

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Korach (Bamidbar 16:1–18:32)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Korach – The need for leaders

In this week's Parasha of Korach, we read about the rebellion against Moshe and Aharon that was instigated by their cousin Korach. Korach had the “gift of the gab”. He was able to encourage a sizeable group of people to join his rebellion by telling them what they wanted to hear. One of the arguments that Korach used in his challenge to Moshe's leadership went as follows:

For the entire people, all of them are holy, and Hashem is in their midst. So why do you [Moshe and Aharon] exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?” (Bamidbar 16:3)

Rashi explains Korach's argument as follows: the entire nation heard Hashem speak at Har Sinai. They all experienced direct communication from Hashem and they had no need for intermediaries. Korach is thus asking why should Moshe and Aharon take on the leadership role if no-one needed them to act as an intermediary?

In reality, Korach simply wanted to take the power for himself. Indeed, the wife of On ben Pelet (one of the people that joined with Korach) tried to convince her husband that there was nothing to gain by joining the rebellion. “What difference will it make?”, she said. “You are currently a follower of Moshe. If Korach wins then you will be a follower of Korach. You will still just be a follower.”¹

However, despite the fact that Korach's motives were not genuine, let us take Korach's claim on face value. He was making a convincing point – if all of Bnei Yisrael was already on an exalted level, then why did the nation need a leader at all?

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot² teaches us to make a teacher for ourselves (עשה לך רב). Interestingly, the Mishnah does not distinguish between different classes of people in this respect. Thus, it would seem that even the greatest leader is required to make a teacher for themselves. But why does a teacher need a teacher? Perhaps this is a little like asking why a doctor needs to go to a doctor.

In a shiur titled “Torah and Humility”, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik discussed this point.³ He spoke in particular about a ben Torah – someone who is learned and wise. He commented that the possession of knowledge is not normally conducive to humility. On the contrary, intellectual achievement is often associated with increased arrogance. However, in truth, the opposite should be the case. The more one knows, the more one realises that there is more to know. The closer one is to the top of the mountain, the more they realise that they need advice and guidance from one who is even closer. And the greatest piece of knowledge is that we are very far from Hashem's wisdom.

¹ See Gemara Masechet Sanhedrin 109b.

² Avot 1:6.

³ “Torah and Humility” presented on the occasion of the 4th yearzeit of his wife on 8 March 1971. See www.vbm-Torah.org/archive/humility.htm. The following is based on a summary of this talk by Rabbi Moshe Meiselman (Rav Soloveitchik's nephew) in “Torah Chazal Science” Israel Bookshop Publications, 2013, pages xxxvi – xxxviii.

Rav Soloveitchik pointed out that there are many times in the Gemara that the conclusion of a debate is “Teyku” (תיקו) which means “let it stand”⁴. In other words, the Sages of the Gemara admitted that they did not have an answer to this particular question. The great commentator Rashi often quotes his teachers throughout his commentary on the Gemara and the Torah. There are also a number of times that Rashi raises a question but then says that he does not know the answer.⁵ If Rashi didn’t know the answer, why did he raise the question at all? Why didn’t he just stay silent and not reveal his lack of knowledge? Perhaps Rashi was teaching us that it is okay to have unanswered questions. If the great Rashi himself was humble enough to say “I don’t know”, then surely we should not be ashamed to admit it as well.⁶

Rav Soloveitchik then discusses our passage dealing with Korach’s argument. Korach was accurate when he pointed out that all of Bnei Yisrael are holy and they all experienced the Divine revelation when the Torah was given. However, Korach then jumped to the erroneous conclusion that this meant that they did not need a teacher or a guide. In fact, the opposite is the case. It is precisely because the people had merited Divine revelation that they were more in need of guidance. There was a greater risk of arrogance and misunderstanding about how to behave correctly at the exalted levels that they were capable of achieving.

Another reason that Korach failed to consider regarding the importance of appointing a Rav, is in order to avoid the problem of subjectivity. It is human nature to be self-interested and subjective. Even the greatest leaders are not immune to this trait. Only by turning to someone outside of ourselves for guidance and advice can we obtain a more complete and objective perspective without being tainted by one’s subjective self-interest. Going back to the doctor analogy, just like it would be unwise for a doctor to diagnose or treat himself, so too a teacher or leader should not attempt to guide themselves.

In his commentary to the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot that we quoted above, the Rashbam explains that a student must take care not to issue rulings without consulting his teacher. The Talmud⁷ explains the meaning of the pasuk in Mishlai⁸: וְשֹׂאֵן תּוֹקְעִים בּוֹטָה (One who takes a firm position is hated) – a person who takes a firm position, relying on his own knowledge is to be despised. We must each make sure to appoint an appropriate teacher for ourselves to make sure that we receive the correct tradition. Otherwise we are directionless.⁹

Let's try something this week:

1. Let’s try to avoid making the same mistaken assumption as Korach. No matter what level we are on, we should remember that we need guidance and advice from others who are more knowledgeable and experienced and can see us in a more objective light.
2. Remember that no matter how much more knowledge we gain, the greatest knowledge is that we do not and cannot understand everything, and Hashem’s wisdom is always beyond us.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

⁴ The term “Teyku” is popularly explained as an acronym for “Tishbi yetaretz kushiyot u’baayot” which means “When Eliyahu HaNavi (known as the Tishbi) arrives with the coming of the Moshiach he will answer all of these outstanding questions.

⁵ See for example Rashi’s commentary to Parashat Toldot, Breishit 28:5.

⁶ Note, a number of commentators have attempted to explain why Rashi raised questions that he could not answer. Some have suggested that since Rashi is coming to explain the simple meaning of the pasukim, he needs to tell the Torah student that there is in fact a question to be asked on this pasuk. If Rashi would remain silent, the student may not realise that there is a relevant question to ask. We can add that simply raising a question takes intelligence and an inquiring mind and helps to spur others on to think about the answer.

⁷ Yevamot 109b.

⁸ Mishlai (Proverbs) 11:15.

⁹ The Pirkei Avos Treasury, Artscroll 1995, p25.