

## THE SONS OF KORAH, WHO DID NOT DIE

Early in the 1970's, R. Soloveitchik delivered several lectures on the book of Numbers, chapters 9 through 21. A few years later he began editing them as a unified presentation on the central sections of Numbers, eventually published by Toras haRav Foundation in *Vision and Leadership*. Some of the lectures are better known via second hand summary. Among these the most popular is on Korah. In giving that lecture the Rav acknowledged that, beyond his analysis of the Biblical text and rabbinic response to it, he was also addressing contemporary challenges to Torah authority. These ideological challenges have become even more bitter and fateful for our community over the past forty years and in the Rav's absence. The assertions on Torah authority have come to overshadow the substantive discourse that precedes it.

Torah study for its own sake needs no apology; periodic review of a great and formative teacher's ideas is always in order: as Hazal say, it often takes as long as forty years to absorb one's master's teaching. My revisiting of the Rav's exegesis is also motivated by the hope that working out the full implications of the Korah episode, beyond the Rav's exposition, is not without relevance for the communal dangers that troubled the Rav and that he strove to avert.

Let us begin with the Rav's own discussion of Korah's rebellion. We will then venture to explore the difference between Korah's position and that of Dathan and Aviram, and to examine carefully the way the Torah presents Moses' responses to these two styles of rebellion, both in terms of his theological stance and his personal reaction.

Following Ramban, R. Soloveitchik holds that Korah's ultimate aim was political power. To make headway he needed an ideology. Korah's argument, presented in the Torah, is the following: because all members of the congregation share the same holiness, Moses has no right to lead, to guide, to rule. The Rav says that Korah was half right. Indeed, within the community of Israel, each Jew's sanctity is equal. He explains: "This sanctity is not personal and intimate, but is a universal, community-rooted, and community-nourished holiness inherited from one's progenitors."

## TRADITION

There is a second, individualistic resource of sanctity, one that “the individual detects in the inner recesses of his personality.” “If the community were the only source of sanctity,” says the Rav, “then the individual would be deprived of his creative role, his individual initiative, his originality and uniqueness. The outstanding person would not be able to develop into a great leader.” The implication regarding authority is clear. Although all share equally in the sanctity of Jewish peoplehood, all are not equally endowed in other respects.

The distinction between the egalitarian aspect of Jewish identity, whereby all Jews are equal in their fulfillment of behavioral commandments, and the individualistic aspect, which recognizes the unique, and therefore unequal, appropriation of religious existence, is familiar from the Rav’s major writings, such as *U-Vikkashtem Mi-Sham*. In Moses’ words to Korah: “Is it not sufficient that God has distinguished you from the congregation of Israel [to do the work of the Levites] that you seek also the priesthood?” Meaning, though the entire congregation is holy, different groups and individuals are assigned different roles.

The second half of the Rav’s discourse presents Korah’s second argument. He reminds us that this argument is not mentioned in the Bible, but supplied by rabbinic midrash. In one version of the story, Korah asked whether a garment entirely of the particular blue *tekhelet* thread is subject to the law of *tsitsit* which mandates placing *tekhelet* on each four-cornered garment. According to another, Korah asked whether a *mezuzah* must be affixed to the doorpost of a house filled with Torah scrolls. The point being, that where special status is ubiquitous, there is no need to reinforce the sanctity with a special marker. When Moses responds that this is not the law, Korah and his followers jeer.

These stories could be taken as a more dramatic enactment of the first argument. R. Soloveitchik, however, pays attention to the rhetorical arena of Korah’s midrashic argument—namely that of halakhic debate. What is at stake, on this reading, is not only the dialectic of equality and individualism, but the authority of religious law. Korah’s street theater aims at overturning autonomous halakhic jurisprudence, faithful to its own principles, in favor of a mode of thinking adapted to “common sense” religious sentiment.

The Rav goes on to justify distrust of sentiment as the basis of religious life on three grounds: “First, religious emotion—like any other emotion—is changeable, volatile, and transient.” Second, precisely because religious subjectivity is individualistic; each, in his or her own way, “experiences God, man, and the world in a unique way.” Lastly, there is an inevitable danger of mundane experiences, based on non-religious apprehensions belonging to aesthetics or ethics, being mistaken for experiences of God. Again,

these arguments on behalf of the need for objectivity in determining religious obligations are characteristic of the Rav's thinking.

In this essay the Rav's argument for what we may call "rabbinic authority" thus draws on two strands of his thought: One is an individualistic insight recognizing that all are not equally endowed and that this makes a difference with respect to religious leadership. The second limits individualism by insisting on objective standards in order to safeguard against the dangers posed by unconstrained subjectivity.

Here we must note that these elements do not deny human subjectivity but preserve it and elevate it. To be sure, one cannot compare the woodchopper's mastery of Torah to that of Moses; in that respect, Moses attains a higher level of religious development, with all that this entails. Yet the woodchopper too has his or her own contribution to make; he too stands in relationship to God. Indeed, one of the reasons the Rav deems halakhic objectivity necessary is to make room for the variety of religious and human experience that would become anarchic without the objective framework. Commitment to God as expressed in the halakha often requires sacrifice of private judgment and cherished desires and dreams. Yet a religious outlook that omits the subjective life of the individual, his or her aspirations and experience, and treats them as negligible, is as much a deviation from the Rav's way of thinking as one that vests authority in the private and halakhically undisciplined judgment of each individual. When the individual standing before God disappears from view, the subservience demanded by the law is no longer experienced as the service of God but merely as submission to the collective.

## II

Let us return to the Biblical story. Korah presented an ideological challenge to Moses: "the entire congregation is holy." Korah did not directly deny Moses' mission, although undermining the Torah given through Moses is implicit in Korah's critique, when taken to its ultimate conclusion, and this is brought to the surface in the midrashic elaboration. If political power plays demand ideological rationale, sooner or later politics also requires disparagement and personal animus. Dathan and Aviram personalized their rebellion. Korah complained that Moses and Aaron elevated themselves (*titnasse'u*) above God's people, setting themselves up as a spiritual aristocracy. Dathan and Aviram accused Moses of taking Israel from Egypt, in their telling "a land flowing with milk and honey," to death in the desert, and seeking to establish a capricious tyranny over them (*histarer*); they allege that Moses is blinding and misleading the people.

## TRADITION

Moses' reaction now is different from his response to Korah. Straight-away he had invited Korah to come forward with incense so that God would decide between them. He had followed up by arguing that Korah, as a Levite, already had been granted his distinctive role. Dathan and Aviram, by contrast, provoke Moses to extreme wrath. He asks God not to turn to their offering, and defends his personal conduct: "I have not borne away one donkey of theirs or done evil to any of them." Then he turns back to Korah with instructions about the test set for the morrow.

On the one hand, Korah is the leader of the rebellion; on the other hand, Dathan and Aviram are the ones who ignite Moses' anger, because their antagonism is driven less by ambition or ideology than by abusiveness towards the emissary of God. As the moment of crisis approaches, Moses still hopes to limit the adversarial confrontation to Korah: he pleads with God: "Shall one man sin and You are angry with the whole congregation?" And then Moses goes to Dathan and Aviram, who had refused to come to him, in a last effort to separate them from Korah. When this fails, he calls upon God to vindicate him by having the earth swallow them up.

Let me stress that Moses explicitly makes the fate of the rebels a test of his leadership: "If these die like all human beings... God did not send me." To deny Moses' unique agency in the giving of the Torah, in theological terms, is equivalent to rejection of the Torah. Thus Moses would be justified in requesting decisive action on the part of God. At the same time the narrative leaves open the possibility that he is impelled in part by the personal abuse hurled at him by Dathan and Aviram.

We tend to focus on Korah, and less on his partners in rebellion. The Torah presents Korah as the ringleader of the conspiracy. He is its ideological spokesman. Hazal (following Numbers 26:9 and 27:3) refer to the cabal as "Korah and his congregation." On son of Pelet disappears from the story, and Hazal explain that his wife persuaded him to withdraw for self-interested reasons. The two hundred and fifty men mentioned in the opening verse accompanied Korah and were consumed by fire. The Torah says nothing about their motives, though commentators like Netsiv ascribe to them idealistic motives. Interestingly, the sons of Korah did not die (Numbers 26:11). Dathan and Aviram, however, are highlighted in that passage, and elsewhere, as participants in Korah's rebellion. Remarkably, outside of Numbers they are the ones who are mentioned, while Korah is omitted. When Moses reviews the history of the wilderness years at the end of his life (Deuteronomy 11) only Dathan and Aviram are cited. Likewise Psalm 106:17-18 mentions Dathan and Aviram and leaves out Korah.

Many hold that since Korah is the major figure his absence must be explained. Thus Ramban in Deuteronomy 11 and R. Hirsch on Psalms

suggest that Korah is omitted out of embarrassment because of his status as a Levite, and thus related to Moses, or out of respect for his descendants who were prominent Levites. Without gainsaying their observations, it is plausible to conclude that to Moses in retrospect, and to the Psalmist, Dathan and Aviram's opposition was more blasphemous and thus more worthy of remembrance. To borrow from Ramban himself, the distinguishing mark of this rebellion was the contempt displayed for Moses their teacher and the inevitable rejection of God's acts and revelation. R. Bahye ben Asher indeed draws the conclusion that Dathan and Aviram are remembered because they inflicted the greatest damage through the outspoken and vulgar manner of their antagonism for Moses and his mission. Such considerations impelled Maharal (Commentary to Aggada, *Sanhedrin* 110) to speak of Dathan and Aviram as essential embodiments of divisiveness. Though Korah was the leader of the immediate confrontation, and stands out in the memory of Hazal, who are remarkably ready to give his rebellion an eloquent voice, Moses himself, warning the next generation forty years later, and the Psalm that commemorates the crises of faith in the desert, identify Dathan and Aviram as the primary foes.

### III

So far I have attempted to present the straightforward meaning of the Biblical narrative, in the Rav's footsteps, albeit with a renewed emphasis on Dathan and Aviram. For centuries commentators have labored mightily to explain the sin of Moses at Mei Meriva: Abarbanel catalogued no fewer than 16 interpretations; the *Or ha-Hayyim* has 12. For his part R. Soloveitchik, in *Leadership and Vision*, offers a powerful analysis that sidesteps the difficulties attendant on the classical interpretations. Off-hand this enigmatic episode is not directly linked to Korah's rebellion 38 years before. R. Meir Simha of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Hokhma*, ties them together. Whether or not we adopt his exegetical view, it bears a crucial lesson in our present condition.

R. Meir Simha observes that Moses, unlike other prophets, scrupulously avoided invoking signs and wonders on his own. Until Korah, everything he does is transparently commanded by God. Then, however, Moses initiates the test without asking God to intervene. Ramban, in one of his approaches to the passage, suggests Moses is repeating a divine instruction not stated in the Torah. Even if one accepts this proposal, the fact that the prior command is not revealed to the reader implies that it was not evident to his contemporaries either. Once Moses summons divine

## TRADITION

intervention in order to counteract Korah, according to R. Meir Simha's reading, he is open to the accusation that he is acting for his own honor. When the next crisis arrives, many years later, and the congregation complains that they lack water, the malcontents view Moses' failure to initiate divine action as evidence of inconsistency: he did not act for the people as he had when his own prestige was challenged. This is the failure to "sanctify God's Name" for which Moses forfeited his leadership.

### IV

The more egalitarian a society is, in its own mind, the more desperately it requires religious and ethical excellence from those who must provide guidance. What is true of secular democratic culture is also true of the religious community: How many Jews, even those educated to religious affiliation and observance, go through their lives without once having encountered—genuinely encountered—a religious individual, meaning an individual whose life is centered on the service of God? Without such exemplars, our society settles for mediocrity and rapidly sinks into indifference. At best, spiritual leadership is discounted and unheeded. At worst, the clamor of Dathan and Aviram fills the air, denouncing all ascriptions of excellence and all claims to authority as bogus and self-serving.

Some of the flashpoints currently agitating the Orthodox community are examined by others in these pages. We all know how particular points of controversy are liable to ripen into irreparable schism, so that contending for particular halakhic views or public policy, however important, often fails to address fundamental divisions. When the Rav spoke forty years ago, he did not merely issue a halakhic decision; he strove to nurture the mentality necessary to appreciate true halakhic principles and the spirit needed to live them authentically.

Three thoughts in closing:

First, as we have seen, halakhic law presupposes an ethic of obedience. But it also presupposes an ethic of sacrifice. Sacrifice—*korban*—is a giving up to God, but it is also, even more so, a coming closer to God, a personal relationship. The objectivity of Halakha is not a substitute for religious subjectivity but its normative framework and this applies to every individual standing before God. R. Soloveitchik delivered his paper "Catharsis," which is his most direct exposition of the ethic of withdrawal, at MIT, not at Yeshiva. The woodchopper's relation with God is not the same as Moses'; that doesn't mean it can be treated as religiously immaterial. Where

religious commitment entails withdrawing from much of what secular culture regards as permissible and even laudable—and we can all think of situations where this is increasingly the case--the sacrifice demanded of the average person may be greater and more profound than that required of the elite. When the average person is at a distance from the spiritual resources and the intellectual levers of halakhic life, the sacrifice is even more poignant. Hence our spiritual leaders, more than ever, must humbly bring to life the sense of God and what it means to be committed to His service.

Second, we learn from Dathan and Aviram that disparagement and contempt towards the bearers of the Torah tradition may often leave deeper and less remediable scars than intellectual heresy alone. This is a warning to those who engage in such incitement and to those who knowingly or inadvertently provoke it.

From here I come to a third lesson: The more desperately a society sinks into indifference and cynicism about its nominal religious and ethical standards, the more urgent that its spiritual guides strive for excellence. Confronted by a society in revolt, the rhetoric of Korah, amplified by the jeering of Dathan and Aviram and supplemented by other voices of discontent, Moses had no choice: he was justified in his anger, and he was justified in acting to quell the rebellion. Doing so, taught the *Meshekh Hokhma*, he also invited increased scrutiny of his motivation; He bound himself to an even more uncompromising standard of dedication to his flock, as they perceived it.

Orthodoxy today faces a crisis of authority for many reasons, some self-inflicted. As rabbis, as educators, even as parents, we may have no choice but to insist on the authority of Torah, even when that makes us vulnerable to the charge of self-aggrandizement. All the greater, then, is our responsibility to uphold our integrity in the face of an almost institutionalized ethos of suspicion. The task may seem impossible: even Moses, according to R. Meir Simha, paid a terrible price for falling short. Often it also seems futile—can we really presume to reverse, whether by force of words or personal example, widespread trends and increasingly entrenched habits of indifference and disaffection?

And yet, amid the frenzy unleashed by Korah, the stridency of Dathan and Aviram, and the mysterious deviation of the two hundred and fifty elders, we cannot be indifferent to the destiny of the sons of Korah, who did not die.