



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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Give and Take

Mystery emerges with the first words of Parshat Korach: *Vayikach Korach ben Yitzhar ben Kehat ben Levi...*

And Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi, *took*.

The problem is obvious. The Torah informs us that Korach's rebellion began when Korach "took" – *but the text fails to tell us what he "took"*.

How are we to understand this glaring, puzzling omission? Exactly what did Korach "take?"

Rising to the challenge, the classical authorities struggle to unravel the cryptic phrase in Parshat Korach's opening sentence.

Rashi offers two options: In the first, he adopts Onkelos' rendering of the phrase "*Vayikach Korach...*" as "*Va'etpaleg Korach, and Korach separated.*" Korach, through his actions, "took" himself out of (separated

himself from) the community.

Rashi then suggests a second approach, based on several midrashic sources. Korach, these sources suggest, "took" others with him. Through the persuasive power of his words and the strength of his personality, he convinced the leaders of the community to join his insurrection.

In a lengthy exposition, the Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretations and cites a vastly different approach suggested by the Midrash Tanchuma. The language of 'taking,' the Ramban argues, is often associated in the Torah with matters of the heart. In this case, the phrase *Vayikach Korach* implies that Korach 'took' the advice of his own heart in moving against Moshe and Aharon.

In addition to these and other interpretations, perhaps we can suggest another approach to the introductory sentence of Parshat Korach. This suggestion rises out of one powerful and crucial point:

Korach's rebellion is dangerous not because it is devoid of truth but because it is a manipulation of the truth.

Korach argues:

Kol ha'edah kulam kedoshim, uv'tocham Hashem, u'madua titnasu al K'hal Hashem?

The entire assembly—all of them—are holy, and Hashem is in their midst, and why do you impose yourselves over Hashem's Congregation?"

If we are all equally holy before God, Moshe, what gives you and Aharon the right to hold sway over us? ...



Had Korach's call for equality remained in the sphere of sanctity, in the realm of our personal *relationship* to God, his ideas would have posed no issue at all. Concerning the individual quest for sanctity, Korach is, after all, correct. "*Kol ha'edah kulam Kedoshim....*" We each have the ability to lead sanctified lives. We each possess the ability to craft on our own personal relationship with the divine.

In the realm of this relationship, we are all potentially equal. The only yardstick against which we are judged is ourselves. Whatever our life journey may be, the sanctity we each achieve is determined by how well we travel the road and by the personal qualities we demonstrate along the way.

Korach's big lie emerges, however, when he makes the leap from *relationship to role* in religious life. For while it is true that, in the sphere of relationship with our Creator, we are all potentially equal; in the *roles that we play*, we clearly are not. Each of us operates in our own personal world.

We cannot all be a Moshe or an Aharon, nor are we meant to be. Many life positions within Jewish experience are automatically assigned at birth. Even earned roles, technically open to all, are not, on a practical level, *equally* open to all. Genetics, environment, the times in which we live, the choices made by those who preceded us, our own choices, and more; all play a part in shaping our place in our people's story.

When Korach deliberately and seamlessly moves from the realm of *relationship* to the realm of *role* in religious life, he threatens to upend the delicate, critical balance that shapes the Israelites' connection to their Creator, and Hashem must respond.

Circling back, perhaps this approach can help us understand the first sentence of



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Parshat Korach. *Korach 'took' pieces of his world.* He selectively chose and manipulated elements of the truth in order to fashion his own reality.

Building on a kernel of legitimacy, Korach created his own world.

During my years in the pulpit Rabbinate, I was often approached by individuals wrestling with the actions of others that they felt defied comprehension. In situations ranging from practical disputes to personal crises, the litany was the same:

How could he act this way? What is she thinking? What gives him the right? Doesn't she realize how wrong she is?

In response, I developed my own working definition of "mental health."

It goes something like this...

There is a line. That line represents the "real world."

None of us live on this line. We all live in worlds of our own creation. We draw our own lines—all at least a little bit off from the center.

Mental health is determined by how closely the line you draw matches the baseline of the "real world." The closer your line, your world, is to that baseline the healthier you will be. Conversely, the further your world from the baseline, the more problems you will encounter.

But (and here's the punchline), wherever you draw your line - you believe it to be the "real line".

Moshe was forced to confront Korach and the deviant world that he created. Centuries later, we confront multiple enemies living in multiple aberrant worlds.

We must recognize that what seems "irrational" to us- seems "rational" to them. The worlds of our attackers, verbal or physical, are distant from ours. The rules that apply in our worlds simply do not apply in theirs. Any attempt to understand their deviant behavior will prove futile. Any attempt to "change" that behavior will prove even more futile.

Our energies will be better spent strengthening our own ranks; preserving our own spirit; supporting our own soldiers; resolving our own internal disputes; giving our children the tools they will need to connect to their heritage and live with Jewish pride. We need to reinforce the communal world that we share.

If we do so, we can be confident that, like Korach, our enemies and the worlds in which they live will ultimately be destroyed. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."



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