

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 – The hungry lion and the cunning fox

This week we read in Parashat Korach about Korach's rebellion and his attempt to overthrow Moshe and Aharon. Korach managed to gather 250 prestigious leaders and other assorted hangers-on for his confrontation with Moshe. They accused Moshe of making up the mitzvot and grabbing power for himself and Aharon.

Korach was a very intelligent man. The leaders that joined him were important and worthy people. (They were leaders of the tribes according to the Midrash or heads of courts according to Rashi.) How could they all make such a tragic and obvious mistake and ignore the truth? Two of Korach's cohorts, Datan and Aviram, actually had the chutzpah to accuse Moshe as follows:

“Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the Wilderness?” (Bamidbar 16:13)

How could they describe Mitzrayim as a land flowing with milk and honey, the term used to describe the Land of Israel? The slavery of Mitzrayim was not a distant memory. The rebellion happened only about a year after the Exodus. Though the hardship in Mitzrayim had eased once the ten plagues had started, all of Bnei Yisrael remembered very clearly the terrible persecution that was their lot in Mitzrayim – the crushing slavery, the murder of their children. How could they claim that life was better in Mitzrayim? After all of the miracles that Hashem had performed through Moshe! After standing at the foot of Har Sinai and experiencing the revelation!

In his article on Parashat Korach, Rav Dessler¹ brings a parable about a lion and a fox. On the surface, it seems to be a children's fable, yet it contains an extremely insightful and important message. The parable comes from one of the Responsa of Rav Hai Gaon²:

There was once a hungry lion who wanted to eat a fox for his dinner. The fox was cunning. He said to the lion: “Why do you want to eat me? I am small and skinny. I will show you a very fat human being that you can kill and you will have a very nice meal. The fox took the lion to a clearing in the forest. There was a pit covered with branches and grass and on the other side sat a man. When the lion saw the man, he said to the fox: “I'm afraid that this man might pray to Hashem and in that merit cause me trouble”. The cunning fox replied: “Don't worry, nothing will happen to you or your son. Maybe your grandson will have to suffer for it. Meanwhile you can enjoy your meal and be satisfied. There is still plenty of time until your grandson comes along.” The lion was convinced. He ran towards the man. But the man was a hunter and had laid a clever trap. The lion fell into the pit and couldn't get out. The fox came to the edge of the pit and looked down at the helpless lion. The lion said: “Didn't you tell me that the punishment would only come upon my grandson?”. “Perhaps your grandfather did something wrong and you are suffering for it,” replied the fox. “Is that fair?” asked the lion. “The father eats sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?”³ “So why didn't you think of that before?” replied the fox.

¹ “Rav Dessler on the Parasha, from Strive for Truth”, based on Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Feldheim, 2004, Part 6, p75.

² 939-1038, the last and greatest of the Geonim, the leaders of Jewry during the times of the Talmud and the Rishonim.

³ A reference to Yirmiyahu 31:28. The pasuk refers to the phenomenon of one generation sinning and the next generation suffering the consequences. Generally, Jewish theology holds that people are only punished for their own sins, but there are some exceptions. This is a very big topic, not for now.

How could the lion make such a foolish mistake? He was tempted by his desire for a delicious meal and this prevented him from thinking clearly.

Rav Dessler explains that this is how the great people in our Parsha could stumble. They were seduced by their desires and their yetzer hara, which blocked them from seeing the obvious truth.

The desires of the people in our Parasha centred on power and kavod. The Ramban and the Ibn Ezra explain why each of the people in the rebellion were tempted to rebel. Korach himself was angry and jealous when Aharon was appointed as Kohen Gadol and when their cousin Elizaphan was appointed as the leader of the Kohathite family, above Korach. Korach felt that he should have been appointed to that position. The 250 leaders were all firstborns and they were upset that Aharon and his sons would replace the firstborns in performing the sacrificial service. Datan, Aviram and On were from the tribe of Reuven which resented losing its firstborn status to the offspring of Yosef. The Ibn Ezra assumes that other Leviim joined the rebellion because they were upset that they would only be assistants to the Kohanim.

They were all jealous of another's power and honour and they desired to regain what they felt they deserved. In those circumstances, they were susceptible to Korach's arguments. Of course it is clear to us that they couldn't all be leaders. It is a fair assumption that Korach was just seeking to take the leadership for himself. But they weren't thinking clearly. On ben Pelet's wife was thinking clearly and she advised her husband to stay away from the rebellion.⁴ She said to him "What have you got to gain from this nonsense. Even if Korach wins he will be Kohen Gadol and you will be just as subservient to him as you are now to Moshe and Aharon".⁵ He wisely listened to her. However the others did not have an antidote to their yetzer hara which would help them to overcome their blocks to the truth. Just like the lion in our fable, they were blinded to the truth by their desires.

In every generation there are many intelligent people that act foolishly because they are under the influence of their desires. Rav Dessler writes that if we take a close look, we will notice those that run blindly after material things and lose touch with reality. But a thinking person can soon distinguish between wisdom and foolishness. And those who are seduced by their yetzer hara usually want others to follow them, because one feels more comfortable when they are in company than when they are acting alone.

So how can we personally avoid falling into this trap? Rav Dessler writes elsewhere⁶ that this issue can be extremely difficult to overcome. Every thought that we have is clouded by our interests and desires. Rav Dessler writes at length as to how one can try to think clearly without being under the thumb of their desires. But for now, here are some brief suggestions:

- Try to recognise when your thinking is being clouded by your desires. Being aware of the problem is a big step towards the solution.
- Daven for help to see the truth, to have the wisdom and understanding to see the emet in each situation.
- Rav Dessler writes that having fear of Hashem can help one to keep their thoughts clear. Perhaps we can focus on this when reciting the pasuk "ראשית חכמה יראת ה', שכל טוב לכל עשיהם" ("The beginning of wisdom is the fear of Hashem – good understanding to all who practice this") – one of the pasukim that we recite first thing in the morning after Modeh Ani.⁷

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be aware of when our material desires and creature comforts cloud our ability to think clearly.
2. Ask Hashem for help to have understanding and to see the truth, especially when reciting ראשית חכמה in the morning.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ On was initially part of the rebellion (see Bamidbar 16:1) but he quietly disappeared from the scene.

⁵ Gemara Sanhedrin 109b.

⁶ Rav Dessler makes this point in various places, see for example his essay titled "The roots of mussar" in Part One of Strive for Truth.

⁷ Page 2 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.