

6-20-26 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene - *Korach* (Bald)
Torah Portion: Numbers 16:1-18:32
Haftarah: 1 Sam. 11:14-12:22,
Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Gal 5:16-26

Accountability Works Both Ways

Central question of this message: Sometimes a challenge to a spiritual leader is appropriate, but how can we do it correctly?

This week we are in parasha *Korach*. It is the fourth parasha in the fourth book of Moses, called *Bemidbar* (“in the wilderness”). It takes its name from the second word in the English, and the second word in the original Hebrew text.

Num 16:1-2

Now **Korah** the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath,¹ the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action, 2 and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.

¹ Korach was a Cohen, at the highest levels of Levitical leadership and responsibility.

16:1
 וַיִּקַּח לָרַח בֶּן־קָהַת בֶּן־יִזְחָר בֶּן־קֹרַח מֵעַתָּה
 Levi, the son of Kohath, the son of Izhar, the son of Korah, men: Now took
3878 1121 6955 1121 3324 1121 7141 9999 3947

וַדָּתָן וַאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי־פֶלֶת בֶּן־וַאֲוֹן אֱלִיָּאב
 sons of Peleth, the son of and On, Eliab, the sons of and Abiram, and Dathan
1121 6431 1121 203 446 1121 48 1885

רְאוּבֵן:
 Reuben,
7205

2
 וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאִנְשֵׁי מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים
 And they rose up before Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, fifty
6965 6440 4872 582 1121 3478 2572

וּמֵאֲתָיִם נְשִׂיָּאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי־
 two hundred and princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of
3967 5387 5712 7148 4150 582

שֵׁם:
 renown:
8034

I think it is very fitting that we should study this parasha during Humility Month, because it shows us clearly how G-d deals with rebellion and pride among His people.

Also, beginning the Shabbes following Pesach until the Shabbes before Rosh Hashanah, it is the tradition of some to study a chapter of the Talmud's "Ethics of the Fathers." It is also known by the common title, Perkei Avot. This week, the prescribed study would be in chapter 4. That chapter contains some very nice commentary which deals directly with the subject I will speak on today.

Today's parasha is called *Korach*, for the person who bore that name in Israel. Korach means "bald". We have already discussed the customs of the Egyptians, how they would cut off all their hair in an effort to not only be acceptable to their gods, but also to be at the highest levels of cleanliness. They considered a "hairy person" to be of the lowest class. You can imagine how they viewed Jews, who had full heads of hair, and beards. Does the meaning of Korach's name maybe offer us a hint that he maybe already possessed a rebellious spirit?

By the time that this story unfolds in our national history, G-d has already told the People that He didn't wish for them to follow this Egyptian custom. Much of what we find in Leviticus is designed to distance us from the pagan customs of Egypt, and those of the other pagan nations around us.

To understand what is going on in today's parasha, let's back up a little. In Numbers 11, Moses takes the 70 elders (later to become the Sanhedrin) with him to the *Mishkan*. The Spirit fell upon them there, and they prophesied. But recall that two men, Eldad and Medad, who were also ordered to come up, had remained in the camp.

Num 11:26-30

26 But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. 27 So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, answered and said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" 30 Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.

See how Moses in his sweet humility seems to elevate the entire people in his statement? But rather than viewing that statement illustrating the humility of Moses, some prideful ones saw it as a statement elevating all the people, and an opportunity to take power.

To continue our background, there had already been considerable grumbling in the camp, associated with the report of the spies. You remember the “we were like grasshoppers to them” report.

Num 14:1-4

14 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! **Or would that we had died in this wilderness!** 3 "And why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

As an aside – G-d seems to have then said in response, “Your terms are acceptable. You *will* die in this wilderness.”

So, it seems that during this time of internal unrest among the People, Korach apparently saw an opportunity to lead an insurrection and seize power from Aaron and Moses.

What did Korach *not do*? He *did not* go in humility to either Moses or Aaron to have a private discussion with them. Had he done so, he might have preserved his own life, and the lives of at least 250 leaders of Israel. But he chose another path – that of pride, contention and division.

Num 16:1-3

Now Korah the son of Izhar, the **son of Kohath**, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action, 2 and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, **two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.** 3 **And they assembled together against Moses and Aaron**, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"

Korach wasn't just recruiting a lynch-mob, a rabble. He lobbied and convinced 250 leaders in the congregation to come support him.

A Sage's book known as Or HaChaim² explains why he believed Korach undertook his rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

רב לכם כי כל העדה כלם קדושים, "a great deal for you, for the whole community is holy." They meant that Moses and Aaron had arrogated too much authority to themselves. In the event that Moses and Aaron would ask wherein precisely they had arrogated to themselves too much authority, Korach and company said that in view of the fact that the entire community was holy having experienced direct communication from G'd something not granted to any other nation, plus the fact that G'd remained within its midst, Moses and Aaron had placed themselves above such a holy nation. By saying ובתוכם השם, "and G'd is in their midst," they hinted that the presence of G'd was due to the people and not to the merit of Moses and Aaron.

Can you see how Korach's heart and his actions were rooted in pride and not in humility?

² Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar, also known as Or HaChaim ("Light of the Life") which is the name of the compilation of his weekly Torah teachings, lived from 1696 to 1743 in Morocco, then Israel. He is considered to be one of the most highly regarded Rabbis and Torah commentators.

Our Sages have recorded a supposed event in which Korach issued a challenge to Moses, much as did the religious men of a later generation would do to Yeshua.

The Midrash Tanhuma, gives us a commentary on Korach's scheme. It says that Korach gathered the supporters, and then asked Moses a difficult halakhic question.

As the story goes, Korach put upon each of the men of the Sanhedrin cloaks made entirely of blue wool.³ They came and stood before Moses and asked him, "Does a cloak made *entirely* of blue wool require tzitzit, or is it exempt?"⁴

Moses is said to have replied, "It does require [tzitzit]." They began laughing at him, trying to challenge him with what seemed to be an opposite ruling. "Is it possible that a cloak of another material, one string of blue wool exempts it [from the obligation of techeles], and this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, should not exempt itself?" (Tanhuma, Korach 4; Rashi to Num. 16:1)

³ You will remember the commandment regarding the tzitzit from last week's parashah, and the requirement that it contain a *techeles* – the cord of special blue. This garment was entirely constructed of that special blue.

⁴ One single thread of techeles on the corners of a 4-cornered garment renders it kosher.

See the next logical step in Korach's argument? He is constructing an analogy. The cloak represents the nation. Is there a need for leadership in "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation"?

Korach's argument is that everyone in Israel is like a priest. Everyone is holy. Everyone in Israel is equal in dignity before God. So, no need for Aaron or Moses. An entirely-blue garment needs no *techeles*.

Moses' response that even that garment made entirely of the special blue also requires *tzitzit*, refutes the argument of Korach.

Do you see where Korach made his error? It is found in his words found at Num 16:3

"You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so **why do you exalt yourselves** above the assembly of the Lord?"

Korach, and all those who followed him misunderstood a fundamental truth of spiritual leadership.

When men choose leaders, that leadership is flawed – even with the best leaders. When G-d chooses leaders, that leadership is best, even with flawed people, if that leader submits to G-d, who guides the leader's heart. Moses was submissive to G-d in the highest way.

This is why G-d chooses humble people for leaders. For a humble heart will follow Him, and not seek after power and material things.

We as flawed humans seem to choose haughty people for leaders. People who have sought after great power and influence. Such leaders don't turn us toward G-d in humility. They turn us toward themselves in pride. That is true in Israel, and in the nations.

In Jewish understanding, leadership is not about popularity, nor subject to a vote. In tractate Ketubot 105b we read that R. Abaye said,

"If a scholar is loved by the people of his town, it is not because he is gifted, but because he fails to rebuke them in matters of heaven"

Moses and Aaron were not universally loved. Two hundred fifty influential men in the congregation (including the Sanhedrin) chose to follow Korach in this confrontation. How did that turn out?

Num 16:31-35

31 Then it came about as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground that was under them split open; 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah, with their possessions. 33 So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. 34 And all Israel who were around them fled at their outcry, for they said, "The earth may swallow us up!" 35 Fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.

What was going on in the camp that gave Korach the opportunity to do what he did? In Hebrew we call it *tilunu* – murmuring.

The root of murmuring is pride, not humility in the Spirit. Paul faced this problem in his time, and wrote about it to the Galatians.

Gal 5:16-26

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the [death penalty of the] Law. 19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, **enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,** 21 **envying,** drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we

live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26 **Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.**

Paul's letter to the Corinthian congregation was a midrash upon this series of parashiot, and how G-d kept judging prideful sin.

1 Cor 10:8-12

8 Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. 9 Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. 10 Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.⁵ 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

Did Korach have a problem with Moses and Aaron? Yes. That wasn't a sin. What he did about that issue was a sin.

⁵ Paul is telling them to study Torah for it has important lessons for them at their time in history.

So, how do we, in this present age, deal with problems we have with one another – especially with spiritual leaders? How do we stand and not fall?

First of all, let's realize several important truths.

First: Leaders are people. They have flaws. My heart's desire is to bless you. But you hang out around me long enough and I will disappoint you. I won't want to do that, nor intend to do that, but it will happen. Please deal with it properly when it happens.

Secondly: Leaders are under authority. No believer is without authority over him. I am under authority. I have a covering over me.

Thirdly: On an issue important to the congregation, you *may* hear from G-d... but long before then, your leaders will have *already* heard from G-d on that matter.

The Spirit deals with the leaders first. Only if your leaders do not listen to the Spirit should you consider coming to them humbly to make your concerns known.

For purposes of this teaching, if you have an issue with your leadership, and after an appropriate waiting period you don't see a turn of heart, what are you to do? Here is the practical procedure:

First (assuming the matter is one of sin), determine if the issue is one of "the child is in the street" urgency or not.

If not, spend some time in prayer, and in the Word.

Exercise forgiveness. This keeps an offense from eating you like a cancer. You can grant forgiveness without ignoring the issue. But if you don't grant forgiveness, in almost every case you will become part of the problem. Once forgiveness is granted, love can come bubbling back to the surface. And love does a far better job in conversations regarding sin.

Get the log out of your own eye. Be sure your heart is pure and you are not beset by sin in this process.

Once you can approach the other person with tears in your eyes – not for your offense, but for his failure – then you might be ready to go.

Recognize that you don't have the full story, and there is something that the leadership knows that you do not know. Complete knowledge is essential to proper judgment.⁶ Lacking only a few important facts in the analysis can lead any of us to a very opposite conclusion from what is required to execute true justice.

Be sure that you are being called to speak. If a leader is really falling, it is likely that more than one person can see it. Know that the Spirit will send the right person to him. That might be you, and it might not be you. The Spirit will guide you in this.

If after prayer you believe that you are the one being sent, begin by following Mat 18. Go first in person, privately, and speak your heart. Begin a conversation with an open and humble heart. Here is where you might get more facts that make all the difference in your preliminary conclusion.

If after this conversation you believe that the issue remains unresolved, take a couple of other witnesses (of the same behavior or same event) to the next private meeting. Those witnesses then need to also make a confrontation, just as you previously did. By the testimony of two or three witnesses, every fact is established.

⁶ Deut 17:4

Know that in our congregation we will not accept an accusation against an Elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. We follow the instructions found in Scripture.

1 Tim 5:19

19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

What if you are the only witness to the behavior or the event? Then you are still to go forward to the Elder one-on-one and have the conversation. If that does not resolve your issue, then the matter is finished.

But there is the good news. If your leader is truly humble, you will never need to gather witnesses. The first conversation will resolve the matter, or you will be released by the Spirit because you did what you should have done. Then allow G-d to deal with the matter. Trust me... He will.

The point of all this is unity.⁷ Satan flourishes in an atmosphere of disunity and strife. He will find ways to pit us against one another in ways that will amaze you and me. If we recognize his efforts to divide us, then we will be strong to oppose him.

Rabbi Bachaye said that Korach aspired to a lofty position for which he was unfit. Therefore, he was punished by being swallowed up by the ground and sent down to the lowest level of Gehinnom.

It is said that Moses considered himself to be nothing more than dust. So, for the L-rd to punish Korach for his haughtiness, and place him below Moses, Korach was brought lower than the dust.

I have told you that it is customary for us to read from the Ethics of the Fathers during these days. In Chapter 4⁸ – this week’s chapter – we find this good advice to spiritual leaders:

Rabbi Eliezer the son of Shamua would say: The dignity of your student [congregation member] should be as precious to you as your own; the dignity of your colleague [fellow leader], as your awe of your master;

⁷ Eph 4:1-3

⁸ Chapter 4 at reading number 12.

and your awe of your master [your covering Rabbi] as
your awe of Heaven [G-d Himself].

We are all under authority, and many of us are also in authority. Each one of us fits into a hierarchy. We should hold our leaders in the highest regard. So, we are to give honor and dignity not only to those under us, but to those over us, as if we are doing so unto G-d.

Also found in Wisdom of the Fathers Chapter 4 are the sayings of another one of our Sages, Ben Zoma, who gave good guidance to all of us regarding how we should live in a proper condition of humility. He said:

Who is wise? He who learns from every man, as it is said: “From all who taught me have I gained understanding” (Psalms 119:99).

Who is mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination, as it is said: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot, as it is said: “You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper” (Psalms 128:2) “You shall be happy” in this world, “and you shall prosper” in the world to come.

Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings as it is said: “For I honor those that honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored” (I Samuel 2:30).

Let us all strive to keep the prideful spirit of Korach that is within all of us locked up in the depths of the earth, so that we can operate as Moses did – as a humble servant to all.

That way we can operate together in the strength that comes from the unity of the Saints in the bond of peace.