

PARSHAS KORACH

תשפ"ב

The story of Korach is a very mysterious story.

The Rambam writes that when Hashem spoke to Moshe Rabbeinu at Har Sinai, He said He will speak to Moshe directly so that Klal Yisroel will know first-hand that Moshe is the one Hashem communicates the Torah to and they will be confident that the rest of the Torah came directly from Hashem as well.

The Meshech Chochmoh asks, how does Klal Yisroel hearing Hashem tell Moshe the Aseres Hadibros help guarantee that Moshe Rabbeinu will not make up anything after that and say it came from Hashem? What about the rest of the 613 mitzvos like tzitzis and tefillin? He answers that by seeing at Har Sinai that Moshe is the only one being chosen to transmit the Torah, Klal Yisroel realized that this itself elevated Moshe Rabbeinu above human free-will. Moshe lost any capacity to insert his own ego and his own human interests in his function of transmitting the Torah. Hashem showed them that Moshe is the only human being who is beyond the flaws of normal human beings.

At the end of Parshas Behaalos'choh, Aharon and Miriam made the mistake of equating Moshe with other nevi'im. This incident wasn't kept private. Hashem corrected this mistake publically because the entire Klal Yisroel had to wait for Miriam to be healed of her tzora'as before continuing to travel. So everyone knew of this mistake and everyone became aware that Moshe Rabbeinu is on a level beyond every other novi. One would think that after all this, no-one would think of questioning Moshe Rabbeinu's authority.

Then we have Korach. Korach had two challenges that he couldn't overcome. He was the wealthiest person in Klal Yisroel, and wealth has a way of making people feel more important than they really are. He had a wife who wanted to believe her husband was the most important Jew in Klal Yisroel and she goaded him into rebelling against Moshe's authority.

The midrash says Korach was a pikeach. How did he fall for this? He was very clever. He used logic to ridicule the halachos of tzitzis and mezuzah. He argued that the reason we put techeiles into tzitzis is to remind someone of the kisei hakavod. So if you have an entire garment made of techeiles, it shouldn't need tzitzis! He knew that having a mezuzah on your doorpost is to remind you of Hashem when you pass by the door. So if the room you are entering is full of seforim, why do you need this small reminder on the door post? Korach has all these problems with these halachos to make it seem Moshe is making things up himself.

But underlying everything was his jealousy of the fact that he wasn't appointed the nosi of shevet Levi. This made him develop a whole philosophy that everyone has an equal right to interpret the Torah. No-one is above anyone else. Had Korach been appointed the nosi, this democratic philosophy would never have been developed. He would have the honor he wanted, his wife would be proud of him, and everything would have gone smoothly. But he didn't get the position and he became jealous. He started preaching that everyone is kodosh and no-one can impose their authority over anyone else. He convinced 250 Jews to think Moshe and Aharon were conspiring to keep all the important positions and prestige to themselves and not give it to those who also deserve it. They could be just like Aharon and do the avodas haketores too! It's just Moshe's ego that is preventing us from getting the positions we want.

But the truth was just the opposite. Moshe was on a whole different

level. He had no ego that interfered with his communication with Hashem. As Rav Chaim of Volozhin explains in the first Mishna in Ovos, only Moshe was able to receive (kibbel) the entire Torah straight from Sinai without any interference of the self. All other members of the chain received (mosruho) the Torah through the filter of their unique personality. Most people have two voices talking simultaneously – the neshomo and the ego mixed together. But when Moshe talked, it was just the Shechinoh talking from Moshe's throat. And this is why Moshe's authority was the highest.

Most people find it hard to acknowledge there is someone on a higher level than they are on because then it will mean they will have to subordinate themselves to them. Especially if they are wealthy and think they should be getting all the honor and prestige, and they should be running things. Then you suddenly forget what you saw at Har Sinai and you forget what just happened to Miriam because she thought she was Moshe's equal. You declare everyone is equally great and no-one is greater than anyone else, nor should anyone have authority over anyone else. You bring everyone down to your level. This is very dangerous.

Who has a right to interpret the Torah? Someone who accepts the internal logic of the Torah and doesn't impose his logic onto the Torah. What is our job when we learn Torah? Our job is to understand to the best of our ability. But when we come across something we don't understand, and we can come up with thirty different reasons why the halacha should be different, we simply accept that the Torah is an expression of Hashem's infinite wisdom. We subordinate our minds to Hashem's mind. We break our heads until we can finally get an understanding into Hashem's logic. We also have to adjust our understanding of Torah to the baalei mesorah who had a deeper insight into the Torah's internal logic that we do. There is authority in learning – it is not a free-for-all.

What makes a person a member of the chachmei mesorah? It is only someone who approaches the Torah and its interpreters with no external agendas or self-interests.

According to the Maharshal, this goes to the point of actual mesiras nefesh. The gemara in Bava Kamma mentions the halacha about the inequality in the obligation to pay for damages between Jewish owned animals and non-Jewish owned animals. The gemara has a story about the Romans who were curious about the Torah and sent spies undercover to learn in a yeshiva. After two years, these spies came to their teachers and revealed their identity and told them this Torah is unbelievable. But they said that if we will tell the Romans about this halacha about the inequality between Jews and non-Jews, it would start a pogrom and Jews will get killed. But don't worry, we won't tell them about it.

The Maharshal asks, of course the tanoim picked up on the fact that these talmidim were spies. And if they realized it, why did they teach this halacha to them as is and not change it to avoid the possible danger of a pogrom? The Maharshal answered that from this we see that to change even one halacha of the Torah is absolutely forbidden – even for pikuach nefesh! There can be no agenda in learning and teaching Torah other than understanding the will of Hashem. There is no instance where one is allowed to corrupt the mesorah for external reasons – no matter the consequences. That is what preserves the integrity of the mesorah.

But after Moshe passed the Torah to the Sanhedrin, how do we know for sure that the Sanhedrin didn't let other agendas corrupt their interpretations? How do we know that for instance, members of the Sanhedrin weren't biased against women or short people or fat people and interpreted the Torah in ways that reflected their bias? How do we know that the Torah we have from Chazal in Shas is pure Torah?

The Rambam in Hilchos Mamrim says an incredible thing. He says the Torah promised us that the Sanhedrin who were in charge of the mesorah of Torah Shebaal Peh will be faithful transmitters and interpreters of the Torah and it will never be corrupted. They will have only one agenda – the purity of Torah.

Klal Yisroel throughout the generations, were able to identify who were the greatest individuals who had no interest but to find and present the truth about Torah. When Klal Yisroel accepted people like Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam as their authority, it was because they had a sense of who had no personal agenda which corrupted their understanding and application of Torah. We don't say Rabbeinu Tam came up with his shitta about ribbis because he had a money-lending business which could be helped by his psak. They said what they did because they were interested in Torah and only Torah.

This is exactly why Korach's rebellion was so dangerous. He was out to undermine the idea that Torah has its own logic and we have to conform our minds to the logic of the Torah. We have to submit our minds to the Torah without any political agendas.

When we sit down to learn, we try to understand how the Torah was understood by previous generations – we don't start interpreting the Torah on our own. We humbly submit to the mesorah.

Another dangerous idea of Korach is that everyone can do the avodah – there shouldn't be any privileged section of Klal Yisroel like kohanim. There shouldn't be anyone telling me how I should serve Hashem. But this is completely wrong. Hashem gave every Jew his or her job in how to serve Him. We have to have the humility to accept how Hashem wants to be served.

Korach and his followers felt they were special and they could do the avodah of the Kohen Godol. Everyone else needs to keep the mitzvos they were given. But Moshe told Aharon that he has to show them that there can only be one Kohen Godol. He made a test to prove it. Everyone who thinks they can be a Kohen Godol should bring a copper pan with coals to put on ketores. Korach, Doston and Avirom were smart enough not to come to the test – because their whole agenda was just to undermine Moshe's authority among Klal Yisroel.

Moshe needed to show everyone that he is completely honest and

sincere in communicating the Torah with no personal agendas. Korach is threatening to undermine the entire concept of an authentic mesorah and it has to be made clear that Hashem's Torah cannot be corrupted. So Moshe asked Hashem to cause a calamity just for Korach, Doston and Avirom that is so unusual and unique that there will be no lingering doubts surrounding Moshe's authority.

That is exactly what happened to Korach, Doston and Avirom – the earth opened up underneath only them and swallowed them up. What happened to the 250 people who thought they could be the Kohen Godol? They were burned up along with their ketores. The follow-up of this is to take those copper coal pans and use them as a coating for the mizbeach. There has to be a reminder to all later generations that we cannot determine how Hashem is to be served and how the logic of the Torah should be. Only Moshe Rabbeinu and those who submitted their minds to the logic of the Torah have the authority to interpret it. You can't just follow your own ideas and your own notions of how halacha should be. Not everyone can do any avodah they want.

We live in a very confusing world. The lessons of Korach are relevant all the time.

One of the main kinnos we read on Tisha B'av is the tragic death of King Yoshiyahu. He inspired all the Jews of his time to give up avodo zoro and do teshuvoh. He was a tremendous tzaddik and he thought he brought the era of Moshiach. When the king of Egypt wanted to send his troops to fight Ashur, he requested that he be allowed to march through Eretz Yisroel to reach Ashur faster. King Yoshiyahu thought since it is the times of Moshiach, he cannot allow the sword to pass through his land – even a sword of peace. Yirmiyahu Hanovi was one of the chachmei mesorah as well as a novi. He told King Yoshiyahu that he received a mesorah from his rebbi Yeshayahu Hanovi that he is supposed to let Egypt march through Eretz Yisroel. King Yoshiyahu countered: I have a mesorah from your rebbe's rebbe – Moshe Rabbeinu – that the posuk says a sword will not pass through the land in the times of Moshiach!

In the end, King Yoshiyahu was so convinced about his interpretation of the posuk that he went to battle with the Egyptian army to prevent them from passing through. He was killed in battle and as he was dying he whispered to Yirmiyahu that he deserved to die because he rebelled against Hashem by not listening to the chachmei mesorah regarding how to interpret that posuk.

You can be the biggest tzaddik but ultimately, you have to submit your mind to the intrinsic logic of the Torah and to the authority of the chachmei mesorah. That is the most important lesson we have from Parshas Korach.