

קרח

THE MERAGLIM AND KORACH

Two of the most remarkable and least understood of the ten *nisyonos* which confronted *Klal Yisrael* in the *midbar* were those of the *meraglim* and Korach. It is important to understand these two revolutions against Hashem and Moshe *Rabbeinu* in their proper perspectives. *Targum Onkelos* interprets the *pasuk* “*Vayikach Korach*” — “And Korach took” (*Bamidbar* 16:1) — as “*Ve’ispeleig Korach*” — “Korach perpetrated a schism.” Rashi (*ibid.*) states that Korach asked the question: “Is a *talis* which is entirely made of *techeiles* — blue wool — required to have *tzitzit* [which contains a *techeiles* strand] or is it exempt?” When Moshe exclaimed that it certainly is required to have *tzitzis*, Korach scoffed: “If a single thread of *techeilis* is sufficient for an entire *talis*, why shouldn’t a *talis* composed entirely of *techeiles* exempt itself!” The *Midrash* (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:3) adds another question posed by Korach: “Is a room full of sacred books exempt from a *mezuzah* or not?” Again, when Moshe responded in the affirmative, Korach scoffed, “If a single *mezuzah* exempts an entire room, then a room full of sacred books should certainly exempt itself!” Korach was actually alluding to the idea that *Klal Yisrael*, which is entirely composed of many holy individuals, should not require the services of an intermediary such as Aharon or Moshe between them and Hashem. He felt that *Klal Yisrael*, as a group, could communicate with Hashem directly.

כי כל העדה כלם קדשים ובתוכם ה', ומדוע תתנשאו על קהל ה'

“The entire congregation is holy, and Hashem is among them; why do you raise yourselves over the congregation?” (*Bamidbar* 16:3).

The schism that Korach sought to implement was an all-out war against Hashem, and his battle was with the natural order of holiness. He argued against peace, and “Peace” is Hashem’s name (*Zohar*, *Bamidbar* 16:1). Korach’s basic contention was that once an entity is invested with a certain element of *kedushah* — sanctity — that entity no longer requires mediation with Hashem. He argued that *Klal Yisrael*, on the threshold of entering *Eretz Yisrael*, Hashem’s Holy Land, was perfectly capable of communicating directly with Hashem, without the aid of self-aggrandizing leaders. By denying Moshe’s authority as Hashem’s messenger, Korach denied the legitimacy of the Torah and ultimately the legitimacy of the One Who sent Moshe.

Korach understood the situation in terms of the Ramban’s assessment of *Klal Yisroel*, in his broad interpretation of the *posuk* (*Shemos* 20:18):

אני בא אליך בעב הענן שתגש אתה אל הערפל בעבור ישמע העם דברי ויהיו הם עצמם
נביאים בדברי

I come to you in a thick cloud, so that you should draw near ‘to the thick darkness’ in order that the people may hear when I speak.

The Ramban (*Shemos* 19:9) explains that Hashem understood that the people themselves will be prophets when Hashem speaks. Hence, it would not be necessary for prophecy to be confirmed to them through others. Korach misapplied this assessment in assuming that the prophet no longer had legitimacy.

To better understand the schism promoted by Korach, it is important to analyze the view of the Ibn Ezra (*ibid.*). The Ibn Ezra claims that the episode of Korach occurred at the time that the *Levi'im* replaced the firstborn in Temple service. The rebellion represented the firstborn's protest against Moshe, for displacing them as the servants of Hashem. They accused Moshe of transferring their honor and status to the *Levi'im* on his own initiative in order to bestow prominence upon his brother Aharon, his cousins, and his tribe.

Korach was a *bechor* — firstborn — as were the *Nesi'ei Ha'eidah* — Princes. They led the battle cry for all the *bechorim*, claiming:

כי כל העדה כלם קדשים

“All of the nation are holy” (*Bamidbar* 16:3).

Dasan and Aviram of *Sheivet* Reuven joined the fracas because they were protesting the transfer of the *bechorah* from their great-grandfather Reuven to Yosef. They, too, accused Moshe of acting on his own initiative in order to promulgate an exalted status for his devoted student and heir-apparent, Yehoshua, who was Yosef's great-grandson.

Korach's rebellion on behalf of the firstborn was only superficially directed against Moshe. It was actually an attack against the very essence of *Klal Yisrael*. The Torah endows the *bechorah* with several privileges. Through his birthright he is entitled to two portions of the inheritance (*Bechoros* 8:9), and he commands honor from his younger siblings (*Kesuvos* 103•), among other privileges. Inherently, the birthright of the firstborn is only 'sacred' in the pagan world; in the Torah world it is privileged, but not necessarily 'sacred.' Among the ancients, it was always the firstborn who served as priests at the family altar, and they always manifested a special relationship with their deities. Yaakov was the first man to challenge the status of the birthright. He did so when he purchased the *bechorah* (*Bereishis* 25:31), and again when he transferred the *bechorah* from Reuven to Yosef (*Divrei Hayamim* I 5:2), and finally in transferring Menashe's birthright to Efraim (*Bereishis* 48:17). If Korach's protest bore any validity at all, then Eisov's replacement by Yaakov as patriarch of *Klal Yisrael* would be nullified, and the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer would then read “*Elokai Avraham, Elokai Yitzchak, ve'Elokai Eisav*” (see Rashi, *Bereishis* 25:32). Obviously, what Korach had in mind with his rebellion was to totally undermine the very foundation of *Klal Yisrael*.

From the very beginning Hashem made it very clear that being firstborn does not necessarily imply sacred status. Hashem rejected the offering of Kayin, the firstborn, while He accepted the offering of Hevel, the second born (*Bereishis* 4:4,5). Later, Sheim was selected as the chosen one, ahead of his two brothers, Cham and Yefes (Rashi, *ibid.* 10:21). In the days of the *Avos* Avraham's firstborn Yishmael was rejected in favor of Yitzchak (*ibid.* 21:12). Yaakov, born second, acquired the *bechorah* from Eisav (*ibid.* 25:31). Reuven lost the *bechorah* to Yosef (*Divrei Hayamim* I 5:2). Menashe's birthright was transferred to Efraim (*Bereishis* 48:17). Hundreds of years later, Shemuel *Hanavi* was a middle child of Elkanah (*Shemuel* I 1:4). David *Hamelech* was the youngest of Yishai's children (*Shemuel* I 17:14). Shlomo *Hamelech* was the

second son of Bas Sheva and he was David's youngest son (*Shemuel II* 11:27). Thus, being born first is no guarantee of elevated holiness, and Korach's revolution was a repudiation of this principle. The *meraglim*, on the other hand, espoused a different sort of heresy.

The *meraglim* were composed of the "Heads of the Children of Israel" (*Bamidbar* 13:3). It was essential that they be the best and the brightest of *Klal Yisrael*, for that was consistent with their mission.

Complete *sheleimut* — perfection — in the performance of any *mitzvah* can only be achieved within *Eretz Yisrael* (Ramban, *Vayikra* 18:25). The performance of *mitzvos* outside of *Eretz Yisrael* is basically preparatory to their performance upon the return to *Eretz Yisrael* (Rashi, *Devarim* 11:18). Prior to the visit of the *meraglim*, *Eretz Yisrael*, although inherently holy, had been defiled by the seven nations of Canaan (*Vayikra* 18:27). The *meraglim*, thus, were charged with a dual mission. On an elementary level their role was to spy on the land. However, on a spiritual level their mission was much more sublime. They were required to reinvest *Eretz Yisrael* with *kedushah* in preparation for the incoming *Klal Yisrael*. The holy nation had to be housed in a holy land, to fulfill its ultimate destiny (see *Sefas Emes*, *Bamidbar* 13:3).

The *meraglim* rebelled against this mission. They were representative of the *Dor Dei'ah* — the "Generation of Intellect" that travelled in the *midbar* (*Vayikra Rabbah*, 9:1). They felt that superior worship of Hashem was completely spiritual and intellectual; there was no need for mundane physical ritual. In the *midbar* there were few conventional amenities; their existence was almost entirely spiritual. Their food fell from heaven, their water supply was a portable stream, their clothes grew with them, they were insulated on all four sides by heavenly clouds, and their feet did not step onto the ground. There was no need for social intercourse with the other nations; there was no agriculture and no commerce; and they were so close to the *Shechinah* in the *Mishkan* that they could practically perceive It with their senses. The only demand Hashem made of them was spiritual growth. This was indeed a "Generation of the Intellect."

The *meraglim* felt that entering *Eretz Yisrael* would involve a diminution of holiness. There the Jewish people would lose their angelic existence, and they would be forced to undertake a mundane existence like that of all the other nations. They therefore denigrated the land, hoping to maintain the *midbar's* generation of intellect forever. They lost sight of the fact that Hashem created man to be human, with all his concomitant foibles and shortcomings. The *meraglim* should have hoped to attain the level of angels by striving to develop the human condition to its desired *sheleimus*.

The rebellion of the *meraglim* and the rebellion of Korach involved two widely differing approaches, each extreme in its own position. Each sought to redefine the ideal human condition to conform to its own personal perceptions and agenda. Perfection can only be attained with the prescription set forth in the Torah; any fanatical or extreme deviation, no matter how sincere, will result in failure.

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