

## Why did Korach revolt against Moses and Aaron?

And what can we learn from that rebellion as a message of hope for today and for the future?

Despite Moses being sent to deliver Israel from Egypt from the time of the burning bush about 1330 BCE and witnessing the 10 plagues on Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea and God's presence on Mt. Sinai where the Children of Israel heard the first two commandments and asked Moses to listen alone and Moses received the law - both written law and the oral tradition and the preparations for the tabernacle and the erection of the tabernacle. Why did Korach and 250 loyal followers lose patience with God's chosen ones?

Why is it that it took almost two years for Korach to challenge Moses? Korach had seen the revelation at Sinai. He had seen all of the miracles that God had performed through Moses and Aaron. So the question becomes, why did Korach wait until at least two years after the revelation at Sinai to challenge the authority of Moses and Aaron? Although the Rabbinic sages, so called *Chazal*, the Midrash, and the Talmud have hundreds and hundreds of explanations for the rebellion of Korach and his jealousy and envy and his need and desire to be the high priest, some of the possible reasons I will summarize by briefly describing the genealogy of the house of Jacob which is part of the handouts I have given to you.

Levi had three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari. Kohath becomes the family for the Levites who would eventually guard the Mishkan's most precious possessions. So it is important to know that Kohath had four sons. The oldest was Amram who was the father Miriam, Aaron and Moses. The second oldest son of Kohath was Izhar whose oldest son was Korach, making Korach and Moses first cousins. The youngest of the sons of Kohath was Uzziel.

In Numbers 3:30, the position of the chief Levite prince is given to Elizaphan who was the son of the youngest of Kohath's sons, Uzziel and it is therefore very likely that there was significant jealousy for Korach with the appointment of Elizaphan as the chief Levite. This is the major opinion of Rashi in regard to Korach's rebellion.

Secondly, one has to review the enormous sin of the spies which gave rise to the depression and anxiety of the Children of Israel knowing that they would now not only not reach the Promised Land, promised to Abraham, but that they would all die in the desert.

I believe it is these two historical facts that are the background for Korach to question Moses in such a way that he states, “You have gone too far? For all the community are holy, all of them and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?”

This is the central core of the *parasha* and Korach is completely wrong with this statement. It is not that the Children of Israel are holy. It is that they have the ability and responsibility to become holy. The fact that God said that they were a nation of priests and a holy nation does not mean that they are that, but that they can become that. And that is what it means to bring godliness down into this world where following God’s commandments and behaving in an ethical and moral fashion leads to spirituality and closeness to God.

Throughout Exodus and Leviticus, there are many *passukim* that specifically state *Kedoshim Tih’yu*. This is translated as, “You shall be holy”. In all of these *Passukim*, we have the future tense: Leviticus 19:2, “You shall be holy because I, the Lord am Holy”; Leviticus 20: 26, “You shall be holy unto me because I, the Lord am holy” - always the future tense. Exodus 22: 30, “You shall be holy unto me.” Leviticus 11: 44-45, “You shall be holy.”

In other words, holiness is a prospective goal, but for Korach to say, “We are all holy” is not only wrong in terms of what the Torah is telling us, but that his tremendous envy and jealousy of both particularly Aaron and the youngest cousin Elizaphan changed the whole persona of Korach who in Talmud and Midrash is an extremely wealthy, extremely scholarly individual who, as a Levite, was against the golden calf and was a Tzaddik. What this teaches us in this world is that envy and jealousy can masquerade as a fight for equality. *Pirkei Avot* chapter 4, verse 28: “Rabbi Elazar HaKappar says: jealousy, lust, and the pursuit of glory remove a man from the world”. It is interesting that is exactly what happened to Korach. But not his sons. His sons survived and wrote many psalms and one of Korach’s most famous relative, 15 generations later, is the hero of the Haftarah, Samuel.

A few words about Dathan and Abiram, descendants of the Tribe of Reuben: To talk about On, son of Peleth is an interesting drash in itself and I will not discuss that except to tell you that On is never mentioned again because in the Midrash his wife tells him, “Don’t get involved.” (A very wise woman).

It is interesting that a complete sermon can be made on Dathan and Abiram. The Midrash tells us that these two men were the men who were the Israelites who fought against each other and Moses stopped the fight in Exodus which is part of the righteousness and justice of Moses which led him to become the man that God chose to be holy at the burning bush. These two men were also the ones who wanted to go back to Egypt because they felt it was a land of milk and honey. They were the men who were unhappy about the fact that they didn’t have meat. So in general, they were always the two men who opposed Moses consistently. And as you know, they were literally eaten up by the earth.

In the few minutes remaining, I want to emphasize the concept of holiness, which I think is important for us today and which Korach, in my opinion, simply got totally wrong and that’s why he was either eaten up by the earth or burned from the incense on the plates held by the 250 people who believed in Korach’s egalitarianism. The 250 representatives that followed Korach, wanted truly to get as close to God as possible spiritually. So it is very likely that even though they knew that all of them might die by fire, they would be doing the ultimate holy act. That is why their plates were attached permanently to the Mishkan because God felt that they had sacrificed their lives to approach God.

Therefore, I think it would be appropriate to talk a little bit about holiness. Although the word “holy” means to be separate and that the Children of Israel were separate from the other nations, and God chose the Children of Israel to be separate, not because they were superior but because he wanted them to follow his commandments, but holiness can also mean something else.

My concept of holiness is taken from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in his beautiful book called *The Code of Jewish Ethics*, subtitled, “You shall be Holy”.

One of the Hassidic explanations of why the 10 spies returned with a negative report about the Holy land is that they had it so good in the desert. They were close to God. The cloud of God was on the tabernacle. It wasn't that they were afraid of the Land of Canaan. They were afraid of freedom because what freedom meant to the Children of Israel in the Promised Land was to work the land, to raise cattle and sheep and toil with their hands. These 10 very holy people who brought back a negative report in last week's *parasha* simply didn't want to leave the desert because of their close relationship to God. For them, holiness was only spiritual and it was being as close to God as possible. It was not important for them to follow the ethical commands that were given in *Parashat K'doshim* and that was their error and shortcoming.

I think, as Rabbi Telushkin so beautifully puts it in *A Code of Jewish Ethics*, if we go back to *Parashat K'doshim* and the holiness code in that *Parasha*, what do we learn? For Telushkin, to be holy means what appears in Torah after God says, "You shall be holy because I, the Lord your God am holy." What follows that in *parashat Kedoshim*? Immediately after this phrase at the beginning of *K'doshim*, it says, "You shall revere your mother and father. Do not turn to idols or molten gods. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field. You shall not steal. You shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall not render an unfair decision. Do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich. Judge your kinsmen fairly. You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself. I am the Lord.

These mitzvot that follow the sentence "You Shall be Holy" are all about how to behave in the real world. They are ethical commands. Therefore, God is telling us that to be holy in the land as physical human beings means to do good things and to love your fellow man – to be ethical and moral, in your business relations and to earn an honest living. That is how to get close to God and become spiritual. That is what the spies failed to realize.

Two of the greatest Jewish sages, Hillel and Rabbi Akiva also do not focus on spirituality but on relationships with people. For example, as you well know, Hillel says, "*What is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. All the*

*rest is commentary. Now go and study.*” In short, this was Hillel’s summary of Judaism’s essence.

What matters most to God? The words of Rabbi Akiva from the Jerusalem Talmud, “*Love your neighbor as yourself; this is the major principle of the Torah.*”

In summary then, for us to be holy is not necessarily to be mystical or to be extremely religious, but to follow Hillel and Akiva, love your neighbor as yourself – work very hard to love and help your neighbor and do not do what is hateful to others.

In summarizing the problem with Korach, who certainly, at least in this *parasha*, did not know, truly, what holiness meant when he said, we are all holy. The *B’nei Yisrael* were in their spiritual infancy. They were not all holy. They had to become holy. That, to me, is the critical failure of Korach and his followers. Yes, envy and jealousy of not becoming the High Priest and knowing that the son of Uzziel, the youngest son of Kohath was appointed the leader of the Levites plays an important reason for the rebellion. But Korach’s major error was the Children of Israel were not yet holy, far from it. They did not have the training and the time to become holy because it takes time to observe the principles set down in Torah to become holy.

I think the message that we learn through Korach is that Korach’s fiery idealism began with the familiar human trait of envy, simple envy. A minimal mar upon the sterling character of a man so important and honorable, Korach wasn’t even aware of it. It didn’t affect him. It didn’t affect his everyday life until the moment that Elizaphan Ben Uzziel became the divinely appointed leader of the Tribe of Levi, as Rashi describes in his commentary on the Midrash. Because he felt this position to be unjustly wrested away from him, to be the head of the Levites, filled him with such envy and such belligerence, it led him literally to mutiny. It isn’t hard to see how jealousy and envy can morph into an ideology of hatred and rebellion, given half the chance. Self-appointed victims can easily begin to believe in the purity of their own intensions. The rumblings of the rebellious voices begin to reach Moses as the group drew together to oppose him. This is the most powerful message *Parashat Korach* is trying to get across to us. It’s a warning, a cautionary tale against the snowball effect and consequences of simple envy and jealousy which led Korach to his destruction. It blinds the eyes of followers and gladly signs their final decree. (Since then and to this day)

I would like to end with a prayer I read in a prayer book in Rochester a month ago when I attended the Bar Mitzvah of the son of my cousin. If Korach had felt this way and if you could feel this way today, perhaps the world would be a better place.

“I need strength, humility, courage, patience. Strength to control my passions, humility to assess my own worth, courage to rise above defeats, patience to cleanse myself of imperfections. And wisdom to learn and live by our sacred teachings.

Let me not be discouraged by my failings. Let me take heart from all that is good and noble in my character. Keep me from falling victim to cynicism. Teach me sincerity and enthusiasm. Endow me with perception and courage that I may serve others with compassion and love.”

So it could have been with Korach long ago and may these thoughts be with us today and in the future. **Shabbat Shalom.**