

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Korach
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Korach – the objective Torah

In this week's Parsha of Korach, we read about Korach's rebellion against Moshe's leadership. Korach gathered together a group of cohorts who were all willing to participate in the planned coup for various reasons.

Korach the son of Yitzhar... took... Datan and Aviram (the sons of Eliav) and On ben Pelet, descendants of Reuben. They confronted Moshe together with two hundred and fifty men from the children of Israel, leaders of the congregation... (Bamidbar 16:1-2).

Korach and his gang confronted Moshe and publicly ridiculed some of the mitzvot that Moshe had taught to Bnei Yisrael.

The 250 men were consumed by a heavenly fire when they tried to offer up incense to Hashem. This is similar to the death of Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu when they tried to offer up a strange offering to Hashem.¹

The punishment for Korach, Datan and Aviram was that the earth miraculously opened up and swallowed them alive together with all of their possessions.

But what happened to On ben Pelet? Though he is mentioned at the beginning of the story as being part of Korach's gang, he is not mentioned again. More specifically, there is no mention of his demise. The Gemara² explains the rest of his story. On was blessed to have a very sensible wife. She understood that it was not good for On to join Korach and she sought to convince him of this. She explained to On that there would be nothing to gain personally from overthrowing Moshe. If the rebellion was successful, then instead of being subservient to Moshe, On would simply be subservient to Korach instead.

On agreed with his wife's logic but he did not know how to extricate himself from the rebellion. He had taken an oath that he would join the rebellion and the gang would be coming over to pick him up. How could he go against his oath and refuse to join them?

His clever wife advised him to get drunk and go to sleep. That way he would not be in control of his faculties and would be exempt from his oath. Meanwhile, she uncovered her hair and sat at the entrance to their tent. She knew that Korach and his gang were very pious and would not go near a woman who was dressed immodestly. Her plan worked. As soon as Korach and his gang noticed her uncovered hair, they turned away and avoided On's tent. In that way, On avoided the doomed rebellion and the resulting punishment. On's wife had saved his life.

However, a question arises. If Korach was wicked and rebellious, and he ridiculed the mitzvot, then why was he so careful not to approach a married woman with uncovered hair? It makes no sense! Either he was truly pious and righteous, in which case it is difficult to understand why he rebelled

¹ Parshat Shemini, Vayikra 10:1-2.

² Sanhedrin 109b-110a.

against Moshe. Or he was wicked and self-serving, in which case it is difficult to understand his reluctance to approach On's wife!

One explanation may be that Korach genuinely thought that his actions were justifiable. Rashi³ explains that Korach saw prophetically that one of his descendants would be Shmuel the prophet, who rivalled Moshe and Aaron in terms of greatness. He also saw 24 groups of Leviim descending from him that would all have Ruach Hakodesh (Divine spirit). Korach presumed that he should challenge for the leadership and he thought that he was guaranteed to be successful because there was so much greatness that was destined to emanate from him. However, what Korach didn't realise was that his sons would repent and escape punishment and that it was they who would father these great descendants.

Perhaps on the surface Korach thought that he was acting correctly, however deep down he was really acting in a self-serving manner. He wanted to rebel against Moshe because he wanted the leadership for himself.

Sometimes we need to look very carefully at our underlying motivations for our actions to discern if we are acting altruistically or just acting in our own self interest. For example, if we struggle to get out of bed in the morning and we get to shule late for Shacharit – are we choosing to get extra sleep so that we can be more alert to better serve Hashem? Or are we just enjoying our comfortable bed?⁴

It is difficult to work out our true motivations by ourselves and not be swayed by our own self-interest. We can see how Korach's self-interest caused him to act in a contradictory and illogical manner by rejecting the commandments and yet following the laws of tzniut. It is easy to use twisted logic to reach the conclusions that we want to reach. We need an external, objective point of reference to ensure that our decisions are made in an objective fashion.

Rav Zev Leff brings the example of the members of the Sanhedrin, the supreme authority of halacha. In order to join this group, one had to prove logically that it was permitted to eat a sheretz⁵, a position which is clearly wrong. Rav Leff explains that this process was required in order to teach these great sages that with their great mental ability they could convince themselves of anything. And therefore, it was vital that they subject their thinking to the Torah.

The story is told of the Rogatchover Gaon⁶ who proved that chametz is permissible to eat on Pesach. He then asked his students to refute his logic, but they could not. He then proceeded to open a Chumash to Shmot 12:15 and read the pasuk: "Whoever eats chametz from the first day until the seventh day [of Pesach], that soul shall be cut off from Israel". That is all the proof that you need! He was teaching them that pure, simple words of Torah defy any complicated logic.

Let's learn from Korach that the only way we can be sure that our thinking is correct is to subject ourselves to an objective truth. And the Torah is the best objective truth that we have!

Let's try something this week:

1. When contemplating our behaviour and decisions, make sure we remain objective and logical by checking what the Torah has to say and asking Rabbanim.
2. Remember, it is very difficult to be objective when our own egos are involved. A good idea is to ask three people in our life that can function as our 'tripod of objectivity' and help us to decide the best way forward.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

³ In his commentary to Bamidbar 16:7.

⁴ OK, maybe that's not a good example. Sometimes it is obvious that we are just acting in our own self-interest!

⁵ One of eight impure creatures that are listed in Parshat Shmini, Vayikra 11:29-30.

⁶ Rabbi Joseph Rosen, 1858-1936.

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About Darchai Noam

Darchai Noam is available online at www.darchai-noam.com. You can access this week's edition of Darchai Noam, archived back issues of Darchai Noam and other divrei Torah.

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah, usually relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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