

# International Rabbinic Fellowship

## Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Korach

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Mordechai Rackover, Brown-RISD Hillel

It is an axiom of our faith that Moshe was the greatest prophet of all time. It is also assumed that his leadership was beyond reproach and thus Korach's rebellion in this week's parsha is understood as unforgivable and sinful.

The challenges of leadership are significant and with Moshe we see, over and over again, that there are specific challenges that he overcomes. In general the pattern we see is a complaint from the community, a reaction by Moshe, his subsequent appeal to God and finally a solution from God that is delivered via Moshe. e.g. Israelites: Oh No! the Egyptians are coming to kill us at the Sea! Moshe: Please God help! God: Watch this! Stretch out your staff and walk through. Everyone: We're safe! (Ex. 14.10-21)

One of the early challenges to Moshe's leadership is in the days after the escape from Mitzrayim. Having passed through the Sea and then having received the manna, the Children of Israel are still unconvinced of their security and Moshe's leadership and they beg him for water. Moshe's initial reaction, "What shall I do with this people? Yet a little more and they will stone me." (Ex.17.4b) is hardly inspiring. In Moshe's defense we can remind ourselves that he is consistently self-effacing, all the way back to his attempted refusal of accepting his ministry. But we must, nonetheless, recognize that Moshe doesn't really answer the people.

God intercedes and Moshe, along with a cohort of elders (for support?) goes out and strikes the famous rock and it gives water. The episode ends with an ambiguous declaration, "And thus did Moshe do before the eyes of Israel's elders. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, [Testing and Dispute,]

for the disputation of the Israelites, and for their testing the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord in our midst or not?'" (Ex.17.5-7)

In this week's reading Korach's rebellion is introduced by the following expression which he directs against Moshe and Aharon, "You have too much! For all the community, they are all holy, and in their midst is the Lord, and why should you raise yourselves up over the Lord's assembly?" (Nu. 16.3b) The complaint appears legitimate; how is it that of all the people in Israel, all the Levi'im, it is Moshe and his brother that occupy both of the top positions in the community? Moshe's response, once again, is not confidence inspiring, "And Moshe heard and fell on his face." (Nu. 16.4a)

The trop, is familiar from our earlier rebellion, when Israel asked, "is the Lord in our midst or not?" Yet, in this case there is a slight variation: in most places in Tanakh we hear about God being b'kerev (the Hebrew root is k.r.b.), here the word used by Korach is, tokh. In English both words refer to inside or amongst, amidst. But in Tanakh we have to assume that the change of words is teaching us something significant.

Moshe's response to Korach continues, "In the morning, the Lord will make known who is His, and him who is holy He will bring close to Him and him whom He chooses He will bring close to Him...You have too much, sons of Levi." (Nu. 16.4..7) Moshe's response twice includes the root k.r.b, and this time, in English, it is rendered as close. Moshe is turning the tables on Korach, unlike his earlier responses of panic or immediately turning to God here Moshe gets up off his face and replies to Korach with a theological response: God is the one who determines not only where He indwells but

also who is close to God. I fall on my face in front of you to teach you that it is not I who makes the choices but rather God who chose me to be close to Him. Korach, if you were listening, if you were careful, you would hear that what you are saying is a paler version of what we have been saying for nearly forty years. Finally Moshe closes by repeating Korach's complaint back to him, "You have too much, sons of Levi." (Imagine it with venom.) Moshe is saying to Korach, you think you have it all figured out, you know nothing.

Korach's error is thinking that God's presence is automatically installed in every person equally. Moshe emphatically answers him by stating that amidst and closeness are not necessarily automatically linked. God is in the camp but only those who properly allow God in to their soul will also be close to God. You, Korach, who feel that leadership and rank are an entitlement have nothing because you think everything is owed to you.

We live in a world filled with leaders who miss the subtleties, the fine points in speech, personal relationships and in guiding others. Moshe is teaching us that great leaders respond directly and with passion when they see others masquerading, others who may deeply injure the people we love.

Let us hope that we are inspired to speak out for the right, sometimes against the many.

Shabbat Shalom!

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Questions for further examination:

1. 1. Where else does the word kerev appear in the Humash? What can be learned in each case about the relationship of God, Moshe and Israel?

See Nechama Leibowitz Studies in Exodus Beshallah 7

1. 1. When did the events of Korach's rebellion occur? Why now?

See Ramban, Bamidbar 16.1 - s.v. V'amar Rabbi Avraham

Ramban has a strong opinion about Moshe and his changing leadership style.

1. 1. Moshe appears to take much more initiative in his response to Korach than in previous assaults on his leadership. Why? Has he changed?
2. 2. Is there any way to understand that Korach had positive intentions? Compare his story to the treatment of the wood collector by Hazal who suggest he was Zelofechad who was trying to teach us all the punishment for breaking Shabbat. What is Korach teaching?

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