

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

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LOOK WHO'S TALKING

We have all been witnesses to attacks on others, such as criticism of someone for who they are or for the position they hold. Korach, the bearer of the name of this week's *parasha*, was the child of Yitzhar, the second son of Kehat, who was also the grandfather of Moses. Korach feels that he is entitled to a more significant leadership role than the one to which he has been assigned. In an attempt to acquire the position of high priest, he attacks the leader of the Jewish people, who Korach thinks can grant his wish - Moses.

Korach and his followers challenge Moses and Aaron: 'It is too much for you [*rav lachem*]! For the entire assembly, all of them are holy, and why should you exalt yourselves over the congregation of God?'¹ Rashi explains that this attack contains the claim that Moses and Aaron have abused their power and assumed too much prominence for themselves.² This is a rather strange accusation to make: 'For the man Moses was very humble,

more than any other person on the face of the earth.'³

When someone wants to bring down a leader, they scrutinise and exploit the weaknesses of that leader. Moses himself has some objective leadership faults. For example, he is by no means an eloquent orator, and he himself is the first to admit this.⁴ Korach could have picked on this obvious weakness. Alternatively he could have honed in on the slander spoken by Moses' siblings.⁵ No individual is perfect, and Moses is no exception. So **why does Korach choose to criticise Moses concerning the one character trait in which he clearly exceeds all other men?** Furthermore, why is the *parasha* named after Korach, when he is the clear villain in this story?

Sometimes, rather than focusing on who is being talked about, we actually need to look at who is talking. In a discussion about stating the flaws of others, the Talmud states: 'He who invalidates [others]...does so

with his own flaw,'⁶ in that the flaw that he accuses them of having is in fact the one that he himself has. In psychology, this is termed projection bias, a mechanism through which one - subconsciously - projects one's own personal opinions, values and concerns onto others.

Perhaps the reason that Korach accuses Moses of having a superiority complex, rather than any of the other flaws he could have mentioned, is that he himself possesses an inferiority complex. He therefore projects his pursuit of honour onto Moses. Moses responds subtly with the same phrase that Korach used to accuse him, reversing Korach's accusation and insinuating that perhaps his claim represents his own flaws: 'It is too much for you [*rav lachem*] sons of Levi!'⁷

In a society where the easiest way to the top is often on the backs of others, we must learn to be critical thinkers and consider the slanderer, not just the slander.



When we ourselves perceive flaws in other people, whether real or not, we must be very careful to analyse whether we are perhaps the true bearers of these flaws.

Ultimately, Korach's pivotal position as a sage and Levite was not enough for him. He wanted more. Whilst Moses indeed possessed certain flaws, honour seeking was certainly not one of them. **Whilst Korach needed to have what he wanted, Moses simply wanted what he had.** The difference between these two mind-sets is the key to contentment.

Perhaps the reason why the parasha is named Korach is to teach us that we should all be wary of the element of Korach hidden within us. If we can remember to focus on ourselves and to be happy with who we are, flaws and all, then we can focus our efforts to perfect these flaws rather than wasting energy by projecting them onto others.

Notes

¹ Numbers 16:3. ² Rashi on Numbers 16:3.

³ Numbers 12:3. ⁴ Exodus 6:12, 30.

⁵ Numbers 12:1-3. ⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin 70a. ⁷ Numbers 16:7.

Parasha Fact:

Staffs make a prominent appearance in this week's parasha. According to tradition, the staff of Moses is one of the things sealed in the Holy Ark, along with the complete Ten Commandments, the original broken tablets and a jar of the manna.

Next week in Chukat:

It is natural that when situations arise we seek out previous similar situations in order to help guide our responses. Indeed, in the legal system, the concept of precedent - previously established principles or rules - guides judicial leaders as to how to deal with subsequent similar instances. If that is so, then what is the problem with Moses striking the rock to bring forth water? Surely he is simply replicating his reaction to very similar circumstances just a generation earlier? Why is his punishment so severe, when his act is seemingly calling upon a precedent from years gone by?