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## When Good Intentions Hide Dark Motives

Al Capone murdered, extorted, and terrorized Chicago during the Prohibition. Yet when asked about his legacy, the notorious gangster declared: "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse - the existence of a hunted man." In his mind, he wasn't a criminal—he was a misunderstood public servant.

If America's most sinister crime boss could deceive himself so thoroughly, what does that say about our own capacity for self-delusion? This question becomes even more unsettling when we examine Korach's rebellion in this week's Torah portion.

### A Mysterious Mutiny

The Torah portion opens with mutiny. Korach, a prince of the tribe of Levi, incites a rebellion against Moses and Aaron: "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and God is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above God's

assembly?"<sup>1</sup> Korach's platform champions unity, equality, and egalitarianism—righteous goals that would make any social justice advocate proud.

Yet Moses's rebuttal completely sidesteps Korach's egalitarian rhetoric, striking at something far more personal: "Is it not enough that the God of Israel has distinguished **you** from the congregation of Israel to draw you near to Him, to perform the service in the Mishkan of the Lord and to stand before the congregation to minister to them?"<sup>2</sup>

Let's recap:

- Korach's attack: "We demand equality!"
- Moses's response: "Don't you think your rank is high enough?"

At this point, you'd logically expect Korach to say, "You misunderstand me! This isn't about my rank—it's about justice for everyone!" But instead of defending his principles, Korach responds by entering a competition with Moses and Aaron to

determine the rightful leader of the Levites, the priesthood, and the nation!

What happened to Korach's platform of egalitarianism?

### **Envy's Egalitarian Mask**

The Midrash reveals that Korach was never interested in equality at all. He rebelled because "he envied the chieftainship of Elizaphan the son of Uzziel whom Moses appointed as chieftain over the sons of Kohath<sup>3</sup> by the [Divine] word."<sup>4</sup>

In his famous short story, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell satirizes the Russian revolution that gave birth to communism. In the book, a group of animals rebel against their human oppressors, establishing "All animals are equal" as the sacred commandment of their new society. But the pigs gradually seize power, eventually changing the motto to "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The noble platform of egalitarianism served as a cover for the pigs' hunger for power. Korach employed the same strategy—he weaponized equality to seize power for himself.

But here's what makes Korach's story truly chilling: Was he a conscious manipulator, or had he actually convinced himself that his cause was just?

### **The Slippery Slope of Self-Deception**

As we saw in the verses above, Moses saw right through Korach's scheme, calling him out for his true intentions. But did Korach realize his own twisted motivation, or had he thoroughly

convinced himself that he was fighting for justice?

According to Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, the master of character development from the last generation, Korach genuinely convinced himself he was fighting for justice. At his core, Korach harbored the destructive trait of jealousy. But rather than confront this character flaw, he constructed a philosophy that transformed his jealousy into righteousness—crusading for equality for all.

But Korach didn't stop there. The Midrash explains that he saw prophetically that supremely righteous people would emerge from his lineage, including the prophet Samuel. Seeing that his descendants would be righteous, Korach convinced himself that his philosophy must be correct. In psychology, this phenomenon is called "confirmation bias"—the tendency to interpret information in ways that support our pre-existing beliefs.

Korach's error reveals an essential truth about human psychology: We hide our true motivation, even from ourselves, dressing it up as a wolf in sheep's clothing. The implications are sobering: if Korach—a prince of Levi who witnessed the splitting of the Red Sea and stood at Mount Sinai—could deceive himself so thoroughly, what does that say about our own capacity for self-delusion?

We hide our true motivation, even from ourselves, dressing it up as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

### **Escaping the Self-Righteousness Trap**

To make this practical, I'd like to suggest a self-accounting exercise: Is there an area of your life where you feel especially self-righteous? Is there

a cause you're passionate about, sometimes to the point of conflict with others? Ask yourself: Why do I feel so strongly about my position? Do I have any personal interest? Trace it back—what was your first thought, before you dressed it up in noble principles? Was it as righteous as it now appears?

If you discover one of these hidden motivations, stop your external rebellion and instead work to correct the internal flaw you've uncovered. Being honest with ourselves is difficult, but there's no other way to live in truth and ensure we sow seeds of love instead of dissent.

May we learn the lesson of Korach and develop the courage to examine our true motivations, choosing authentic growth over self-righteous revolt.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Avraham

*Inspired by the talks of Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz - one of the great Torah scholars of our current generation.*

1. Bamidbar 16:3
2. Bamidbar 16:9
3. One of the Levite families
4. Tanchuma Korach 1



## Great Choices

Korach is a classic example of a person with great potential, who made wrong decisions. The Sages tell us that Korach was a wise man. He was chosen to be one of the select few who were spiritually fitting to carry the Ark of the Covenant. The Zohar tells us that of all the Tribe of Levi, he was the one with the greatest potential. That's pretty high praise, especially when we remember that Moses and Aaron themselves were from the Tribe of Levi.

And yet, Korach starts up a dispute with Moses, and ends up being swallowed by the earth. What went wrong?

Actually, the question itself is wrong. Nothing "went" wrong. Korach had free will and he "chose" wrong. There is no determinism. Korach was not caught up in a wave of events over which he had no control. Korach made some very bad decisions. He became incredibly wealthy, but the wealth led him to arrogance. It's common for that to happen, but it was still a choice. Korach's arrogance made him feel that he was not given enough honor, and he made another choice to enter into a dispute with Moses. From beginning to end, he was choosing.

This week's Torah portion begins with the word *vayikach*, "and he took." Korach took that which was not his. He "took" it – actively and consciously.

Shakespeare is wrong when he says "some are born great" and "some have greatness thrust upon them." People only "achieve greatness" through their choices. Greatness through birth, and greatness thrust upon a person, are only greatness in potential. True greatness must be achieved. Korach was great in potential. But he chose wrong and had only himself to blame.

The same is true of all of us. When we do not achieve the spiritual and moral heights we may aspire to, we can blame circumstance; we can blame upbringing; we can blame nature. Ultimately, though, we are responsible for our own choices. And conversely, when and if we achieve greatness, it is ours and ours alone – because we will only have "achieved" it, with the Almighty's help, through our own efforts and our own choices.



### For the Sake of Peace

Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer was a great sage in Jerusalem 100 years ago. Once, during one of

Rabbi Meltzer's Talmudic lectures, a young man **who did not usually contribute** to the discussions, spoke up - arguing that Rabbi Meltzer's interpretation contradicted the great Talmudic commentator, the Sfas Emes. Rabbi Meltzer, a noted Talmud scholar himself, apologized for his mistake, but asked permission to continue.

After the class, one of Rabbi Meltzer's top students approached him and said: "Rabbi, I don't understand. First of all, your interpretation was not at odds with the Sfas Emes. And secondly, even if it was, there was nothing wrong in offering a differing interpretation."

Rabbi Meltzer explained: "I noticed that there was an older man in attendance **who does not usually come** to my lectures. Also, the student who asked me the question usually does not participate in the discussions. I thought these two unusual **circumstances may be related**. Perhaps the older man was looking at the student as a prospective son-in-law. If that were the case, I did not want to put the young man in a negative light."

One week later, Rabbi Meltzer's supposition was proved correct: The student who had posed the challenge in class **became engaged** to the older man's daughter.

True humility entails a willingness to **put oneself in a bad light** if it will help others. A prime example can be found in this week's Torah portion, Korach.

Korach, a cousin of Moses and Aaron, launches a rebellion against them. He claims that they have unfairly seized leadership roles and have ignored

the prophetic powers of the rest of the nation. Korach says that Moses and Aaron are no holier than anyone else - and he ridicules their teachings. Datan, Aviram, and 250 others join Korach's cause.

Were the rebels' claims justified? No - they were patently absurd! **Who would accuse Moses of snatching power**, when in fact Moses had to be persuaded by the God to take a leadership role in the first place!?! Moreover, the Torah describes Moses as "the most humble of all men." Wielding power was the last thing on his mind!

Moses tells the rebels, though, that if they have any doubts about his designation of Aaron as High Priest, he is willing to conduct the following test: Each person who lays claim to Aaron's position should bring an incense offering to God, and **whoever the Almighty chooses** will become the High Priest. Moses is willing to put his position on the line in order to mollify the rebels.

Then, in a stunning example of humility, Moses **asks to meet** with Datan and Aviram. Though they have been provocateurs, and Moses **risks humiliation** by meeting with them, he still tries to make peace.

Characteristically, Datan and Aviram rebuff Moses' offer and insult him. With this last ditch effort being met with failure, the die is cast and the unfortunate episode ends with the **ground opening up and swallowing the rebels**.

We can derive a dramatic lesson from this story. Though he was totally in the right, and though he exposed himself to insult and humiliation, Moses did all he could to stop a tragedy. In acting this

way, Moses provided subsequent generations with an exemplary model of what constitutes true humility, and showed how far one must go to **put ego aside for the sake of peace**.



## Unhealthy Conflict

Conflict is ubiquitous in so many areas of life and there are numerous fields of research that study this fiery topic as it manifests in these different contexts. Industrial and organizational psychologists investigate conflict in the workplace, marriage and family therapists look at conflict between relatives, political psychologists work to understand conflict on a more global scale, and social psychologists study conflict on a more general level. While naturally there is some conflict amongst the research findings about conflict, there are generally agreed upon trends as to what causes conflicts and the best ways to try and resolve them.

Jewish tradition is also heavily concerned with conflict resolution and the pursuit of peace. Rabbi Dr. Howard Kaminsky recently published a book called *Fundamentals of Jewish Conflict Resolution: Traditional Jewish Perspective on Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts*, where he

systematically gathers and summarizes ideas found in Biblical and Rabbinic literature, comparing those sources with modern approaches to conflict resolution. What follows is a brief summary his main points as they relate to this week's Torah portion.

The Sages (Sanhedrin 110a) articulate an actual prohibition of perpetuating a quarrel, based on the verse that states “Do not be like Korach and his congregation” (Bemidbar 17:5). Rabbi Yehonatan mi-Lunil argues that even though Moshe was in the right and was unjustly attacked, if he didn't try to stop the dispute, he would have violated the prohibition. Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel suggests further that we can learn from Moshe's continual attempts to resolve the conflict, that the prohibition even applies after the other party rejects earlier attempts at reconciliation.

The Mishna in Ethics of the Fathers (5:17) distinguishes between the disputes of Hillel and Shammai, which are considered for the sake of Heaven, and the dispute between Korach and his followers, which are not. We are just given paradigms, without delineation of any particular criteria for identifying a dispute for the sake of Heaven. It is up to the commentators to fill in the gaps, and many use the nuances of the narrative reported in Parshat Korach to elucidate the parameters.

Summarizing and organizing the commentaries, Rabbi Dr. Kaminsky presents three criteria that indicate that a dispute is not for the sake of Heaven. One is that the party demonstrates a lack of intellectual integrity. They are uninterested in engaging in any clarifying and compromising

dialogue. They are right and nothing anyone can say will change their minds.

A second criterion is the content and tone of the argument. If it is clear that they are condemning and insulting the other party, with a backdrop of animosity, then the dispute is not for the sake of Heaven.

The final criterion relates to the motivation of the dispute. If the provocation is rooted in anything but the pursuit of truth and peace, that is a strong clue that it is not for the sake of Heaven. As various midrashim indicate with Korach, his true motivation was rooted in arrogance, jealousy and hurt, not a more noble internal impulse.

The difficulty, as Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz poignantly adds, is that most people aren't always aware of these ulterior motives and subconscious motivations within themselves. Most people can rationalize away their participation in any dispute as being for the sake of Heaven, even if it is not.

If we truly want to follow Moshe's paradigm and avoid Korach's example, we would be wise to reflect before any dispute and engage in an honest introspection. Are we listening to the other party and really concerned with intellectual integrity? Are we being overcome with hostility and other unhealthy negative emotions towards the other party? Can we honestly say – knowing that it is so easy to delude ourselves – that we are not being driven by ulterior motives? If we aren't confident that we pass these criteria, we would generally do well to avoid conflict as much as possible.