "But if Hashem will create a creation, and the ground will open its mouth and swallow them and all that is theirs, and they will descend alive to the pit – then you shall know that these men have provoked HaShem. And it was when he finished saying all these words, the ground underneath them opened up. And the land opened its mouth and swallowed them and their homes, and every man who was with Korach and all their possessions. And they and everything of theirs went to the pits alive, and the ground covered them and they were lost from the congregation."

Rashi, Bamidbar, 16:30. Dh: Yivrah: "To kill them in a way that no man has died up till now..."

This week's Torah Portion involves the terrible story of the uprising of Korach against Moshe. Initially, Moshe tries to make peace, despite the fact that he had done nothing wrong and that Korach had instigated the dispute. However, when Korach continues to insist that Moshe was not a valid leader, and that he had made up

sections of the Torah, Moshe drastically changes his tone, and requests that God bring about the destruction of Korach and his cohort in a unique way to clearly demonstrate to everyone the severity of Korach's actions. Rashi, on the words, "If Hashem will create a creation," writes: "To put them to death through a death which no person has died up to this point - the earth will open its mouth and swallow them. Then you shall know that they provoked Hashem and I have spoken the Word of the Almighty."

It is understandable why Moshe wanted Korach to die a unique death, because Korach's arguments and provocations threatened to undermine the whole basis of Emunah – that the Torah is a Divine document given by HaShem and transmitted by Moshe Rabbeinu. Korach claimed that some of the Mitzvot in the Torah¹ did not make sense, and used this to try to prove that Moshe had made them up. In addition, he attempted to undermine the whole system of leadership, claiming, "all the nation is holy, why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem."²

Yet, the exact nature of the death that Moshe requested needs explanation – why did he ask God to cause Korach and his congregation to die through being swallowed into the ground? The Kli Yakar offers an interesting approach – he focuses on Moshe's request that Korach and his cohorts be swallowed up and he cites a source in Chazal where the same concept of swallowing is mentioned. The Mishna in

Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches that one should pray for the well-being of the Government of a country, because, "if not for the fear [of the Government], each man would swallow his fellow alive."³ The Mishna is teaching that without strong leadership of a nation, then anarchy will take over, and consequently people will 'swallow each other alive'.⁴

In essence, Korach was in fact demanding anarchy - his argument was that there should not be any leader because all the people are holy. But, as the Mishna teaches, if his stated goal would have come to fruition, then the dire warning of the Mishna would have come into actuality and anarchy would rule, leading to the prospect of each man 'swallowing' his fellow. Accordingly, measure for measure, Korach and his assembly were punished by being swallowed themselves, signifying the damage that their plans posed for the well-being of each person.

One aspect of the punishment that may not be fully addressed by the Kli Yakar's approach is that the Torah emphasizes not just that Korach and his congregation were swallowed up, but that the ground covered them up as well, indicating their total disappearance. Accordingly, it is possible to suggest an additional explanation as to the nature of this punishment.

Another Mishna in Pirkei Avot cites Korach's dispute as the quintessential example of a *machloket loh leshem Shamayim* – a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven, rather it was motivated by selfish concerns.⁵ The Mishna asserts that

such a dispute is '*eino mitkayem*' – this is often translated as meaning 'it does not last' but perhaps a more literal interpretation is that it ceases to exist⁶. The commentaries offer interpretations as to what it means that the dispute does not last. Based on the Torah's account of the story of Korach, it is possible to suggest that their punishment of being swallowed up and having the ground totally close itself up, is the manifestation of their dispute not lasting. Not only were they killed, but any remembrance of them was totally wiped out, including all their belongings. In this sense, not only did their dispute not last but it totally ceased to exist. Had the land simply swallowed them but left a gaping hole, then they would not have been totally erased from creation, but the closing up of the ground indicated that they did indeed completely cease to exist.

According to all the ways of understanding the severe punishment meted out to Korach and his cohorts, it is evident that the consequences of dispute are so severe that they merited a unique, miraculous punishment. Nowadays, such direct Divine Providence does not occur, but the dire harm caused by disputes is highly evident – whether they be disputes among families, communities, institutions, or anything else, the negative consequences are clear and everything possible should be done to avoid them. And if a dispute begins to develop, it is incumbent on anyone involved to do what he can to stem its development and if that is impossible, then to escape his own involvement.

1. Such as Mezuzah, and Techeilet on Tzitzit.
2. Bamidbar, 16:3.
3. Pirkei Avot, 3:2.

4. Kli Yakar, Bamidbar, 16:29.
5. Avos, 5:17.
6. The word *kiyum* is often used to refer to existence.

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