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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Korach

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BLIND AMBITION

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Love is blind. So is hate and any principle that begins to shade the intellect with emotion. This week, in what appears to be the worst ideological division of the Jewish people after the Exodus, a litmus test of human nature proved that the great divide bordered more on ego than on principle.

Korach, a cousin of Moshe and a brilliant man in his own right, began a rebellion that challenged the leadership and divine appointment of both Moshe and Ahron. In addition to his own family, Korach's iconoclastic actions inspired 250 Jewish leaders to denounce publicly the leadership of Moshe and Ahron. Foremost among the self-appointed detractors were two men with a history of vindictive activities toward Moshe – Dassan and Aviram. Back in Egypt, when Moshe killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an innocent Jew, these men threatened to inform the Egyptian authorities.

But Moshe wanted to deal with them. As leader of two million people, he could have laughed at the complaints of a minute fraction of the population, but he didn't. He reached out to Dassan and Aviram and asked them to come and discuss their qualms with him. His request was met with a barrage of insults.

"Even if you gouge out our eyes – we shall not meet!" they responded (Numbers 16:14)

I was always amazed at this most arrogant response. Why did these men, who obviously were stubborn, arrogant, and supercilious, respond in a self-deprecating manner? Why did they suggest the horrific infliction of eye-gouging upon themselves? Would it not be enough to respond, even to the worst of enemies, "we will not come?" What connection does the loss of vision have with their refusal?

Reb Gimpel, a travelling salesman, developed an illness in a small village far from his home and was prescribed with a cure that entailed eating of non-kosher food. A foreigner in that town, he decided to ask the local rabbi if he was permitted to eat the medicine. The gentile doctor did not know where the rabbi lived and suggested that Reb Gimpel ask the local butcher. Reb Gimpel went into the butcher shop. "Excuse me," he asked the burly meat vendor, "do you know where I can find your rabbi?" "The rabbi!" sneered the butcher, "why would a respectable-looking man like yourself need our rabbi?" The man was puzzled but continued to explain. "I'd like to ask him something. "Ask him something!" mocked the butcher. "Our rabbi doesn't know the difference between a horse and a cow! You're wasting your time! Ask the chazzan where he lives, I have no reason to tell you." The shocked man went to the chazzan's home. "Excuse me," he asked. Do you know where the rabbi lives?" "The rabbi?" asked the cantor in horror. "Why in the world would you want to meet that ignoramus? Surely you don't want to ask him a question! I wouldn't want to be party to your misfortune. Better ask the mohel." Frustrated the poor man went to the home of the mohel where once again he was accosted with a barrage of insults and put-downs. Finally, however, the mohel acquiesced and directed the man to the rabbi's home. The man entered the threshold and before he even shook the rabbi's hand he exclaimed, "Listen, I don't know you, and you don't me. I came here to ask one question, but I will ask you something totally different. Why are you the rabbi here? The butcher thinks you're a thief, the chazzan thinks you're an ignoramus, and the mohel loathes you. Why in the world do you remain the rabbi of this town?" The rabbi looked up from his bifocals and smiled. "Ah! The insults, the abuse and the criticism. But you know what: for a little honor it's all worth it!"

As the proverbial rabble-rousers of all time, Dassan and Aviram were preaching profound insight into the laws of arrogance. When one is set on a self-fulfilling mission of squabbling, as corrupt and perverted as his judgement is, so is his vision. He is blind to the critics, blind to the world, and worst of all, blind to his own self. Once a man is blind, you can gouge his eyes and he will not notice. Only those with a pure sense of mission, cherish the vision that lets them see a situation from every angle. Even if it is not their own. While Moshe, the leader of the entire nation asks to meet his worst enemies and discuss their gripes, they refuse and would rather be blind to any criticism.

When Good Intentions Hide Dark Motives

by Rabbi Avraham Kovel

Al Capone murdered, extorted, and terrorized Chicago during the Prohibition. Yet when asked about his legacy, the notorious gangster declared: "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse - the existence of a hunted man." In his mind, he wasn't a criminal—he was a misunderstood public servant.

If America's most sinister crime boss could deceive himself so thoroughly, what does that say about our own capacity for self-delusion? This question becomes even more unsettling when we examine Korach's rebellion in this week's Torah portion.

A Mysterious Mutiny

The Torah portion opens with mutiny. Korach, a prince of the tribe of Levi, incites a rebellion against Moses and Aaron: "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and God is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above God's assembly?" Korach's platform champions unity, equality, and egalitarianism—righteous goals that would make any social justice advocate proud.

Yet Moses's rebuttal completely sidesteps Korach's egalitarian rhetoric, striking at something far more personal: "Is it not enough that the God of Israel has distinguished **you** from the congregation of Israel to draw you near to Him, to perform the service in the Mishkan of the Lord and to stand before the congregation to minister to them?"

Let's recap:

- Korach's attack: "We demand equality!"
- Moses's response: "Don't you think your rank is high enough?"

At this point, you'd logically expect Korach to say, "You misunderstand me! This isn't about my rank—it's about justice for everyone!" But instead of defending his principles, Korach responds by entering a competition with Moses and Aaron to determine the rightful leader of the Levites, the priesthood, and the nation!

What happened to Korach's platform of egalitarianism?

Envy's Egalitarian Mask

The Midrash reveals that Korach was never interested in equality at all. He rebelled because "he envied the chieftainship of Elizaphan the son of Uzziel whom Moses appointed as chieftain over the sons of Kohath by the [Divine] word."

In his famous short story, *Animal Farm*, George Orwell satirizes the Russian revolution that gave birth to communism. In the book, a group of animals rebel against their human oppressors, establishing "All animals are equal" as the sacred commandment of their new society. But the pigs gradually seize power, eventually changing the motto to "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The noble platform of egalitarianism served as a cover for the pigs' hunger for power. Korach employed the same strategy—he weaponized equality to seize power for himself.

But here's what makes Korach's story truly chilling: Was he a conscious manipulator, or had he actually convinced himself that his cause was just?

The Slippery Slope of Self-Deception

As we saw in the verses above, Moses saw right through Korach's scheme, calling him out for his true intentions. But did Korach realize his own twisted motivation, or had he thoroughly convinced himself that he was fighting for justice?

According to Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, the master of character development from the last generation, Korach genuinely convinced himself he was fighting for justice. At his core, Korach harbored the destructive trait of jealousy. But rather than confront this character flaw, he constructed a philosophy that transformed his jealousy into righteousness—crusading for equality for all.

But Korach didn't stop there. The Midrash explains that he saw prophetically that supremely righteous people would emerge from his lineage, including the prophet Samuel. Seeing that his descendants would be righteous, Korach convinced himself that his philosophy must be correct. In psychology, this phenomenon is called "confirmation bias"—the tendency to interpret information in ways that support our pre-existing beliefs.

Korach's error reveals an essential truth about human psychology: We hide our true motivation, even from ourselves, dressing it up as a wolf in sheep's clothing. The implications are sobering: if Korach—a prince of Levi who witnessed the splitting of the Red Sea and stood at Mount Sinai—could deceive himself so thoroughly, what does that say about our own capacity for self-delusion?

We hide our true motivation, even from ourselves, dressing it up as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Escaping the Self-Righteousness Trap

To make this practical, I'd like to suggest a self-accounting exercise: Is there an area of your life where you feel especially self-righteous? Is there a cause you're passionate about, sometimes to the point of conflict with others? Ask yourself: Why do I feel so strongly about my position? Do I have any personal interest? Trace it back—what was your first thought, before you dressed it up in noble principles? Was it as righteous as it now appears?

If you discover one of these hidden motivations, stop your external rebellion and instead work to correct the internal flaw you've uncovered. Being honest with ourselves is difficult, but there's no other way to live in truth and ensure we sow seeds of love instead of dissent.

May we learn the lesson of Korach and develop the courage to examine our true motivations, choosing authentic growth over self-righteous revolt.

Humility vs. Low Self-Confidence

By Rabbi Naftali Silberberg

Moses was exceedingly distressed, and he said to the L-rd, "Do not accept the offering [of Korach and his cohorts]. I have not taken a donkey from a single one of them, and I have not harmed a single one of them." — Numbers 16:15

Humility was one of Moses' most outstanding qualities. In fact, the Torah affirms that "Moses was exceedingly humble, more so than any person on the face of the earth." Yet, when his leadership was contested by his scholarly and prodigious cousin Korach, Moses responds with seemingly uncharacteristic righteous indignation. One would have expected Moses to turn to G-d and say, "A-lmighty, perhaps You should consider allowing Korach to assume my position—he is far more qualified than me! I am more than happy to abdicate my position to the worthier candidate!"

A proper understanding of how the Torah views humility will explain how Moses' reaction to Korach's uprising wasn't inconsistent with his exceptional humbleness.

True humility is not a result of an undervaluation of one's talents and accomplishments. Such is a false humility, for it is built on a false foundation. Rather, the truly humble individual is keenly aware of all his strengths and qualities—but simultaneously recognizes that all these talents are G-d-given, and therefore do not constitute a reason to feel superior to another whom G-d has not bequeathed such talents. "Perhaps," the humble person thinks, "if that person had been blessed with the same gifts, he would have accomplished the same as me—or perhaps even more!"

Moses recognized that G-d had endowed him with tremendous leadership qualities, and he therefore absolutely rejected the notion of relinquishing his position to anyone. This cognizance, however, did not interfere with his genuine humility and respect for *every* Jew.

On a deeper level, the person who is entirely devoted to fulfilling the will of his Creator is naturally egoless, because he has no personal ambition—his goal is only to further G-d's "agenda" on this world. While arrogance is a sense of self-importance, dedication to G-d means realizing that life isn't about the individual or what he wants, it's about serving a higher purpose. Moses, despite all his greatness, of which he was keenly aware, was a dedicated servant of G-d. And when Korach sought to impede his fulfillment of his divinely ordained mission in life – shepherding the Jewish Nation – Moses responded by firing on all cylinders.

Many confuse humility with meekness. In truth, the humble person is very driven and will not stomach any opposition. But he is not driven by his own ego; he is driven by a desire to implement the Divine plan.

“Now Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehas, the son of Levi, with Dasan and Abiram, the sons of Eliav, and On, the son of Peles, sons of Reuven, took” (16:1)

The Torah lists all of Korach’s ancestors, but stops short at Levi and does not include Yaakov in the list. Rashi comments that Yaakov prayed not to be associated with Korach and his rebellion. Everyone should realize that we come from parents and everything that we do brings them honor or disgrace. The fact that our actions affect the reputation of our parents should motivate us to do what is right. When a person keeps the mitzvos properly and acts in the way that the Torah wants him to act, he brings honor to his parents, grandparents, and all of his ancestors.

“Moshe heard and fell on his face” (16:4)

Moshe Rabbeinu had a big problem on his hands when his authority was questioned by Korach and his large group of followers. Moshe’s immediate reaction to this serious challenge, even before responding to Korach, was to pray to Hashem. We can never forget the power of prayer and the critical role that it plays in our success. Moshe did respond to Korach and formulated a plan that would prove the divine origin of Aharon’s status as Kohen, but he prayed to Hashem for guidance and assistance before doing anything. This serves as a lesson for how we can approach any difficulties that we face in our own lives.

“Moshe sent to call Dasan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said: We will not go up” (16:12)

Despite the fact that it was beneath his dignity as leader of the nation, Moshe himself went to Dasan and Aviram in order to reach out to them with an offer of peace. Rather than stand on ceremony, he was willing to forgo his own honor in order to end the fight. Rashi says that Moshe’s overture to Dasan and Aviram teaches us that we must not continue arguments. Instead, we should always seek to resolve them, regardless of who is right and who is wrong. The Mishna says that Aharon “pursued peace.” Typically, when one is pursuing another person, the pursued is trying to run away. The same is true of resolving arguments. Even if the other side has no interest in peace, we should still persist in reaching out to them and attempting to end the fight. Moshe goes to Dasan and Aviram because one cannot prolong a fight. He lowered his honor by going to them even though they refused to go to him. He learned not to stand on ceremony.

“A reminder for the Children of Israel, so that no outsider, who is not of the seed of Aharon, shall approach to burn incense before Hashem, so as not to be like Korach and his company, as Hashem spoke regarding him through the hand of Moshe” (17:5)

The Torah warns us not to be like Korach and his followers. In fact, Chazal tell us that, based on this posuk, whoever is involved in an argument transgresses the mitzvah in the Torah not to be like Korach. Whether this is a biblical commandment or not is the subject of a dispute among the Rishonim, but either way, one must be careful not to start fights in general and not to participate in arguments. It is not enough to eschew fights; one must stay far away from them and never even come close to being party to one. This is hinted to in the name of the parsha, Korach, which contains the same letters as the word "rachok," "distant." One must keep his distance from anything bordering on an argument. If the Torah speaks so strongly about the negative ramifications of persisting in a fight, then we can only imagine the great reward for ending one’s own fights and convincing others to abandon theirs.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Why is This Sin Different than All Other Sins?

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Torah says that Korach and his entire congregation were swallowed up by the ground. “They, their wives, and their children...” Rashi notes, regarding the fact that even the children were killed, “Come and see how difficult *machlokes*[argumentation] is. An earthly court does not punish an individual until the age of Bar/Bas Mitzvah (13/12). The Heavenly Court does not punish a person until the age of twenty years. However, by *machlokes*, even infants were swept away in the punishment of Korach and his congregation.” [Rashi to Bamidbar 16:27]

The Maharal asks the obvious question: “Why is this sin different than all other sins?” By *machlokes*, the Heavenly Court does not discriminate by age. No matter what the age, a person caught up in divisive argumentativeness is liable to be punished. The Maharal writes, “You must know the main reason for this: Normally a minor is not punished because the Holy One does not punish a minor. But by *machlokes*, the essence of *gehinnom* [Hell] clings to *machlokes*.” *Machlokes* and *gehinnom* are inextricably bound up with each other. *Gehinnom* is part and parcel of *machlokes*, and *machlokes* is part and parcel of *Gehinnom*. “The reason this is true is because both *gehinnom* and *machlokes* were created on the second day of Creation.” (The *machlokes* [Division] created on the second day involved G-d’s splitting and separating the waters into the Upper Waters and the Lower Waters. This is the best possible type of “*machlokes*,” yet it still involves division.) So *gehinnom* and *machlokes* are “hand and glove” in lockstep with one another.

Now, I do not fully understand what these words mean. I do not understand the why, but I understand the what. The what is that *gehinnom* and *machlokes* are two sides of the same coin. That is why even infants meet their demise when they are exposed to *machlokes*. It is not a case of punishing the child. It is a reality. It is similar to what happens if a child, Heaven forbid, sticks his finger into a fire. He will get burned, even though he is innocent. It is not a punishment. Rather, it is the nature of fire to burn. Similarly, if a child, Heaven forbid, will swallow poison, he will be poisoned. However, it is not a punishment. It is just the nature of poison.

Here too, Hashem is not punishing the child, but nonetheless, finding oneself in proximity to *machlokes* inevitably leads to tragedy and punishment. The Maharal gives an analogy: It is as if someone says, “I will not kill you, but if you kill yourself, you cannot blame me for that. I will not be responsible for that.” The same, says the Maharal, happens with *machlokes*. If children are associated with *machlokes* — through their parents — they may be killed, albeit it will not be a punishment from G-d. It will be the inevitable consequence of *machlokes*.

There is such a concept as “the natural laws of *ruchniyus* [spirituality].” One of the natural laws of *ruchniyus* is that somebody caught up in *machlokes* winds up in *gehinnom*. I am sure all of us are familiar with the destructive powers of *machlokes*. There is not any family, there are not any institutions, there are not any organizations, and there is nothing in the world that will be saved from the fire and the destructive power of *machlokes*. All too often, we see how it destroys families. Brothers do not talk to sisters. Parents do not talk to children. We see what *machlokes* can do to institutions. We see what it can do to a shul, what it can do to a community, and what it can do to a Yeshiva. Nothing is immune to the ravages of *machlokes*. Therefore, at all costs, we must attempt to avoid *machlokes* — literally — like the plague.

I admit that I do not understand the full depth of the Maharal’s equation “*gehinnom* = *machlokes*“, but it is a spiritual reality. Therefore, despite the fact that the children of the parents associated with the *machlokes* of Korach’s rebellion were innocent, they were caught up by this incident of the ground swallowing the perpetrators. It was not a punishment. It was the natural consequence of *machlokes*.

Gory Glory Hallelukah

By Sheldon Stern

In the Parsha's first verse, Korach's lineage is traced, but there's nary a mention of Yaakov Avinu. Rashi explained that the Patriarch pleaded for mercy that his name not be associated with a squabble. That makes sense, but what's hard to understand is verse 16:19. This was the climax of the contretemps. Korach rallied his forces against Moshe and Aaron, but there's a surprise guest, none other than the glory of Hashem. Rashi tells us that there are four times when G-d's glory appears after the people complain, and this is an indication of His anger. The question is, "Why didn't Hashem separate Himself completely from the nation at those junctures?"

Rabbi Akiva is arguably the greatest of the Tannaim. The Gemara in Pesachim tells us of his ignoble past. He said, "When I was an Am Haaretz if someone would give me a Torah scholar I would bite him like a donkey, i.e. which breaks ones." The Chafetz Chaim teaches that one may not even utter Loshon Hora about himself, so why did the man who was held in such esteem by Moshe Rabbeinu share this information, and why did the Gemara choose to publicize it? The Heter to speak Loshon Hora is if there's a Toeles, a substantive benefit. In 1971 the Pesuaders had a hit called, "There's Thin Line Between Love and Hate." Rabbi Akiva was telling us that his hatred for Talmidei Chachamim was jealousy based, and that impelled him to reach the heights in Torah. Several weeks ago there was a minor stir in Israel. A secular journalist expressed his disgust for the kiosks in which Chabad place Tefilin on irreligious Jews, "If I was able, I'd strangle those boys with their own Tefilin straps." You can guess the online responses but one female took a different tack, "The fact that he could say something so vile, is clear proof that he has a deep-seated desire to put on Tefilin and return to Hashem." I think she was spot on. Now it's no easy task to harness that antipathy and turn it into love, but it can be done. Hashem, understood this and so He wanted to witness the goings on, because He knew that ultimately there would be an Aliyah despite the present Yeridah. "But there's another reason that Hashem showed up to watch this train wreck. Let me introduce it with a story. Moshe(not his real name) is one of my best friends. Some years back he called me up because he was very upset. He had a doctor's appointment and while sitting in the waiting room he heard the doctor in his office talking to someone on the phone, "Oh no. I just looked at my book. That Moshe guy is coming today. I can't stand his visits. He never stops talking. It kills my day." Moshe thought that the doctor was also his buddy so this came as a total shock and he just walked out never to return. So let's imagine that Korach had been two-faced, outwardly demonstrating obeisance to Moshe Rabbeinu but inwardly seething. That hatred would manifest itself subtly. Speaking to members of Shevet Reuvein he'd say, "Boy you guys must be angry. That Moshe is so busy giving out all the best perks to his family members but what about Yaakov's first born?" Korach was brilliant, and he had the gift of gab. When the Jews stood at Sinai they were united, Keish Echad, Blev Echad. But an essential element of that unity was the complete trust that Moshe was G-d's chosen, faithful emissary. Such murmurings, therefore, could not be countenanced. As President Lincoln said, "A nation divided against itself can't stand." We see then, that Korach's uprising, albeit quite unfortunate, ultimately was beneficial as it brought the issues out in the open, and proved conclusively that Moshe was absolutely unimpeachable.

But this leads to a question, "If their tussle was advantageous why did Yaakov want no part of it? Quite often polls are taken regarding Jewish practices, 73 percent have a Seder 42 percent fast on Yom Kippur etc. Interestingly, there's one Mitzvah that's universal, Kibud Av Vaem. As the Intruders sang in 1973, "I'll Always Love My Mama" she's my favorite girl, I'll always love my mama she brought me in this world." (Okay they have Kibud Am) I know someone whose father passed away about ten years ago. Totally nonobservant but he came to shul and announced that he'd never miss a Kaddish. A few months later his mother died (they were both elderly) so he had to say Kaddish for 15 months altogether. And he did it, morning and afternoon. Not a small thing. A few weeks ago a patient struck up a conversation. He knew someone who died leaving over more than a billion dollars in Manhattan real estate. The gent told me that the estate still hasn't been settled some 23 years after his death, because the kids are locked in battle mode egged on by their lawyers. Let's assume he left over three children. That billion today is probably worth at least ten. So why can't they settle it amicably? Of course, it's the Yetzer hora, but there are strategies to deal with him. The Gemara singles out one of Rabbi Akiva's Middos for praise, "He was Maavir Al Middosov." What does that mean? He wouldn't protest if someone was sitting in his seat in the Bes Medrash, and if someone quoted one of his Chiddushim as his own he wouldn't say anything. Rabbi Akiva understood the importance of Shalom and he exemplified it. So when Yaakov foresaw his children doing battle, even if they could justify their intentions, it cut him to the core. Many years ago my wife and I went into a fabric store that was going out of business. We got great stuff for about half price and when we brought the merchandise up front, the owner, a Sefardi, opened his heart to us, "My father came to America from Chalab (Aleppo) in 1917. He didn't have a shirt on his back and he didn't speak a word of English. But he worked hard and was honest and he became successful. And he gave "Sedakaah." I have a brother and a sister. We're in court over his estate but they're liars. We've been fighting for years." I'm sure these are everyday experiences and the root is that people don't understand what's important in life. I have no doubt that the kids give charity in their fathers' names but what Yaakov Avinu was teaching us with his actions is that what means the most to him is that his children are at peace with each other. I'd like to end with some Mussar from Sir Paul and then one of my own. "Life is very short and there's no time for fussing and fighting my friend."