

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

Parashat Korach: Leadership, Truth, and Peace

By Rabbi Dov Linzer



While Korach is a *parasha* about those who rebel, it also affords us different models of leadership. While both Moshe and Aharon are attacked, Aharon is perhaps the greater target. As a close reading of the text makes clear, Korach, the leader of the rebellion, is a Levite who is after Aharon's position as *Kohen Gadol*, whereas Datan and Aviram, as members of the tribe of Reuven, are interested in Moshe's position as the political head. Nevertheless, Aharon remains markedly silent during this confrontation, and it is Moshe who defends both his position and that of Aharon. Aharon's response, as we will see, comes later and in a different form.

Proving who is right and who is wrong is the common theme running through Moshe's response. He speaks to, or more accurately, at Korach but not with him. He summons Datan and Aviram, but he does not go to them. We see no attempt on Moshe's part to hear and listen to those opposing him, to genuinely try to engage them and understand their complaints, to understand their motivations. He points out Korach's hypocrisy – noting that it is not equality for the people that he is after, but leadership for himself. While Moshe may be completely correct in this point, calling Korach out on it will not necessarily win him – or even the people – over. Moshe may be rightfully hurt that the people are shifting the blame for their failures and their current predicament onto him, but calling out to God and focusing on the wrongness of Korach's claim rather than on how the people are experiencing their current reality does not get him anywhere. In the end, Moshe demands a showdown with one ultimate winner and one ultimate loser. The consequences are drastic and deadly – he was victorious,

deeper truth of human beings, of human emotions and motivations, of societal realities and of interpersonal relationships. Such a focus can sometimes even be quite counterproductive.

What is the aftermath of all of these proofs? Are the people satisfied now that they know that Moshe was right and Korach was wrong? Quite the contrary:

But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, You have killed the people of the Lord (Bamidbar 17:6).

The people do not see the justice in what Moshe did. His response is too violent, even if he was right. And maybe the people aren't even so sure of this in the end. They still refer to Korach and his followers as "the people of the Lord." It is hard not to hear the echo of Korach's claim that "All the people are holy and the Lord is in their midst" (16:3). The people were taken with Korach's vision, and they remain sympathetic to it. Moshe might have believed that he had proven once and for all who was right, but the people – who exist on an emotional and psychological plane as well – may still be feeling that Korach was innocent, maybe even right in some ways, and that he has been killed unjustly.

Here is where Aharon comes in. Aharon – on Moshe's direction – runs into the middle of the people and puts incense on the fire censer, staying the plague that was decimating the people. Rashi notes that, here, the incense was doing the opposite of what it had done earlier, bringing life rather than death.

The point here is larger than that of the incense. It is about two aspects of God, and about two types of leadership. Closeness to God, if approached wrongly, can lead to death – that was the story of Nadav and Avihu and their wrongly offered incense (Vayikra 10:1-3) as it is the story of the 250 men here. But closeness to God can also bring life. "Seek me out and live," says God (Amos 5:4).

The Rabbis speak of two aspects of the Divine, the side of Judgment and the side of Compassion. When God interacts with us in the mode of judgment, every misstep is noted and punished accordingly. This, to use a gendered stereotype, is the mode of the stern father. But there is also the mode of the forgiving, understanding mother, the mode of compassion. God, operating in this mode, looks to find ways to nurture and give life, not to focus on an exact sense of right and wrong, of missteps and failures.

These two modes are paralleled in two types of leadership – the leadership of Moshe and the leadership of Aharon. Moshe’s leadership was one of judgment, of right and wrong. Aharon’s leadership was one of peace, of forgiveness and understanding. This is vividly illustrated in the next event in the *parasha*. God responds to the people’s outcry by telling Moshe to take 12 staves, one for each tribe, including Aharon’s staff for the tribe of Levi, and to place them by the ark. Moshe does so and the next day Aharon’s staff had blossomed and brought forth almonds. This, the Torah tells us, demonstrates that Aharon and his tribe had been chosen.

But how did this miracle accomplish anything more than the previous miracles? On an intellectual plane, it added nothing. But on an emotional level, it made its point through beauty and life, not through destruction and death. It showed that leadership – as symbolized by the staff – could be, should be, nurturing and life-giving. The same staff that can be used to smite can also, if attached to its original source of life, be the source of growth and flourishing.

This is not to say that the approach of Aharon can exist by itself. In the end we need both a father’s sternness and a mother’s compassion. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (6b) addresses this in its discussion of whether a judge should strive for justice (*din*) or compromise (*pesbara*). It associates the former with Moshe, and the latter with Aharon:

But let the law cut through the mountain, for it is written, “For the judgment is God’s” (Devarim 1:17). And so Moses’s motto was: Let the law cut through the mountain. Aharon, however, loved peace and pursued peace and

made peace between man and man, as it is written, “The law of truth was in his mouth, unrighteousness was not found in his lips, he walked with Me in peace and uprightness and did turn many away from iniquity” (Malakhi 2:6).

Moshe is Truth. Aharon is Peace. These two are not always compatible. The famous midrash tells how Aharon would pursue peace. When two people were fighting, Aharon would approach each one individually, saying, “Your friend wants to make up with you, but he is too embarrassed to come and apologize.” This would evoke sympathetic feelings, and the next time they met, the two would embrace and make up. This is the way of peace. But it is not exactly the way of truth: white lies were necessary to achieve this end.

One may have to choose between Truth and Peace, but it is not necessarily an either/or. Maharsha already notes that the verse regarding Peace also states that “the law of truth was in his lips.” Peace can be integrated with Truth. In *halakhic* literature this is referred to as *pesbara krova li’din*, a compromise which approximates the just resolution. This integration could be in terms of proportions – some elements of the decision being based on the letter of the law and some on compromise. Or it can be in terms of a larger perspective. Truth is found not only in terms of abstract realities and the letter of the law; it can also incorporate equity, fairness, and the truth of human relationship and societal well-being.

Peace by itself, if it fully sacrifices truth, is also a perversion. Let us not forget that Aharon’s desire to find peace led to his giving into the people at the sin of the Golden Calf. One needs to stand for truth, but one needs also to strive for peace. A peace that is close to truth, that integrates truth, but that has peace as its ultimate goal.

As it is with leadership, so it is with our interpersonal relationships. How many couples waste needless hours and expend undue emotional angst, and at times even fracture and rupture, over pointless arguments regarding who is right and who is wrong. What larger truth is really solved by demonstrating that one is right about a trivial detail? On the other hand, to never stand for anything and to just give in all the time leads to resentment and

compromises one's sense of self. The goal is to strive for the integration of Moshe and Aharon, for a peace that is close to truth. To always seek out the larger truth – one that incorporates not just abstract questions of fact, but the truths of human emotions and of human relationships. “Truth and Kindness have met up” (Tehillim 85:11) – “This is Moshe and Aharon” (Shemot Rabbah 5:10).

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GUEST D'VAR TORAH

Reacting to Criticism

By Rabbi Steven Exler (YCT '09)

Do you trust your instincts? What are our immediate reactions in difficult situations? The beginning of our *parasha* gives us a powerful chance to think about instinctive reactions to threats and challenges. Moshe Rabbeinu, together with his brother Aharon, is confronted with an attack on his authority and leadership. Much of the rest of the *parasha* details his reaction and response, but in one verse we find out what Moshe does first: “And Moshe heard, and he fell on his face” (Bamidbar 16:4). Two verbs, two reactions.

First, hearing. While the plain sense of the verse may be, “When Moshe heard, he fell on his face,” the text could simply have said, “And Moshe fell on his face,” or, “Upon hearing, Moshe fell on his face.” The language seems to push us to understand the hearing as an act unto itself.

This may be Moshe's first lesson for us: We must listen to our critics. The previous verse said that these dissenters had “assembled upon” Moshe and Aharon – the two leaders probably had a chance to flee or preempt the confrontation, having had a sense that the attack and critique were coming. But – “*vayishma Moshe*” – Moshe listened. He stood opposite his critics and heard them out before reacting. I believe this is an important trait for a leader to possess. A leader cannot shun criticism or



opposition at the outset – it must be honored by being heard. But what of Moshe's subsequent action? Why did Moshe fall on his face?

There are two basic interpretations of Moshe's falling on his face. Rashi quotes a midrash that suggests it was a moment of despair. Moshe had interceded on behalf of a sinning people time and again, and he feared that God would simply not accept his placation this time. How often can someone come to the aid of a poorly behaved people before the arguments and defenses start to wear thin? Moshe essentially decided in that moment to give up. He would not defend them in front of God again for fear his intercession would be ignored. Instead, he would critique them and offer a test in which God's true favorites would become known.

The Rashbam, cited approvingly by the Netziv, offers a different interpretation. I believe they are troubled by the prior suggestion. Sure, Moshe is frustrated, but to give up on his people? Because he worried God would not listen, he would not attempt a response? Of course this was different – they were rebelling against him and Aharon, not God. Still, wouldn't Moshe rather have protected them and set them gently on the right path? Perhaps more powerfully, how could he be sure that God would back him up after creating the test described in the next verses – that everyone offers incense and those finding God's favor will be sanctified (16:5-7) – on the spot? The Rashbam suggests that Moshe fell on his face “*lifilah*,” in prayer, and the Netziv further explains that, in this prayer, he received Divine communication and knew how to respond.

Perhaps, taken together, these offer a two-fold piece of advice for handling instinctive reactions to moments of challenge. First, listen: Hear the opposition; hear the critique. Then, following Rashbam, do not despair.

Instead, pray! Spend moments of inner reflection and connection to God. Perhaps those moments of prayer will offer insight on how to respond, a moment of Divine communication. Even if they do not, the listening and the prayer will find us grounded, in a better place from which to react.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Arvut: Jews Taking Responsibility for Each Other

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin

I join Jews all over the world in praying for the release of the three young men abducted from Gush Etzion this week: Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel, and Gilad Shaar. As many have noted, Israelis see these children as their very own. The pain is personal: We pray in empathy – not just sympathy – with the mothers and fathers who are waiting for their children to come home safely.

Halakha vividly illustrates this idea of sensitivity through the law of *arvut* – joint responsibility. For example, even if you have fulfilled your personal obligation of the mitzvah of reciting or hearing Kiddush on Shabbat, you have not completely fulfilled the mitzvah as long as even one Jew has not heard Kiddush. Thus, because you are re-fulfilling your own personal obligation by enabling someone else to “be *yotzeh*,” you can say Kiddush for them by using the same language of obligation and sanctification that you used for yourself. All Jews are responsible for one another, bonded and connected. This is how we are feeling for these precious missing children.

Taking responsibility for one’s fellow Jews takes form not only in ritual or feelings; it can and should be a real part of our lives. That is why I am so proud that two of our senior students took it upon themselves to travel across the world to visit the Jewish community in Nairobi, Kenya. They are there for two weeks to help Rabbi Brachyahu Schonthal (YCT ’13) and his wife, Rebecca Schischa, teach Torah and build the community in Kenya – a country that doesn’t even have a Chabad House! Rav Brachyahu and Rebecca went to Nairobi because they felt a sense of responsibility for their community, just as our two students, Ben Elton and Andrew Scheer, feel a sense of responsibility – of *arvut* – for them. They are having a great time teaching great Torah, but more importantly, they are modeling the caring tradition of our Torah. We all have to look out for one another, and it begins at the



yeshiva, with our students, graduates and everyone involved in YCT taking responsibility for each other.

We are proud of Ben and Andrew, we take comfort that our students are learning to take care of fellow Jews wherever they may be in the world, and we look forward to their return. May God see our love and caring for each other, our commitment to *arvut* for every Jew and for every single human life, and in the merit of our commitment, bring home the three kidnapped Israelis for whom we pray. From Kenya to the Bronx, from Nigeria to the Holy Land, may there be peace and a safe home for all our brothers and sisters. We care about them, we miss them, and we are not whole without them.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

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About the Rabbi:

Rabbi Eytan Yammer is a powerful force for positive change. From erecting an *eruv* to becoming the city’s only *mohel*, Rabbi Yammer has transformed Jewish infrastructure and the Jewish community in Birmingham, Alabama.

To read more about Rabbi Yammer and the important difference he is making in the Birmingham Jewish community, please see our newsletter.

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