

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Korach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Korach – Because I said so, that’s why!

In this week’s Parasha, Korach tries to challenge Moshe’s leadership. The Midrash provides us with some of the details of Korach’s tactics. He deliberately asked Moshe halachic questions that would lead Moshe to provide answers that seemed counter-intuitive. Korach wanted to use this as an opportunity to make Moshe look foolish.

Rashi brings one such interaction from the Midrash. Korach took 250 men and dressed them all in cloaks made entirely of techelet (wool dyed with a special blue ink from a sea creature known as the chilazon). There is a halacha that four cornered garments need to contain fringes (tzitzit), one of which is dyed with this techelet colour¹. One of the reasons given for the techelet is that we should look at it and be reminded of the heavens and Hashem’s Throne of Glory². Korach asked whether a garment that is made entirely of techelet needs to have a techelet fringe attached. Moshe answered in the affirmative and Korach and the men started to laugh. They argued – if one string of blue wool exempts an entire garment, then surely a garment made entirely of blue wool should exempt itself!

Korach also asked Moshe whether a room that was full of Torah scrolls needs a mezuzah. When Moshe answered yes, Korach laughed again. If a small scroll with some passages from the Torah can exempt a whole house, then surely a room full of Torah scrolls would also exempt the house!

Korach needed to learn the truth that “This is the halacha that Hashem commanded us. Hashem said so and therefore we do it.” We don’t always need to know the answers to all of our questions. Indeed, sometimes it is healthy for parents to tell their children “Because I said so”. Children should be trained to understand that sometimes things happen that don’t seem to make sense to them.

Moshe wisely did not continue to argue with Korach. Moshe understood that Korach was not looking to discover the truth, he was just trying to poke fun and stir discontent. Rav Chaim of Volozhon³ experienced a similar situation. A story is told that some of his students went off the path of Torah and mitzvot. They later met Rav Chaim and presented a list of philosophical problems and questions that were troubling them. They explained that it was these problems that led them to abandon the Torah. Rav Chaim wisely told them “If you genuinely want to know the truth, then I can answer every one of your questions. But you didn’t come to me with a list of questions, you came to me with a list of justifications. You are trying to justify your behaviour by looking for problems and difficulties”.

Eventually, everything will become clear to us, and our questions will be answered, but not necessarily in this world. The story is told about the Ramban who had a student who was about to pass away. The

¹ This halacha was taught at the end of last week’s Parasha (Bamidbar 15:38). Over time we have lost the knowledge as to how to obtain the special blue dye so we wear tzitzit that are fully white. The mitzva of tzitzit can still be performed validly with purely white strings. There are some Rabbis who claim that the chilazon has now been re-identified and that therefore it is possible to create halachically valid techelet. These days, some in fact do wear tzitzit with this dye. Other Rabbis are unsure whether the chilazon has been correctly identified and therefore rule that pure white tzitzit should continue to be worn.

² See Gemara Menachot 43b for an explanation of the thought process that one should go through when looking at the techelet thread.

³ The main disciple of the Vilna Gaon.

Ramban had some difficult questions that were troubling him.⁴ The Ramban gave his dying student a kabbalistic amulet that would allow the student to appear to the Ramban in a dream after he passed away. He asked his student to ask for answers to the Ramban's questions when he reached the World of Truth. Sure enough, after passing away, the student appeared to the Ramban in a dream. But he did not answer the Ramban's questions. Instead, he explained that in the World of Truth everything made sense and there was perfect clarity. The Ramban's questions and difficulties had simply disappeared!

Korach asked some tough questions, but the main answer to all of them is: "Because Hashem said so!" Remarkably, the Chatam Sofer suggests another answer to one of Korach's questions. A powerful answer that has potent consequences.⁵ Why does a house full of Torah scrolls require a mezuzah? The mezuzah guards the door to the house. It controls what comes in and what goes out. A house can be full of Torah, but if we are not careful with what comes in and out, then the Torah contained in the house can be worthless! Similarly, the opening to a person is one's mouth. A person can be full of Torah, but if he does not control what leaves his mouth (such as lashon hara, hurtful words, lies, unseemly language)⁶ then all that Torah that he has acquired can be worthless! The mezuzah teaches us how careful we need to be of the words that come out of our mouths – what we say and how we say it.

We see a similar idea in a discussion brought in the Gemara.⁷ If there are only nine people in shul, Rav Huna suggested that the Holy Ark containing Torah scrolls can count as the tenth person to make up a minyan. Rav Nachman challenged Rav Huna: "Is the ark a person? How can it complete the minyan?" Rav Huna conceded. What a strange discussion. Did Rav Huna really think that the Aron is a person? I saw a remarkable explanation of this discussion – Rav Nachman was saying that even though the Ark is filled with Torah, it is not a mensch. In other words, it is not enough to be filled with Torah, one needs to be a mensch in order to count.⁸

What about Korach's question about techelet? Why does one need to attach white strings with one blue string to a garment that is fully made of blue wool? Perhaps we can suggest that the message of the tzitzit is that we need to use our senses and our intellect to recognise distinctions. Just like we can distinguish between white and blue, so too we must distinguish between wrong and right, bad and good, improper and proper, impure and pure, forbidden and permitted. It is not sufficient to have a garment that is all blue, we need to have that contrast between white and blue in order to remind us of this message.

The time for reciting Shema in the morning begins at the time of misheyakir – the time at which there is enough light to distinguish and to recognise a colleague. It has been suggested that before we turn to Hashem in prayer, we first need to be able to recognise our fellow, to be aware of who they are what they need and how we can help them. Only when we recognise each other and make these important distinctions will our prayers to Hashem be accepted.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that sometimes things may only make sense in the future or in the world to come.
2. Remember the powerful lesson of the Chatam Sofer and be careful with what comes out of our mouths.
3. Remember the lesson of the tzitzit – use our intellect to make appropriate distinctions, to recognise our friends and their needs and to distinguish between what positive and what is negative.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Certainly, we can say that the Ramban's emunah was not challenged by these questions, he just wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how Hashem runs the world.

⁵ I heard this idea in a lecture by Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld. I did not see the actual text of the Chatam Sofer.

⁶ The Chatam Sofer focused on what goes out of one's mouth. The same argument can apply to what comes in as well (i.e., the food must be kosher).

⁷ Brachot 47b.

⁸ See "Smiling Each Day" by Rabbi Twersky in the name of Reb Zusha of Anipoli, p137.