

פרשת קרח

OVERVIEW

Korach, Dathan and Abiram hatch a plot against Moshe whom they accuse of trying to assume too much power. They claim to have the majority of the people behind them in their belief that they would be better suited to take over the leadership. It is G-d Himself who exercises the divine judgment in the sight of the stunned people. The earth "opens its mouth" and swallows Korach and his men together with all their possessions.

The people blame Moshe for the tragic events, "you have caused the deaths of the people of G-d". Then a sudden wave of deaths occurs among the people and only due to Moshe's placing himself between the dead and the living the pestilence is stayed. 14,700 people perish.

Upon divine order every tribal prince had to place a rod in the Tent of the Meeting. The very next day one rod was covered with blossoms - it was the rod of Aharon of the tribe of Levi. This was the sign of G-d's choice of the Levites as the servants of the people. Their functions are outlined in detail towards the end of our Sidrah.

COMMENTARY

The Revolt

A period of suffering and deprivation reveals the fiber of a nation far more than a time of prosperity and easy living. The Korach episode represents a decisive moment in the history of the Jewish people whose very future was at stake.

Korach's complaint against Moshe seems to be based on justifiable grounds: nothing is more logical than allowing the people to participate in governing their country and

preventing their leadership from following in the footsteps of tyrants whose criminal misdeeds are recorded in the annals of history. Korach appears as the champion of "democratic" aspirations that often become the cause of struggle and civil wars in the history of nations. But a closer look at the text shows a different picture: "Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of G-d - everyone of them is holy and G-d is among them". These words reveal the true purpose of the rebels. They know that the people were certainly not composed of holy men. They appealed to the primitive instinct of the masses in order to conceal their real motives: envy and jealousy. Being a close relative of Moshe and Aharon, Korach felt that he was entitled to the same privileges as the two brothers. In order to downgrade Moshe's prestige in the eyes of the people, he casts doubts as to the divine origin of Moshe's mission. It is this despicable approach that resulted in a punishment involving nature's upheaval on G-d's command.

A closer look at the background of the rebellion is revealing. The three ringleaders, Korach, Dathan and Abiram came from the tribes of Levi and Reuben. Both had old claims to leadership: Reuben as the first-born, Levi as the priestly tribe. Neither was chosen by G-d to be leaders. This was revealed to Jacob (see the blessings at the end of Bereshit) and resulted in a fatal residue of bitter recriminations that ultimately erupted in a joint revolt. There also was an old family feud between Korach and Moshe. The resentment was further stirred by the physical proximity of the two tribes (their camps were located next to each other). It was almost predictable that the brother-tribes would join forces in the attempt to gain power. Curiously though, there was no greater contrast imaginable between two brothers. Levi represents pure spirituality while Reuben embodies

uncontrolled passion and blind force. The conflict with Moshe united them. The sages point to the evil created by hatred, especially groundless hate that had caused countless numbers of victims throughout history.

Korach uses other means to win the people's support. The Midrash tells us of the 250 men who came before Moshe, clad in garments of sky-blue wool. Korach inquires of Moshe whether these garments would require Tzitzit. Receiving an affirmative answer, Korach exclaims "If the presence of one sky-blue fringe fulfills the requirement for Tzitzit on a white cloth, why should a garment that is completely sky-blue require Tzitzit"? Another question concerned the need for a Mezuzza on the door of a house that contains Torah scrolls. Again receiving an affirmative answer, Korach calls out "How could a few verses from the Torah satisfy the law of Mezuzza when the presence of the entire Torah is not sufficient?". This Midrash points up the radical difference between Moshe's and Korach's reaction to the divine Word. Korach attempts to subject the Torah laws to the test of his dialectics. Moshe knows but one duty: respect for and obedience to G-d's law. No reconciliation is feasible between the Koraitic spirit of envy and ill-will and Moshe's clear and unequivocal perception of the divine word.

The dramatic conflict comes to the fore as the threat to Israel's unity increases. G-d reacts with exceptional harshness. The profound and lasting traces of this tragic episode is reflected in a Midrash that tells us of a deep crevice found in the rock of the Sinai desert from which a hollow voice emerges "we have lied – Moshe and the Torah have spoken the truth."

The only person who recognizes his error and the danger of the situation is On, son of Pelet to whom the text refers at the beginning of the chapter (16:1) but who is not mentioned again. The Midrash ascribes the omission to the fact that it was his wife

who saved her husband from sharing the fate of his fellow rebels. She told him "what do you gain by rebelling against Moshe? If he prevails you will have earned nothing but contempt and dishonor. If Korach gains the upper hand he will seize power for himself and you will become the slave of an ambitious and willful master". In this context the Midrash quotes the proverb: "A wise woman builds her house, but the foolish one destroys it with her own hand" (Prov. 14:1).

"The Mouth of the Earth"

A night passes between the start of the rebellion and the divine summons to the people to be witness to the divine judgment. It is a night of reflection, of anticipation. Many of those who participated in the rebellion used the calm before the storm to reconsider their action and to retract their threats to Moshe's authority. Among them were Korach's own sons. The next morning Korach and his band confront Moshe in the sight of the sanctuary. Moshe alerts the people to the unnatural death that is about to befall the rebels.

Ever since the creation, death is the normal conclusion of the human existence. The supernatural character of the rebels' dying demonstrates to the people G-d's total rulership over nature that bows to His will and command. Thus we understand that "the mouth of the earth" (that swallowed Korach and his band) is mentioned among the ten creations that occurred on the eve of the Sabbath of creation. It is a new manifestation of the primal-creative will that forms the origin of the six days of Creation and that actively continues to shape nature and history. Moshe demonstrates an extraordinary degree of magnanimity in that he pleaded for those who were so easily swayed to join the campaign of hatred against himself – Moshe. He never forgot that a true leader must be in absolute control of his emotions. He also knew that the punishment of the rebels was inevitable. As

mentioned earlier, Pirkei Avot lists the "opening of the earth's mouth" among the ten events that occurred on the eve of the Sabbath of Creation. This characterizes the miraculous event in its supernatural dimension that ties it closely to the act of creation itself. It also demonstrates the unquestioning discipline that G-d demands of His people in regard to His law and its representatives. The idea of democracy is inadmissible as an excuse for undermining the law and the authority of its spokesmen. The qualification of the Jewish leader lies in the example he sets in word and deed and in his absolute loyalty to G-d's Torah. Moshe's identification with the Torah law and with the authentic word of G-d earned him the respect of the people at the critical moment when he became the object of Korach's vicious attacks.

The Rod of Aharon

It is a curious etymological fact (but certainly not a mere coincidence) that the Hebrew word שבט means both rod and tribe, literally "branch". The twelve branches grown from the same root of Jacob's tree are of equal quality and worth before G-d and it is He alone Who designates the branch that will blossom and bear fruit. It is significant that Aharon's rod was covered with almond blossoms: Almond blossoms that are already in full bloom at the onset of spring, when the other trees seem to hesitate to bring forth the first sprouts. Thus the almond tree is the image of the decisiveness and promptness of our response to the divine summons. The tribe of Levi proved its stance in the face of

the crisis brought on by the golden calf. It will also be recognized in the history of our people as the tireless protagonist for the purity of Jewish thought.

Earnings of the Levites

The tribe of Levi did not share in the allocation and distribution of the land, as did the other tribes. It was fully supported by the nation but also bore the responsibility for the nation's moral integrity. The Levites formed less than a thirtieth part of the total population, thus the tithe from the kernels, oil and wine were sufficient for their needs. In addition, the Kohanim received the first-born animals and certain parts of the sacrifices, the first fruit, Chalah, Terumah and the skins of the animals that were slaughtered for sacrifices. In turn, their obligations beyond the service in the temple included the supply of rabbis, teachers, judges and administrators of the public functions of the Jewish state.

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