

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Korach rebellion was not just the worst of the revolts from the wilderness years. It was also different in kind because it was a direct assault on Moses and Aaron. Korach and his fellow rebels in essence accused Moses of nepotism, of failure, and above all of being a fraud – of attributing to God decisions and laws that Moses had devised himself for his own ends. So grave was the attack that it became, for the Sages, a paradigm of the worst kind of disagreement: Which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? The argument between Hillel and Shammai. Which is an argument not for the sake of Heaven? The argument of Korach and his company. (Mishnah Avot 5:17)

Menahem Meiri (Catalonia, 1249–1306) explains this teaching in the following terms: The argument between Hillel and Shammai: In their debates, one of them would render a decision and the other would argue against it, out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of cantankerousness or a wish to prevail over his fellow. An argument not for the sake of Heaven was that of Korach and his company, for they came to undermine Moses, our master, may he rest in peace, and his position, out of envy and contentiousness and ambition for victory.¹

The Sages were drawing a fundamental distinction between two kinds of conflict: argument for the sake of truth and argument for the sake of victory.

The passage must be read this way, because of the glaring discrepancy between what the rebels said and what they sought. What they said was that the people did not need leaders. They were all holy. They had all heard the word of God. There should be no distinction of rank, no hierarchy of holiness, within Israel. “Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” (Num. 16:3). Yet from Moses’ reply, it is clear that he had heard something altogether different behind their words: Moses also said to Korach, “Now listen, you Levites! Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near Himself to do the work at the Lord’s Tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought

you and all your fellow Levites near Himself, but now you are trying to get the Priesthood too.” (Num. 16:8–10)

It was not that they wanted a community without leaders. It is, rather, that they wanted to be the leaders. The rebels’ rhetoric had nothing to do with the pursuit of truth and everything to do with the pursuit of honour, status, and (as they saw it) power. They wanted not to learn but to win. They sought not verity but victory.

We can trace the impact of this in terms of the sequence of events that followed. First, Moses proposed a simple test. Let the rebels bring an offering of incense the next day and God would show whether He accepted or rejected their offering. This is a rational response. Since what was at issue was what God wanted, let God decide. It was a controlled experiment, an empirical test. God would let the people know, in an unambiguous way, who was right. It would establish, once and for all, the truth.

But Moses did not stop there, as he would have done if truth were the only issue involved. As we saw in the quote above, Moses tried to argue Korach out of his dissent, not by addressing his argument but by speaking to the resentment that lay behind it. He told him that he had been given a position of honour. He may not have been a Priest but he was a Levite, and the Levites had special sacred status not shared by the other tribes. He was telling him to be satisfied with the honour he had and not let his ambition overreach itself.

He then turned to Datan and Aviram, the Reubenites. Given the chance, he would have said something different to them since the source of their discontent was different from that of Korach. But they refused to meet with him altogether – another sign that they were not interested in the truth. They had rebelled out of a profound sense of slight that the tribe of Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn son, seemed to have been left out altogether from the allocation of honours.

At this point, the confrontation became yet more intense.

For the one and only time in his life, Moses staked his leadership on the occurrence of



¹ Meiri, Beit HaBechira ad loc.

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a miracle: Then Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things, that they were not of my own devising: If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt." (Num. 16:28–30)

No sooner had he finished speaking than "the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them" (Num. 16:32). The rebels "went down alive into the grave" (16:33). One cannot imagine a more dramatic vindication. God had shown, beyond possibility of doubt, that Moses was right and the rebels wrong. Yet this did not end the argument. That is what is extraordinary. Far from being apologetic and repentant, the people returned the next morning still complaining – this time, not about who should lead whom but about the way Moses had chosen to end the dispute: "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 'You have killed the Lord's people,' they said" (17:6).

You may be right, they implied, and Korach may have been wrong. But is this a way to win an argument? To cause your opponents to be swallowed up alive? This time, God suggested an entirely different way of resolving the dispute. He told Moses to have each of the tribes take a staff and write their name on it, and place them in the Tent of Meeting. On the staff of the tribe of Levi, he should write the name of Aaron. One of the staffs would sprout, and that would signal whom God had chosen. The tribes did so, and the next morning they returned to find that Aaron's staff had budded, blossomed, and produced almonds. That, finally, ended the argument (Num. 17:16–24).

What resolved the dispute, in other words, was not a show of power but something altogether different. We cannot be sure, because the text does not spell this out, but the fact that Aaron's rod produced almond blossoms seems to have had rich symbolism. In the Near East, the almond is the first tree to blossom, its white flowers signalling the end of winter and the emergence of new life. In his first prophetic vision,

Jeremiah saw a branch of an almond tree (shaked) and was told by God that this was a sign that He, God, was "watching" (shoked) to see that His word was fulfilled (Jer. 1:11–12).² The almond flowers recalled the gold flowers on the Menorah (Ex. 25:31; 37:17), lit daily by Aaron in the Sanctuary. The Hebrew word tzitz, used here to mean "blossom," recalls the tzitz, the "frontlet" of pure gold worn as part of Aaron's headdress, on which were inscribed the words "Holy to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36).³ The sprouting almond branch was therefore more than a sign. It was a multifaceted symbol of life, light, holiness, and the watchful presence of God.

One could almost say that the almond branch symbolised the priestly will to life as against the rebels' will to power.⁴ The Priest does not rule the people; he blesses them. He is the conduit through which God's life-giving energies flow.⁵ He connects the nation to the Divine Presence. Moses answered Korach in Korach's terms, by a show of force. God answered in a quite different way, showing that leadership is not self-assertion but self-effacement.

What the entire episode shows is the destructive nature of argument not for the sake of Heaven – that is, argument for the sake of victory. In such a conflict, what is at stake is not truth but power, and the result is that both sides suffer. If you win, I lose. But if I win, I also lose, because in diminishing you, I diminish myself. Even a Moses is brought low, laying himself open to the charge that "you have killed the Lord's people." Argument for the sake of power is a lose-lose scenario.

The opposite is the case when the argument is for the sake of truth. If I win, I win. But if I lose I also win – because being defeated by the truth is the only form of defeat that is also a victory.

In a famous passage, the Talmud explains why Jewish law tend to follow the view of the School of Hillel rather than their opponents, the School of Shammai: [The law is in accord with the School of Hillel] because they were kindly and modest, because they studied not only their own rulings but also those of the School of Shammai, and because they taught the words of the School of Shammai before their own. (Eiruvin 13b)

They sought truth, not victory. That is why they listened to the views of their opponents, and indeed

² See L. Yarden, *The Tree of Light* (London: East and West Library, 1971), 40–42.

³ There may also be a hint of a connection with the tzitzit, the fringes with their thread of blue, that according to the Midrash was the occasion for the Korach revolt.

⁴ On the contemporary relevance of this, see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name* (New York: Schocken, 2015), 252–268.

⁵ The phrase that comes to mind is Dylan Thomas' "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" (from the poem by the same name). Just as life flows through the tree to produce flowers and fruit, so a Divine life force flows through the Priest to produce blessings among the people.

taught them before they taught their own traditions. In the eloquent words of a contemporary scientist, Timothy Ferris: All who genuinely seek to learn, whether atheist or believer, scientist or mystic, are united in having not a faith, but faith itself. Its token is reverence, its habit to respect the eloquence of silence. For God's hand may be a human hand, if you reach out in loving kindness, and God's voice your voice, if you but speak the truth.⁶

Judaism has sometimes been called a "culture of argument."⁷ It is the only religious literature known to me whose key texts – the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud, the codes of Jewish law, and the compendia of biblical interpretation – are anthologies of arguments. That is the glory of Judaism. The Divine Presence is to be found not in this voice as against that, but in the totality of the conversation.⁸

In an argument for the sake of truth, both sides win, for each is willing to listen to the views of its opponents, and is thereby enlarged. In argument as the collaborative pursuit of truth, the participants use reason, logic, shared texts, and shared reverence for texts. They do not use ad hominem arguments, abuse, contempt, or disingenuous appeals to emotion. Each is willing, if refuted, to say, "I was wrong." There is no triumphalism in victory, no anger or anguish in defeat.

The story of Korach remains the classic example of how argument can be dishonoured. The Schools of Hillel and Shammai remind us that there is another way. "Argument for the sake of Heaven" is one of Judaism's noblest ideals – conflict resolution by honouring both sides and employing humility in the pursuit of truth. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd Korach took..." (Numbers 16:1) Is controversy a positive or a negative phenomenon? Since the ideal of peace is so fundamental to the Jewish ideal – to such an extent that we even greet and bid farewell to each other with the Hebrew word shalom, peace – I would expect that controversy would be universally condemned by our classical sources. But apparently there is a way to argue and a way not to argue. The Mishna in Avot (Ethics of the Fathers 5:20) distinguishes between two types of controversy: "A controversy which is for the sake of heaven, like that of Hillel and Shammai, will

ultimately continue to exist; a controversy which is not for the sake of heaven, like that of Korach and his cohorts, will not continue to exist."

In addition to the problematic issue of the positive description of a "controversy for the sake of heaven," it is difficult to understand why the Mishna refers to one type of controversy as that of Hillel and Shammai, the two antagonists, and the other as that of Korach and his cohorts, rather than Korach and Moses, which we would have expected.

I believe that the answer to our questions lies in the two legitimate definitions of the Hebrew word for controversy, machloket: Does it mean to divide (lechalek) or to distinguish (la'asot chiluk), to make a separation or a distinction? The former suggests an unbridgeable chasm, a great divide which separates out, nullifies the view of the other, whereas the latter suggests an analysis of each side in order to give a greater understanding of each view and perhaps even in order to eventually arrive at a synthesis or a dialectic, a resolution of both positions!

With this understanding, the initial comment of Rashi on the opening words of this Torah portion, "And Korah took," becomes indubitably clear. "He took himself to the other side to become separated out from the midst of the congregation." Since Korah made a great divide between himself and Moses, the Mishna in Avot defines his controversy as that of Korach and his cohorts; he was interested in nullifying rather than in attempting to understand the side of Moses. On the other hand, when the Talmud describes the disputes between Hillel and Shammai, it decides that: These and those [both schools] are the words of the living God. If so, then why is the law decided in accord with the school of Hillel? Because they are pleasant and accepting, always teaching their view together with the view of the school of Shammai and even citing the position of Shammai before citing their own position. (Eruvin 13b)

According to this view, "these and those [conflicting opinions] are the words of the living God," the Almighty initially and purposefully left many issues of the Oral Tradition open-ended in order to allow for different opinions, each of which may well be correct when viewed from the perspective of the divine. Indeed the Mishna in Eduyot teaches that the reason our Oral Tradition records the minority as well as the majority opinion is because a later Sanhedrin (Jewish supreme court) can overrule the decision of an earlier Sanhedrin, even though it is not greater than the earlier one in wisdom or in number, as long as there is a minority view recorded on which the later Sanhedrin may rely for its reversal of the earlier decision; and most halakhic decisions rely on a minority decision in cases of stress and emergency (Mishna Eduyot 1:5, Maimonides and Ra'avad ad loc.). In the world of halakha, minority dissenting views are never nullified; these opinions are

⁶ Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 312.

⁷ David Dishon, *The Culture of Argument in Judaism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1984).

⁸ I have written more extensively on this in *Future Tense* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2009), 181–206.

also part of the religio-legal landscape, and can become the normative law of the majority at another period in time or for a different and difficult individual situation within the same period.

The Talmud likewise powerfully and poignantly confirms the importance of dissenting views in order to challenge and help clarify the alternate opinion. R. Yochanan and Resh Lakish were brothers-in-law and study partners who debated their conflicting opinions on almost every branch of Talmudic law. When Resh Lakish died, R. Yochanan was left distraught and bereft. R. Elazar b. Pedat, a great scholar, tried to comfort R. Yochanan by substituting for Resh Lakish as his learning companion.

Every opinion that R. Yochanan would offer, R. Elazar would confirm with a Tannaitic source. R. Yochanan lashed out, "Are you like the son of Lakish? Not at all! Previously, whenever I would give an opinion, the son of Lakish would ask twenty-four questions and I would answer him with twenty-four responses; in such a fashion, the legal discussion became enlarged and enhanced. But you only provide me with supporting proofs. Don't I know that my opinions have merit?" R. Yochanan walked aimlessly, tore his garments and wept without cease. He cried out, "Where are you, son of Lakish, where are you, son of Lakish," until he lost his mind. The other sages requested divine mercy, and R. Yochanan died. (Bava Metzia 84a)

This fundamental respect for the challenge of alternative opinions – so basic to the Talmudic mind – is rooted in another Mishna (Sanhedrin 37a), which sees the greatness of God in the differences among individuals and the pluralism of ideas. "Unlike an individual who mints coins from one model and every coin is exactly alike, the Holy One blessed be He has fashioned every human being in the likeness of Adam, and yet no human being is exactly like his fellow!... And just as the appearances of human beings are not alike, so are the ideas of human beings not alike." It is precisely in everyone's uniqueness that we see the greatness of the Creator.

This great truth was one of the teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, who claimed that multiplicity of ideas is actually the key to understanding God's truth:

"Scholars increase peace in the world." A multiplicity of peace means that all sides and all views must be considered; then it will be clarified how each one of them has its place, each one in accordance with its value, its place, and its specific issue.... Only through a collection of all parts and all details, all of those ideals which appear to be different, and all disparate professional opinions, only by means of these will the light of truth and righteousness be revealed, and the wisdom of the Lord, and His love, and the light of true Torah. (Ein Ayah, end of Berakhot) ©2019 Ohr

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The tragedies and difficulties that befell the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai continue to multiply in the Torah reading of this week. This week's sad story involves unique personalities affected by human ambition, jealousy and a complete misreading of one's true role in the family and society.

Korach sees himself as being a far greater person than he really is. He is convinced that he is truly a rival to Moshe and Aaron and is entitled to the same degree of leadership that they enjoy. He is not at all satisfied in being the head of one of the families of the Levites and performing the service in the Tabernacle and Temple. Such false leaders always surround themselves with other malcontents who are also interested in destabilizing the leadership of the people for their own personal, psychological and, many times, financial advantage.

In every society there are those who are dissatisfied with their lot in life. Their frustration translates itself into episodes of anger and the vilification of others, especially of the leadership then present in that society. Revolutions are always popular and those who lead them continually promise a new and better society, a utopia that unfortunately is never realized and usually turns into tyranny and the oppression of others.

Jealousy and disaffection are always with us no matter who our leaders may be and what type of society or social norm currently prevails. This frustration and dangerous arrogance always spawns further frustration as the problem that is to be addressed is a personal one. There are no outside forces or governmental action that can truly solve this inner angst. Truly, we are our own worst enemies.

The punishment visited upon Korach and his followers is their complete elimination from society generally. It is as though the Torah is aware that there is no society or leadership that can really satisfy people who are professional malcontents. It is not only individuals that are swallowed up and extinguished, but throughout history it is recorded that ideas, movements, political parties and immoral social norms are also subject to extinction.

This doesn't mean that these groupings will never again appear in society. They always do, but they do so in differing forms and morph into changing mores. The Torah itself tells us that even though the original Korach may have been buried and disappeared, the descendants of Korach have not disappeared. Rather, they rise in every generation in different forms, victims of their own inner frustrations, jealous of the accomplishments of others and determined to turn over the entire applecart in order to

achieve their own aims.

Human history – and Jewish history is no exception to this phenomenon – is littered with the debris of failed personal ambitions and unnecessary disputes and social divisions. We are bidden to learn and benefit from the mistakes and follies of others. The Torah reading this week certainly has many important lessons to teach us about life, society and human behavior. ©2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The controversy of Korach and his congregation – unlike the controversy of the scholars Hillel and Shammai – is a controversy not pursued in a Heavenly cause. It, therefore, does not endure. (Ethics 5:17) Why is Korach's disagreement with Moshe (Moses) so tainted?

Malbim, the 19th century commentator feels that within Korach's camp, there were impure intentions from the beginning. He therefore writes: "In a controversy pursued for unholy ends...even those who have come together on one side are not really united. Each is out to cut the other's throat."

Supporting Malbim's approach is the text in Ethics which describes the controversy as one that existed between Korach and his congregation, not Korach and Moshe. In other words, Korach's group was racked by dissension from within, each wanting the priesthood for himself.

Korach also refused to dialogue with Moshe. (Numbers 16:12) An essential principle of controversy for the sake of Heaven is the recognition that no single person has the monopoly on truth. Although one may be committed to a particular position, he or she must be open and respectful of dissenting views.

This is an essential ingredient in all spheres of leadership, especially in politics. Hearing-listening to the other is essential. The real challenge is not listening to those who agree with us, but listening to those who do not.

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, a 16th century commentary offers a final idea. He notes that the text in Ethics states a controversy for Heaven will in the end – "sofah" – endure. In other words, when Hillel and Shammai disagreed they still wanted the halakhic system to endure, hence, their controversy was for the sake of Heaven. This, unlike Korach, whose purpose in disagreeing with Moshe was to destroy the system of the priesthood.

Rav Kook states that the duly elected government of Israel has the status of malkhut, the biblical status of king. (Mishpat Kohen 144:14-17) Thus,

an individual has the right to disagree with government policy, but can never regard those policies as null and void. Dissent is acceptable for it sustains the enduring nature of the State. Delegitimization, on the other hand, is not acceptable for it threatens the very fabric of the State.

If this distinction is blurred, if the government is declared illegitimate, the consequences are grievous. Citizens would then be able to take the law into their own hands and carve out their own conceptions of what they believe Jewish law demands. Let us pray that those in power and we ourselves realize the fine line between discourse that is destructive, selfish and fleeting and dissent for the sake of heaven, dissent that is constructive, productive, enduring and even holy. ©2019 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVINE

Task of the Kohein

After Hashem destroyed those who rebelled with Korah, Moshe instituted a test using the staffs of one leader from each tribe with Aharon's staff representing the Leviim. This was to demonstrate that Aharon had been the chosen one of Hashem for his position. Aharon's staff blossomed and produced almonds overnight. Hashem then instructed Moshe further on the responsibilities of the Kohanim and Leviim in the Mishkan.

The Torah tells us, "And Hashem said to Moshe return the staff of Aharon to (where it had been) before the (Tent of) Testimony as a safekeeping, as a sign for rebellious ones and put an end to their complaining from me so that they not die. And Moshe did as Hashem commanded him so he did. And the B'nei Yisrael said to Moshe behold we perish, we are lost, all of us are lost. Everyone who approaches closer to the Mishkan of Hashem will die, are we doomed to perish? And Hashem said to Aharon, you and your sons and your father's house will bear the iniquity (burden) of the Mikdash (Sanctuary) and you and your sons will bear the iniquity of the priesthood. And also your brethren the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, shall you draw near with you and they will be joined with you and minister to you, you and your sons with you shall be before the Tent of Testimony. And they will safeguard your charge and the charge of the entire Tent, but to the holy vessels and to the Altar they will not approach that they not die, they as well as you. You shall safeguard the charge of the Holy and the charge of the Altar and there shall be no more wrath against the B'nei Yisrael. And I have taken your brethren the Leviim from among the B'nei Yisrael to you they have been given as a gift for Hashem, to perform the service of the Tent of Meeting. You and your sons

with you shall safeguard your priesthood regarding every matter of the Altar and within the Curtain, and you shall serve, I have presented your priesthood as a service that is a gift, and an alien (non-Kohein) who approaches shall die.”

These statements immediately followed the test that Moshe used to show the people that Aharon was the real Kohein Gadol. This is fine according to Rashi who says that this test proved Aharon's leadership, but the Ramban argues that this test was only designed to show that the tribe of Levi was the tribe chosen for spiritual leadership within the Mishkan. Aharon's staff did not represent Aharon alone but the entire tribe of the Leviim. This could not prove that Korach's rebellion was wrong, as Korach was a Levi. The Ramban insists that this test only proved that the tribe of Levi was chosen in place of the firstborn. The proof that Aharon was to be the Kohein Gadol, the Head Priest, instead of Korach was when the fire descended from Heaven and consumed Aharon's offerings. The Ramban continues to explain that once the tribe of Levi was chosen from among the other tribes, it might then be possible to say that Aharon was the most respected of the tribe and would become the Kohein Gadol. This would exclude Gershon even though he was the firstborn of Levi and by rights should have been the leader.

Hashem gave Moshe several instructions which would further clarify His commands concerning the spiritual leadership of the people and Aharon's position in leadership. “And Hashem said to Moshe return the staff of Aharon to (where it had been) before the (Tent of) Testimony as a safekeeping, as a sign for rebellious ones and put an end to their complaining from me so that they not die.” This demonstrated Aharon's leadership of the Leviim as well as of all the B'nei Yisrael (with the exception of the Ramban's interpretation). HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin reminds us that there were two such instructions given to demonstrate Hashem's control of the people's lives. Here Moshe is instructed to display Aharon's staff as a sign of Hashem's choice. The second was when Aharon was told to display the manna before the people to demonstrate Hashem's care for the people. Rav Sorotzkin explains that Aharon would have been reluctant to place his staff before the people as it might have appeared that he was boastful. Hashem therefore told Moshe to display the staff.

The Torah speaks of the iniquity or burden of the Mikdash and the iniquity or the burden of the priesthood. The work that the Kohanim did in the Mishkan was difficult because of the many aspects of each korban, sacrifice. The various korbanot carried with them different instructions as to where they were to be slaughtered, what parts of the korbanot went to the Kohein and which parts to the Altar, whether any parts were returned to the person who brought the korban, where the blood was sprinkled on the Altar, and who

brought the korban and for which purpose. The Kohein was responsible for keeping track as the korban went through the different stages of presentation to the Altar.

The Kohein's focus must be steady, his concentration unwavering, and the seriousness with which he performs his tasks consistent. It is only in this way that he can perform not only his tasks but the greater task of 'guarding' that must be done to complete his goal. This is truly described as a burden for the Kohein. Yet Hashem regards this service as a gift. “You and your sons with you shall safeguard your priesthood regarding every matter of the Altar and within the Curtain, and you shall serve, I have presented your priesthood as a service that is a gift and an alien (non-Kohein) who approaches shall die.” Hirsch explains that, “all the acts performed in the Sanctuary reach their height in the concept: matanah, gift, in the concept of giving oneself up, of devotion. ... The whole service in the Sanctuary has the purpose of teaching us to give ourselves and to give all the gifts that we receive from Hashem up to Him and His Torah.”

This concept of returning to Hashem that which He has given to us applies to every aspect of our lives even without the Temple. The money with which Hashem has blessed us must be used not only for our needs but also for the Torah of Hashem. The Tzedakah (Charity) we give is a means of channeling those blessed funds into the service of Hashem's Torah. Our support of Torah Institutions as well as hospitals, food banks for the poor, and many other charities are the privilege that we have been given by Hashem as the way to serve Him with what he has given us. May we all acknowledge all that Hashem has given us and learn to seek ways in which we may return our good fortune to Him in the ways in which the Torah has instructed. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

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Guarding the Temple

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

In this week's portion the Torah States “And you and your brothers with you before the tent of meeting” (“V'atah uvanecha Itcha lefnei Ohel Moed”) which we derive that the Kohanim and the Leviim were commanded to guard the Temple. This was done not to necessarily actually guard the Temple, but rather as an act of respect and honor (“Kavod”). In fact the Kohanim and Leviim when carrying out this task wore their priestly garments (kohanim and Leviim were not permitted to wear their priestly clothes when sleeping). Children were not allowed to accomplish this task, only a Kohen or Levi that was above the age of twenty, even though they are forbidden to carry out any other assignment in the Temple at this age.

Because this was classified as a task

("Avodah") one must theoretically, out of respect, stand while performing it. However our sages, because of the great strain on the individual, allowed one to sit while carrying out this task, (though in all cases one was not permitted to sit in the courtyard of the Temple) because sitting was a pre-requisite to guarding the Temple properly.

Our sages differ as to the time that this "guarding" took place. The Rambam (Maimonides) states that it was only applicable in the evenings, however according to the explanation of the sages of the Mishna in Tamid, it would seem that this was prevalent all the time.

Additionally, there is controversy as to whether in all places designated, the Temple was guarded during all hours of the day and night, or there were certain areas that were only guarded during the day but not a night. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd Dasan and Aviram went out standing in front of their tents, [along with] their wives, children and infants" (Bamidbar 17:27). In what may be the first attempt at using human shields, these sinners not only didn't repent, but had their families stand right where Moshe had just warned the rest of the nation to move away from, "lest they be swept up in [the retribution for] their sins" (16:26). Included in those who were standing by their tents, and therefore swallowed by the giant sinkhole created specifically to punish Korach and his cohorts (16:32), were infants, a category expressly stated independent of the other children, leading Chazal (Tanchuma 3/6, Bamidbar Rabbah 18:4) to say that even those who were just born that very same day were swallowed alive. Which leads to the question of how innocent children could be included in the punishment of others. After all, they didn't defy Moshe, or deny the authority or authenticity of the Torah he taught. How could children too young to have sinned suffer the same consequences as adult sinners? (Or suffer at all, for that matter.)

Rashi seems to address this issue (at least pertaining to this instance), when he paraphrases the above-referenced Midrash: "Come and see how harsh division/dispute is, for human courts do not punish (a sinner) until he [is 13], and the heavenly court [does not punish] until (a sinner) is 20, and here even those who were still nursing were destroyed." Although this is certainly an acknowledgement of the issue, and the lesson being taught (about the severity of dispute) is clear, the question still remains. These infants were not part of the dispute; how could they be included in the punishment?

Some commentators on Rashi (e.g. Nachalas

Yaakov and Maskil L'Dovid) suggest that being part of a dispute permeates a person so deeply that even the children were affected by it (see Gur Aryeh), and had to be eliminated along with the other disputants. A comparison is even made to the "ben sorer u'moreh," the rebellious son who is put to death so that he dies without sin rather than allowing him to sin and be punished for it. However, the "ben sorer u'moreh" was not an infant; can newborn infants be so affected by a dispute their parents are involved in that their lives are not worth being spared? Besides, it only pushes the question back one step; what did the souls of these infants do wrong to be born into families involved in a dispute, which in turn causes them to be included in the punishment?

Rabbeinu Bachye (17:29), in order to explain how innocent children could have been swallowed by the earth due to the sin of others, as well as why Moshe didn't pray for these sinners when he had prayed for other sinners (see Sh'mos 32:11 and 32:31-32, Bamidbar 11:2 and 14:13-19), tells us that those involved with Korach's rebellion were the reincarnated souls of those who tried to build the Tower of Babel (B'reishis 11:3-4), who were also the reincarnated souls of the wicked men of Sodom. The men who joined Korach were "anshei shem," men who were well-known (Bamidbar 16:2), and the purpose of building the Tower was to "become well-known" ("v'na'aseh lanu shem"). Similarly, the men of Sodom who surrounded Lot's house were blinded so that they couldn't break down his door (B'reishis 19:11), and Dasan and Aviram told Moshe that even if he blinded them they wouldn't come meet with him (Bamidbar 16:14). Rabbeinu Bachye says that the Torah used these literary devices (and others) in order to indicate that this was the third major sin these souls were involved in; although usually a soul will get it right by its third chance (referencing Koheles 4:12), in this case they didn't, so Moshe knew it was futile to pray for them. [Rashi (16:4) quotes Chazal, who gave a different reason why Moshe didn't daven for these sinners; for my thoughts on this approach, see <http://tinyurl.com/p9atne4>.]

Rabbeinu Bachye says that this answers his other question too, how these children can suffer if only their parents sinned, but I'm not sure how. Since the infants were too small to have sinned with Korach, their souls only had two chances, not three! In his introduction to Sefer Iyov, the Ramban gives several reasons why seeing the righteous suffer does not contradict G-d being completely just. One of these reasons is that they could be the reincarnated souls of people who weren't completely righteous, but didn't receive the punishment for what they had done in their previous life while they lived it. Therefore, their souls are sent back again, during which time they receive the punishment for what they had done in the previous life, even if nothing they did in their current life warrants

such a punishment. It is therefore possible that the souls of these infants were being punished for their participation in those previous sins, even if they couldn't be held accountable for this one. (If so, they should have to be given a third chance in still another lifetime.) Although this answers Rabbeinu Bachye's question while being consistent with his reincarnation angle (and Rabbeinu Bachye often quotes, at length, word for word, the Ramban's commentary on Chumash), he does not add this additional piece to the puzzle, making it difficult to say that this is what he meant.

The question of how children can suffer at all, let alone along with Korach's followers, shouldn't need a reincarnation background, or the severity of disputes, in order to be explained. As I have discussed on numerous occasions (e.g. <http://tinyurl.com/q2vpqs8>), not everyone is worthy of divine intervention. Children, who have not yet had a chance to create a strong enough connection to G-d to merit His protection in their own right, are therefore subject to the consequences of the actions of others. (This actually applies to most people, even adults, see S'forno on Vayikra 13:47, but at least adults have the opportunity to create a strong enough connection with G-d to be protected by Him.) When G-d told Moshe that He was about to punish Korach and his followers, He told Moshe to have everyone else move away so that they wouldn't suffer the same consequences (Bamidbar 16:26); if the adults who weren't part of Korach's group had to move away in order not to be swallowed alive by the earth, how could we expect the children who stayed there not to be? Why would we expect that children, who do not merit divine protection in their own right, would be saved from a dangerous situation just because they're children?

When lamenting the destruction of Yerushalayim, the prophet lists some of the consequences, including that "her young ones were taken captive" (Eichah 1:5). The Nesivos (Palgay Mayim) says that children, who are innocent, being taken captive proves that G-d was no longer protecting Israel, as otherwise He wouldn't have let those without sin suffer. The Nesivos is referring to protection on a national level, as when we, as a nation, are deserving of His protection, individuals don't need to be worthy of it in their own right. In the desert, with G-d's presence residing in the Mishkan, we did have divine protection on a national level, as evidenced by the "clouds of glory" (see <http://tinyurl.com/ne7vfny>), so the children should have been protected too. The question of why they weren't would seem to be based on the fact that at this point in time the nation was being protected by G-d, so unless a punishment is purposely directed at a sinner (and children can't be considered sinners), they shouldn't have suffered.

Since the "starting point" for children (including infants) is that they are not protected (and could

therefore experience suffering even without having sinned), and that in the desert they should have been protected because of the umbrella protection that the nation as a whole was experiencing, if there was a hole in that "umbrella," the national protection would not cover everyone. "Come and see how harsh dispute is, for human courts do not punish a sinner until he is 13, and heavenly court until he is 20, and here even those who were still nursing were destroyed." Not because these children were being held accountable for actions they had no control over, but because the dispute had created a "hole" in the divine national protection, with G-d not protecting those involved in the dispute. It was for this reason that the rest of the nation was warned to move away, as anyone nearby wouldn't be protected either. And since these children were there when the earth opened up beneath the sinners, they were swallowed up with them.

There is one more point to add. The Midrashim that Rashi paraphrased don't start with Rav B'rechya's statement about how severe disputes are. Rather, they first say that whoever assists in a dispute will have his memory destroyed. The implication is that he will lose his progeny, after which Rav B'rechya's adds that from here we see how severe disputes are, as even infants are destroyed. They are destroyed as part of the punishment of the parents, which operates even (or perhaps especially) when the nation is being divinely protected, since infants and children do not merit specific protection of their own. ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Korach relates the story of Korach, Datan, Aviram and 250 members of the shevet (tribe) or Reuven challenging Moshe's choice for Kohen Gadol (high priest). The end result was that the 250 members were burned by a heavenly fire, and the other 3 were miraculously swallowed by the earth. From a motive perspective, Korach makes the most sense, because he felt slighted for not having been chosen himself. But why would 250 people follow him to their certain death, with apparently little to gain?

The answer can be found in Rashi, the great medieval commentator, who writes that just as Korach's family camped on the southern side of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), so did the tribe of Reuven. Rashi quotes the words of Chapters of the Fathers, "woe to an evil person, and woe to his neighbor." The 250 people met their death, simply because they were influenced by their neighbors! This points to the awesome influence that friends, neighbors and associates have on us. So who do we surround ourselves with? Do we have positive friends and neighbors? Are WE positive friends and neighbors to others? ©2012 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.