

KORACH (NUMBERS 16:1-18:32)

Caleb, Korach, and Me

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Never hit a guy when he's on a roll; you have to try to get him when he's down.

You couldn't put anything on Moses; he was at the top of his game. He was The Man! He straight-talked the Pharaoh, and led us out of Egypt. He led us through the split-open waters of the Red Sea, and presided over our nation's receipt of miraculous manna from Heaven. Even when we sinned he was there for us. He caught us worshipping the Golden Calf, but negotiated our forgiveness from G-d.

Moses was great. You just HAD to love him!

Most people did. One of the exceptions was Korach.

Korach was a cousin of Moses. A fellow Levite, he was offended over the fact that Moses was giving leadership positions to people other than himself.

The Levites were divided into various family groups. One such group was the Kehathites, descendents of Kehath, son of Levi. Kehath had four sons. Amram, father of Moses and Aaron, was the oldest. Next came Yitzhar, the father of Korach. Korach was unhappy over the fact that Moses had appointed his brother to the High Priesthood. Why couldn't that honor have gone to someone in another branch of the family? (i.e., himself!!)

Then, to add insult to injury, G-d told Moses to appoint Elizafan, the son of Kehath's youngest son, as leader of the Kehathites. Korach felt that he should have been next in line for leadership, and felt slighted over the fact that the job had gone to his cousin Elizafan.

Korach wasn't the only person who was annoyed with Moses.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra writes that the Firstborn of Israel were also upset. The Firstborn of every family were the original Priests of Israel. They were supposed to bring the offerings in the Temple. However, when the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, the Firstborn participated in the party. Only the Levites refrained. As a result, the Priesthood was taken from the Firstborn and given to the Levites. (To this day, Firstborn sons have to be redeemed; their fathers have to "buy them back" from a Kohain.) So the Firstborn had their own beef with Moses. (Korach, too, was a Firstborn)

Nachmanides writes that Korach temporarily swallowed the insults of being passed over. He had to wait for an opportune time to lead a rebellion against Moses. Moses was too well-liked. Korach had to find a time when there was general dissatisfaction with the “Mosaic” regime. Even after the Golden Calf, which led to the deaths of several thousand Israelites, Moses remained popular because he had prayed to G-d for 40 days and 40 nights to forgive the Nation. The people would not have tolerated a challenge to Moses; they would have stoned anyone who would try!

But now it was different. Much bad news happened in the last two weeks’ Torah Portions. Two weeks ago, we read that the nation complained about a lack of meat; G-d sent a fire into the camp that burnt the complainers. Then, as we read last week, the nation believed the negative reports about the Land of Israel from the spies who had been sent to check it out. As a result, they were punished by being told that they would have to wander the desert for 40 years before being permitted to enter the Land. Almost everyone over 20 years old would die in the desert; only the youth would live to see the Land.

This was Korach’s golden opportunity. The people were sad and disheartened. Moses was, perhaps, not the great commodity he had previously presented himself to be. He was now a source of trouble. People had died under his watch; all they had wanted was some protein! The Tribal leaders who had conducted the expedition to scout out the land of Israel were dead. Now, his promise of taking us to the Promised Land was not going to happen. Why hadn’t Moses prayed to G-d to retract the 40-year punishment? WHAT HAD MOSES DONE FOR US LATELY??!!

Against this backdrop of discontent, Korach saw a chance to lead the people to rebel. People have very short memories. No one was interested in all of the good Moses had done for them; now was the time to look for things to complain about.

Korach argued, “*You (and your brother Aaron) have gone too far! The entire Nation is holy, and G-d is with them. Why have you placed yourselves above G-d’s congregation?*” (Numbers, 16:3).

Dathan and Abiram, two long-time adversaries of Moses from back in Egypt (see “Mother Goose Lied to Us!”) followed up with the next salvo:

“Isn’t it enough that you brought us out of (Egypt,) a land flowing with milk and honey, just to kill us in the desert? What right do you have to set yourself above us? You didn’t bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, or give us an inheritance of fields and vineyards!” (ibid, verses 13-13)

Not only did Korach and his mob object to some of Moses’ appointments. They challenged the entire notion of his prophesy! They accused him of fabricating Commandments. They said that Moses, on his own, had come up with his own ideas on how to serve G-d. Some of these Commandments, which Korach & Company rejected, were based, they claimed, upon flawed logic.

Among these disputed laws were the Mitzvahs of Mezuzah and Tallis. They disagreed with some of the circumstances under which these rules should apply. (To see the “reasoning” behind their attack of these Mitzvahs, see “True Blue”.)

The Kli Yakar writes that the selection of Mezuzah and Tallis was not coincidental. The purpose of the Mezuzah is so that we think about G-d as we leave and enter our homes. In reference to the Tzitzis fringes of the Tallis, we read last week, ...*when you see them, you will remember all of G-d's Commandments so as to keep them...*(*ibid*, 15:38) (See “Fringe Benefits” for more details.)

This, too, was viewed as an affront to the honor of Israel. “*The entire Nation is holy, and G-d is with them.* Who needs reminders like Mezuzah and Tzitzis? Holy people like us don’t need any reminders!”

And therein, I believe, lay the methodology behind Korach’s rebellion. Korach knew, as Nachmonides explains, that if the people would but pay attention to everything that Moses had done for them, they would never put up with this insurrection. Korach had to wait until they had forgotten. By eliminating those two important Commandments, he hoped to keep them in their state of forgetfulness.

Last week we read of another rebellion. Twelve spies were sent to the Land of Israel. Ten of them brought back a negative report. Only Joshua and Caleb tried to convince the nation that G-d could and would bring them into the Land. The masses believed the majority.

Caleb tried to quiet the people for Moses. (Ibid, 13:30) Rashi explains that once Caleb got everyone’s attention, he reminded them that Moses had parted the sea for them, brought down manna for them, and caused pheasant to fly into the camp for them.

Caleb obviously felt that by reminding the people of the fact that Moses was such a devoted servant of G-d and His nation, he would discourage them from sinning.

Korach and Caleb, apparently, both agreed that remembering G-d keeps us devoted to Him. Therefore, Caleb tried to get us to remember; Korach tried to get us to forget.

There is a little bit of Korach in all of us. G-d created us with two inclinations. The “*Yeitzer Hatov*,” the Positive Inclination, is that force within us that propels us toward doing the right thing. Respect your parents, be kind to your spouse, observe the Sabbath, be honest in business, study Torah.

Then there is the “*Yeitzer Hara*,” the Negative Inclination. He’s the guy in the back of your head who tries to drag you down. He’s the fellow who encourages you to cheat in business, gossip about your neighbor, waste your time in front of the TV, eat at Outback, read (and ogle at) immodest literature and

websites.

It is a life-long struggle.

The Korach in us tries very hard to distract us from our obligations toward G-d. Ironically, he tries, often successfully, to convince us that we don't need G-d's Commandments to remind us to be holy. We think we can remain holy without them.

The Caleb within us endeavors to keep us on the straight and narrow. He tries to get us to recognize all that G-d has done for us. Besides the historical record of what G-d has done for the Nation of Israel, we should focus on what is perhaps a more important question: What has G-d done for ME lately?

Did I wake up this morning? Is there food on my table? Do I have a job? Is my family well?

And even if these questions don't have the exact answers that we wish they had, isn't there much for which we need to be thankful? Shouldn't we pay close attention to all that G-d does for us? Doesn't it behoove us, if we want Him to continue to do for us, that we should continue to do that which He wishes of us?

Who is right, Korach or Caleb?

Let me put it this way. Caleb lived to a ripe old age, crossed the Jordan, and settled in the Land of Israel. Korach was swallowed up by the earth.

How's THAT for a reminder? The decision SHOULD be a no-brainer!

Have a great Shabbos.

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