

“Korach’s attempted coup and the fallacies of his claims”

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In the episode relating to the attempted coup against the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Nu.16:1 -18:7), Korach chides Moses that, “the entire people are all equally holy and God is among them all, so why do you raise yourself above the entire assembly?” (16:3).

Korach was Moses’ first cousin, and, as such, he was a Levite, a member of the tribe from which the priests and ministers of the sanctuary hailed. But Korach was consumed with envy and was not satisfied with being just one of the ministers. He coveted the role of chief minister. And if he couldn’t occupy it by divine, or even popular, choice, he set out to seize it by force, planting the seeds of discontent among the masses and winning over other malcontents to his side.

So, he put about two ideas, both of which sounded valid enough and were passionate and populist enough to create support, but which, on closer examination, were patently absurd. The first was that, *Kol ha’eidah kulam kedoshim*, “the entire people are equally holy.” The absurdity of this notion may be measured by the fact that religiosity is determined by various and complex factors, such as heredity, environment, religious upbringing, or an inspirational mentor or role model. Complex, psychological or emotional factors may also motivate some individuals to pursue religion and a quest for piety; and even among those committed to the religious way of life, there are many different levels of piety and observance. It is absurd, therefore, to assert, as did Korach,

that the entire congregation was equally holy to the extent that no single individual had the unique qualities for election to the position of national or spiritual leadership.

Furthermore, the illogicality and egocentricity of Korach's argument may be demonstrated by his argument that, while Moses had no right to be a leader since everyone was equally holy, he, Korach, was, at the very same time, staging a coup to become the leader in place of Moses.

A third demonstration of Korach's deceptiveness lay in the wording of his denunciation of Moses: *umadu'a titnasu al kehal Hashem*, "Why do you elevate yourself above the entire assembly?" In truth, there wasn't a shred of evidence throughout the whole of Moses' career of his having put himself on a pedestal or adopted an authoritarian attitude. To the contrary: God Himself testifies that – *v'ha'ish mosheh anav me'od mikol ha'adam* – 'The man, Moses, was the humblest of all men (Nu. 12:3). It will be noted that the repetitive designation of him as 'the man' and 'of all men' clearly serves to reinforce the fact of his humility as 'a man among men,' whose life's goal was to serve, not to lead.

Hence, he is consistently depicted in the Torah's narrative as a self-effacing and sensitive man who declined God's initial instruction that he assume the role of leader and deliverer of Israel; a naturally indecisive man who, when confronted with a prominent Israelite prince who unashamedly cavorted with a Midianite woman in full view of Moses and a group of Israelites, was rooted to the spot, leaving it to the zealot Pinchas to

take the law into his own hands, dispatch the couple, and remove the burgeoning licentiousness from the camp (see Nu. 25:1-18).

Fully aware of his speech impediment, and on more than one occasion giving expression to his inadequacies (Nu. 11:21-22), he shunned the limelight and was more than happy for his brother Aaron to serve as the lead negotiator at every meeting with Pharaoh (see Ex. 3:11; 4:13-17). On other occasions, when the going got tough, he cried out to God, alleging that he could no longer bear his burden and that God should appoint a new leader (see Nu. 27:15-23). And when God tells Moses to appoint seventy elders to share the burden of leadership, He makes it clear to him that their new prophetic powers would be secured through a ‘siphoning off’ of some of those belonging to Moses (see Nu. 11:25).

His ready acceptance of other people’s spiritual powers even if they were acting in defiance of his own instructions was also exemplified by the episode of Eldad and Medad who prophesied while still in the camp rather than joining the rest of selected members of prophetic elders, as instructed. When Joshua, greatly affronted by that slight to his master, ran to tell him of what had occurred and appealed to him to restrain the two, his characteristically modest answer was, “Are you zealous on my account? Would that the entire people of God could be prophets, and that He would place His spirit on them!” (v. 29).

Finally, we have clear evidence of the Israelites’ lack of faith, which prompted them to believe the report of the ten spies and reject that of such men of integrity, wisdom, and holiness as Joshua and Calev, and which resulted in that entire generation being

prevented from entering the promised land. This was accompanied by an attempt by ‘all the people’ to assassinate Moses and Aaron by hurling stones at them (see Nu. 14:10). To this, we may add the testament of the Torah, that the Israelites murmured against God and defied Him on no less than ten occasions (v. 22),¹ all of which is sufficient to refute Korach’s core assertion that “the entire people are all equally holy and God is among them all.”

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That Korach was envious of Moses and Aaron’s – his first cousins’ – leadership is clear. As a Levite, it is even clearer that his envy of Aaron’s position as High Priest involved a more realistic attainment. That Moses recognised that fact may explain why, when attempting to rebut Korach’s leadership challenge, he asks him specifically why he had singled out Aaron as having usurped the position of High Priest (Nu. 15:11).

In the modern period, Korach’s state of mind might be attributed to the male mid-life crisis. In the year 2000, Professor George Lotter coined the term “Cyberphobia” to describe

‘a middle-aged, all-consuming jealousy of an aggressive, successful young man whose success may induce a mid-life crisis in older colleagues when a younger ‘star’ threatens to upset the established hierarchy. The whiz-kid, with all the advantages of having testosterone surging around his virile body, further undermines the

older man's confidence by understanding how computers work and the intricacies of the internet.'²

With this in mind, we may suggest that Korach was suffering from the biblical equivalent of today's Cyberphobic mid-life crisis, which expressed itself in that same "all-consuming jealousy." In his case, however, it was not jealousy of the young, but of the old – those who had attained to rank, power, and influence, and who were revered and accepted by most of the people as bearers of the spirit of God and mediators of His will.

Korach saw the years passing; and, given that the Levites had to retire at the youthful age of fifty from most of their privileged duties at the Sanctuary,³ he must have begun to compare his lack of achievement, authority, and status with that of the ageing Moses and Aaron, and, especially regarding the latter, with the affection in which he was held by the entire nation. While Korach had been passed over for any high office or mission, he saw Moses vindicated every time he was challenged, whether it was by the worshippers of the Golden Calf, the two sons of Aaron who took the strange fire, the returning false spies, or in the face of the criticisms of him behind his back by Miriam and Aaron for his having married a Cushite woman (see Nu. 12:1-16).

The thought that Moses, notwithstanding all his lack of charisma, oratory and self-confidence, was nevertheless invested with all the authority, influence, and divine vindication, as well as a unique place in the history of Israel, while he would die unrecognised and forgotten, was more than he could bear. And the fact that Moses

received his call to service and greatness at the advanced age of eighty (see Ex. 7:7) was a pill too bitter for Korach to swallow. And that frustration engendered within him an unbridled jealousy and a determination to bring Moses down from his lofty pedestal and usurp his position.

There can be nothing sadder than a person who has lost his or her self-esteem. It is doubly so if one measures one's worth as a person by whether one succeeds in gaining a place on the board, or, conversely, if one regards oneself as a failure if one does not measure up to the greater or younger talents that suddenly appear on the scene.

Korach got it so wrong. We are not all equal in holiness, any more than in physical beauty, wealth, personality, creativity, or talent. Being human means being limited, and realising that those who are more talented or wealthy are not necessarily more content with their lives or in their relationships; that those who are more beautiful do not, for that reason, necessarily have more pleasure or fulfilment and less stress in life; and that those who become the financial high fliers often find that there is a price to pay in terms of their personal and family lives. The message of Korach's rebellion is that contentment in life should be measured not in terms of how we compare with others, but to what extent we are reaching our potential, giving of our best, and fulfilling our God-given part.

The US President Woodrow Wilson once said that "every man who takes office in Washington either grows or swells, and when I give a man an office, I watch him

carefully to see whether he is swelling or growing.” The problem of Korach was that he wished to swell without growing. And people who do that inevitably end up bursting.

NOTES

1. The ten occasions on which the Israelites murmured against and defied God are enumerated and discussed in Tal. *Arachin* 15a-b.
2. See “Virile no more?” *The Times* 2, (Wed., June 28th 2000, p.3); “How to spot a cyberphobe”: www.BBC Homepage/World Service/Education. Tues., 27th June 2000. 17:24.

