

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Korah Part I

### 1. Introductory Remarks

The Torah does not date the insurrections described in our *parasha* nor comment on where they occurred. We will cite two leading schools of thought on these matters.

These events occurred in the Sinai Desert when the firstborn were exchanged for the Levites, the latter being designated [for sanctuary service]. Israelites thought Moses acted at his own discretion, giving prominence to his brother, his close relatives from Kohath and his fellow Levites. The Levites conspired against Moses because they were subordinated to Aaron and his sons; Dathan and Abiram conspired because he removed dynastic firstborn rights from their tribe of Reuben [descendants of Jacob's firstborn] and gave them to Joseph. Perhaps they suspected Moses of favoring his disciple Joshua, who derived from Joseph's son Ephraim. Korah was himself a firstborn as Scripture indicates ("And Izhar's sons were Korah" etc. [Exod. 6:21]). Reuben's designated encamping position was south of the Tabernacle (Num. 2:10) as was Korah's, who was part of the Kohath Levite branch (Num. 3:29) [thus their connection]. The 250 tribal chieftains were firstborns who previously had performed the offerings and that is why they took fire pans.

Ibn Ezra, *Introduction to Parashat Korah* □

By assuming these episodes occurred at Sinai after the Levites were exchanged for the firstborn and before the nation departed from there (on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year), Ibn Ezra links them to their presumed specific causes. After the dedication of the Tabernacle (in the first month of the second year), Aaron and his sons stood out as the sole priests and occupants of the highest positions. Upon the exchange of the Levites for the firstborn, the former were allocated the positions of sanctuary servitors while the latter were passed over for any

position of status. The census undertaking (early in the second month) put into effect the designation of Joseph's two sons as two tribes, appropriating a firstborn privilege. Before departing from Sinai the points of contention were all fresh.

The Ramban disagrees with Ibn Ezra, maintaining that it is far-fetched to assume that insurrections took place at Sinai, the location of the lawgiving. While there, the nation's situation was positive, Moses' leadership was unsullied and unchallenged, and the nation was expected to enter the promised land in the very near future. Subsequent to departing Sinai, however, with the backsliding and retribution, the situation changed. Especially following the episode of the scouts that brought G-d's decree that the nation will not enter the land until after forty years and the death of the adult generation, enormous frustration and depression had undoubtedly set in. It was with such a bitter backdrop that the rebellions could have taken place.

Although grievances generally do remain suppressed during successful and optimistic times, individuals fired by ambition and burning with jealousy (see Ps. 106:16-18) are ever restless. It is not unusual for such malcontents to foment rebellion even during periods of general well-being, to redress what they see as bias and personal insults and promote their personal goals. Nevertheless, the Ramban's basic point is surely well-taken. And, as he consistently stresses, the Torah's textual sequence should always be assumed to be chronological except where clearly indicated otherwise, and there is no such indication here. Furthermore, Dathan and Abiram's words, "to cause us to die in the wilderness" (Num. 16:13), seem to indicate a post-decree setting. Accordingly, these events should be assumed to be recorded in chronological order and to have occurred subsequent to the scout episode. Perhaps they were undated because they are the only events recorded in the lengthy time period subsequent to the decree and its aftermath before the fortieth year narrative

resumption. They reflect on the doomed generation's disposition during that span of time.

The Ramban also disagreed with Ibn Ezra regarding the basis of some of the grievances. He felt Dathan and Abiram could not have claimed tribal firstborn rights since by their time, generations after Jacob's selection of Joseph for firstborn rights, that issue must have been a closed case. Korah's complaints may have partly stemmed – as the Midrash assumes – from jealousy of his cousin Elizaphan the son of Uzziel, who was appointed chieftain of the Kohath branch of the Levites (Num. 3:30), although Uzziel was the youngest brother of Korah's father Izhar (Exod. 6:18). Moses' uncontested remark to Korah, "And do you (plural) seek the priesthood as well?" (Num. 16:11), indicates that at least one group of dissenters also sought the higher sanctuary rank.

We do not know if Korah based himself on his being a firstborn – a consideration never mentioned in the text – or was officially promoting an egalitarian-type program with כָּל הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קֳדָשִׁים ("for the whole assembly, they are all holy" [v. 3]). We also do not know if the Reubenites sought a more eminent rank as descendants of Jacob's firstborn – and the history of dethroned royalty does not indicate that the passage of time is a decisive argument against such a supposition. There is no indication in the text implying that the 250 chieftains were firstborn; chieftains (גִּבּוֹרִים, literally: "uplifted ones") may have been as we usually think of them, the preeminent class of all the tribes. But it is clear that there were at least two, probably three, distinct insurgencies being alluded to in our *parasha*. Each dissident group promoted its own agenda against Moses and his prophecy, with Korah being the link between them. One group sought revision of the sanctuary structure and was focused on the positions of Aaron and his sons, another was essentially political, directed against Moses' leadership, while a third may simply have been seeking more prominence for themselves.

These insurrections are described in their concise essence. They involve political, social and perhaps even religious leaders (or would-be leaders), suffused with envy and unrestrained aspirations for honor and power, contending with the prophetic tradition that G-d transmitted to the Israelites through Moses. Overcome by these powerful ambitions and personal characteristics, they were unable to acknowledge the

truth and appreciate the worthiness that lies at the foundation of their heritage and history. They quickly "forget" the past and misinterpret all relevant details. They overlook the national redemption from slavery and the lawgiving as well as the many cases of G-d's interventions on their behalf brought about through Moses, His faithful servant.

## 2. Korah's Challenge

The *parasha's* first verse (Num. 16:1) identifies the rebel leaders. It begins with a transitive verb in the singular וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח ("Korah took") followed by the names of several of Korah's associates, "and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab and On the son of Peleth," but it does not contain the expected direct object of the verb. As far as beginning a statement with a singular verb when multiple individuals are to be mentioned, it probably indicates that Korah was the initiator or the ringleader and that the others were partners in insurrection.\* (As On son of Peleth is not mentioned again, he has traditionally been understood to have reversed himself and to have separated from the rebels.) But where is the object of the verb? The "Korah took" clause seems to flow into the succeeding verbal clause at the beginning of verse 2, וַיִּקְמוּ לְפָנָי מִשָּׁה, ("and they rose against Moses"). The Ramban explains the וַיִּקַּח, in an extension of its basic meaning of "took," as describing one who bestirs himself to begin something. According to him, the phrases should be translated: "And Korah...betook himself as also did Dathan and Abiram...and rose against Moses."

The 250 chieftains are only mentioned after the others "rose against Moses," indicating that they joined in afterwards. Once complaints give rise to a rebellious movement, other malcontents join in. It should be recalled that the chieftains were not given a leadership role in the Tabernacle program; even their dedicatory gifts, generous as they were, were more in the nature of "accepted" than prescribed (Num. 7; see our *Parashat Naso* studies). They may have resented finding themselves relegated to a secondary status in the new spiritual hierarchy. Challenges were presented from all sides.

Verse 3 provides a fresh start in the narrative: "And they gathered (וַיִּקְהָלוּ) upon Moses and Aaron" and presented their arguments. This clarifies that the previous sentence, "And they rose against Moses," is

to be understood as a closing of a general introductory statement that covered the various insurgencies. Thus, Dathan and Abiram were present in verse 2 but not in verse 3; their grievances will be articulated separately in verses 12-14. The chapter is a conflation of different insurgency episodes with the scene shifting back and forth.

The first group's arguments were ostensibly based on religious considerations. They said: You [Moses and Aaron] have arrogated too much privilege to yourselves for no proper reason, for the whole assembly is holy and Hashem's presence is suffused throughout, so why do you elevate yourselves over Hashem's congregation? The implication of their statement is that in such a distinguished population leadership roles should be broader-based, perhaps even decentralized. Although the context makes clear that Korah is the spokesman for the group, at no point is he personally quoted; he speaks this one time as part of the group. Is the Torah thus describing an aspect of his *modus operandi*?

Viewing holiness as a status already achieved by the whole assembly, an innate state-of-being and not as an ongoing process that requires continuous vigilance, reveals their argument to be religiously superficial. True, Israel is to be a holy nation but that designation connotes the intent and desire to be ever conscious of G-d's presence and prepared to serve Him in all ways. It does not negate the need for the people to have sanctuary officiants and religious leaders to assist, inspire and teach. The priests are called holy by dint of their involvement in sanctuary service.

Although the dissidents declare their commitment to Hashem, the G-d of Israel – a point Moses does not dispute – they reject Moses' claim that his source for selecting the priestly leaders and for not providing greater leadership roles for Levites and chieftains was prophecy from G-d. In arguing for more status for themselves at the expense of Moses and Aaron they were contravening G-d's revelation to His prophet.

The Torah seems to be transmitting several lessons here. Theoretical belief in an active, involved G-d is inadequate to ward off the pernicious rationalizations that may be concocted in envy and ambition. Instructions transmitted through prophecy are not so easily authenticated to those who choose to be

skeptics. In the absence of a sincere desire to "see the truth" they are not readily demonstrated.

Moses immediately responded to the challenge concerning the religious leadership of Aaron by proposing an incense test at the sanctuary the next morning. (The test could not be carried out the same day for the men require time to prepare themselves for doing service at the sanctuary.) Korah, the men of his assembly and Aaron should all bring incense in their fire pans and G-d would select whom He chooses to minister unto Him. Some have suggested that the precedent of the Nadab and Abihu tragedy associated with an incense offering (Lev. 10) may have prompted Moses to suggest such a test; Aaron's incense offering would be the mandated service for that morning, while all the others would be "strange fire," a major breach of sanctuary ritual. However, such an explanation appears too theurgic.

One wonders that Moses suggested a procedure that might lead to so many deaths. Perhaps he did not expect the rebels to accept the test, assuming they would fear the dire consequences for unauthorized incense offering. Or he may have felt the challenge was so grave, having the potential to undermine the whole structure of national leadership, that the most serious response was required.

In any event, Moses immediately followed up on his suggestion with a private talk with Korah and some of his Levite associates in which he attempted to dissuade them from their course of action. He emphasized their special status as Levites (Num. 16:8-11), but to no avail.\*\*

The reader is surprised that all 250 chieftains accepted the test, considering the disastrous precedent of unauthorized sanctuary offerings as well as the wondrous deeds wrought by G-d during Moses' tenure as leader. It points to the spiritually debilitating effects that excessive ambition and covetousness may bring about. The forward thrust of maintaining an insurrection, the excitement of the challenge and the momentum of social pressure undoubtedly beclouded the rebels' thinking and moved them along their path to destruction. Indeed, the text indicates that Korah was actively engaged in gathering the public to be present at the test at the Tent of Meeting, adding to the pressure (v. 19). Ultimately, the rebels must have convinced themselves that they were in the right and

that G-d would actually respond to them or at least not respond to Aaron; such is the nature of self-delusion. This episode highlights a major lesson: Being convinced of the rightness of one's cause even while standing in the presence of G-d and offering Him incense is not incompatible with major transgression.

### 3. Dathan and Abiram

The rebellion of Dathan and Abiram is another story. They were only peripherally linked with the first group and Moses had to address them separately. Upon concluding his talk with Korah and his group, he sent for them but they refused to come forth. They denied his right to summon them and sent back a message articulating their position. They totally repudiated Moses' leadership and his prophecy, and had a revisionist interpretation of recent history. They accused Moses of having caused a most grievous deterioration in the nation's situation: He took them out of a land flowing with milk and honey and brought them into the wilderness where they were destined to die. And on top of that, "you desire to continue lording it over us?" (v. 13).

They concluded their message with the taunt: "Even if you gouge out those men's [our] eyes we will not ascend" (v. 14). In the ancient Near East eye gouging was a penalty meted out to rebels against political authority as exemplified in the case of King Zedekiah (2 Kings 25:7). A Hittite document seems to indicate that eye gouging was applicable even in the event that a party summoned by the authority did not appear as requested, a situation comparable to what was then transpiring with Dathan and Abiram. Surely they were aware and exploited the knowledge that Moses would not resort to such a practice.

These two rebels were in total defiance. Their argument lacked any religious backdrop and they made no reference to G-d, sanctuary or holiness. Aaron's status did not interest them because they were not committed to the G-d of Israel. They were together with Korah in verses 1 and 2 in a superficial manner only. Was it a desire not to be bound by revelation and the lawgiving that was driving them, perhaps an extreme case of egotism? The Torah makes the point that dispositions such as theirs can play tricks on one's memory and foster outrageous interpretations of reality.

### 4. Toward the Denouement

The three verses of Moses' interaction with Dathan and Abiram (vv. 12-14) are located in the midst of the Korah account in such a way that the opening portion of verse 15, which reports Moses' extreme distress at the insurrection, serves a dual purpose. Since it narrates Moses' prayer that G-d should not accept their offering it apparently refers to Korah and those who were planning to offer the incense, given that no offering is mentioned or implied in association with Dathan and Abiram. (Contrary to Ibn Ezra, it is implausible to assume they proffered one as it does not fit the context.) But the opening clause of verse 15 – "And Moses became very angry" – reads naturally as continuing the narrative of the immediately preceding verses concerning Dathan and Abiram; their refusal to talk and their repudiation of him seems to have gotten to Moses. Only as we read further do we realize that the scene had shifted back to Korah without a signal. This appears to be a literary device that reflects the conflation of accounts.

Moses prays that G-d should not accept their offering. He concludes with self-justification, that he did not act greedily or abuse his power: "Not a single donkey did I take from them" and "I did not harm even one of them" (v. 15b). Did he think that the rebels' offering would be accepted? Some have understood this prayer as his expression of frustration to G-d. Others have seen it as a tactic, an audible prayer articulated in the presence of some members of the congregation so that the details of his prayer should be overheard and spread about, reminding everybody of his exemplary conduct as leader. According to this, Moses was doing what he could to dissuade the people from harboring doubts about him, ameliorating the situation as much as possible (cf. S.D. Luzzato). But such an interpretation does not fit his character.

Additionally, such an audible prayer runs the risk of lending support to those in his audience who are open to the possibility that the rebels have legitimate grievances. Or, worse, it might be interpreted as of a kind with the pagan notion that regardless of merit, a ritual service performed according to proper protocol may magically be efficacious.

It appears more likely that when his performance was so vehemently criticized, Moses, the totally honest individual and the most humble of men (Num. 12:3),

experienced a moment of self-doubt. This time, however, he did not complain to G-d as on previous occasions but engaged in supplication, receiving the assurance that comes with the introspection of prayer.

While the 250 chieftains, Korah and Aaron were waiting with fire pans and incense at the Tent of Meeting, G-d communicated two messages to Moses (vv. 21, 24), the first also addressed to Aaron since he was involved. The first related to the Korah group and the second to Dathan and Abiram. In the first, He asked that Moses and Aaron separate from the assembly ('edah) so that He might destroy it at once. Considering that in verse 19 the word 'edah was employed in a broader sense, embracing the people who acceded to Korah's importuning and came to the Tent of Meeting to witness what was going on, the divine intention may have been referring to them in addition to the 250 chieftains. That would mean that merely acquiescing to Korah's request to be present at such a serious challenge to Moses' prophecy implies a degree of sympathy for the insurgents. It may indicate that the onlookers were entertaining the possibility that Korah had a point that Moses misrepresented his prophecy, a serious offense.

Despite the fact that Moses and Aaron were suspected of falsifying G-d's word, they nevertheless pray on behalf of the people: "When one man sins shall You be wrathful with the entire 'edah?" Some understand their supplication as having been made on behalf of all except for the "one man," Korah, but G-d did not grant it. He spared the 'edah that was persuaded by Korah to be present at the test but not the 250 chieftains (v. 35). Others explain the prayer of Moses and Aaron less literally. "When one man sins shall You be wrathful with the entire 'edah?" is a formulaic question that only is intended to cover the observers, who were not deeply involved but were persuaded by Korah. It should not be taken as Moses and Aaron requesting exoneration for the 250 men who were directly challenging Moses' prophecy.

G-d's second communication instructed Moses to warn the assembly to stay away from the "mishkan (tent) of Korah, Dathan and Abiram" (v. 24). Moses, followed by the elders, proceeded to that location to warn the assembly. G-d's mention of the *mishkan* of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, repeated in the narrative (v. 27), is a most unusual usage. The employment of

this term in the singular for a private domicile is a rare occurrence in the Bible, the word having been appropriated for the Tent of Meeting, while the usual term for one's home in the desert is *ohel* ("tent," as in v. 26). And how could the "*mishkan* of Korah, Dathan and Abiram," a single tent, be thought of as referring to the dwelling quarters of three families, especially families that belonged to different tribes? This exceptional term seems to indicate that Korah, who was hankering for sanctuary decentralization that might diminish Moses' authority and create new leadership roles, had set up a rival sanctuary district at his headquarters. The plural מִשְׁכַּן of verse 26, the standard term for dwelling tents, refers to the cluster of family tents that belonged to Dathan, Abiram and their followers, in contrast to the "*mishkan* of Korah, Dathan and Abiram."

It was obvious that the public required convincing of Moses' faithful ministry. He introduced the forthcoming divine intervention of the earth swallowing Dathan and Abiram by adducing it as proof that all his doings were mandated by G-d, not performed at his own discretion (vv. 28-30). Sure enough, the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them (vv. 31-33), while a fire burst forth "from Hashem" (that is, in the sanctuary) and consumed the 250 chieftains who were offering the incense (v. 35). We will discuss Korah's fate in the next study.

In Deuteronomy, Moses recalled the Dathan and Abiram episode (Deut. 11:6) without mentioning that of Korah.

## Endnotes

\* Similarly, the Torah states וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה ("Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses" [Num. 12:1]) where the feminine singular clearly reflects the fact that Miriam initiated the "talking." Accordingly, only she was stricken with leprosy.

\*\* The final words of Moses' talk in which he proposed the incense test – רַב לָכֶם בְּנֵי לֵוִי ("You have gone too far, sons of Levi" [v. 7]) – should not be taken as an indication that he was then already speaking only to Korah and his Levite associates. We learn from verses 16-17 that the incense challenge was proposed to the 250 men of Korah's assembly, chieftains of the nation. "You have gone too far, sons of Levi" was a concluding aside to Korah and his close circle, the ringleaders of the broad-based insurrection.