

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Korach)

Many years ago, a good friend of mine who ran a high school shared with me parts of the process he used to employ in interviewing prospective applicants. The boys were invited to a day of interviews, tests and experiences, and in the middle of the day they broke for lunch. When they entered the dining room the tables were set with six seats per table. On each table a large platter was waiting, with rice, and five pieces of Schnitzel. The boys who took first, were usually the ones he was less interested in.

Without discussing the ethical and practical implications of that ‘test’ (not sure I am personally comfortable with such a methodology), what I think this educator was attempting to ascertain was, whether the boys were takers or sharers.

This week, we read the portion of *Korach*, which tells the story of Korach’s famous rebellion against Moshe and Aharon, which does not end well for Korach who is swallowed up in a Divine earthquake, along with many of his followers and fellow rebels.

The parsha begins with an interesting statement saying that Korach took (“*Vayikach Korach*” Numbers (*Bamidbar*) 16:1), without ever explaining exactly **what** he took. We have encountered this phenomenon before; when the Torah does not finish a sentence, there is always a reason.

A great example occurs in the famous struggle between Cain (*Kayin*) and Abel (*Hevel*).

The verse (Genesis (*Bereishit*) 4:8) tells us “... *And Kayin said to Hevel his brother...*” without ever telling us exactly **what** he said. In that sentence we have suggested in the past that the Torah is telling us; if two brothers can get to a point where one kills the other it does not matter what the argument is about; something is dreadfully wrong.

Perhaps here as well, *what* Korach actually took is not the issue; the Torah wants us to know that he was a taker, and that is the source of the problem. Interestingly, towards the end of the portion (*Bamidbar* 18:11-20), the Torah discusses the gifts the Jewish people are meant to give to the Kohanim (priests). Known as the *Matnot Kehuna*, the topic seems out of place against the backdrop of Korach’s rebellion. Unless of course the Torah is trying to teach us that there are some things in life (like honor, position, power and influence) one is not meant to take; they are gifts meant to be received.

So why do people take? Certainly, there are many different types of ‘taking’: taking risks, taking drugs, but we are speaking here of *acquiring*. Such people often, whether consciously or subconsciously, associate their self-worth with position, power and/or the accumulation of material wealth; if I *have* more, I must *be* more.

As an example, shoplifting is one of the most common and yet least detected and reported crimes in America. A study on *pricegun.com* suggests there are 550,000 shoplifting incidents in America *every day*. Over 13 billion dollars (which amounts to over thirty-five million dollars a day!) is shoplifted in America every year. In fact, there are twenty-seven million regular shoplifters in America today, which means over one in ten Americans steals regularly. And while some people steal for drugs, or simply to

get by, statistics suggest a very high portion of shoplifters and thieves (i.e. from hotels) are people who could easily afford to pay.

And while there are many reasons such people steal, including a desire to be in control, or to fill a void, one of the oft-cited reasons is that people feel they deserve it. For an example in a hotel-theft study (why well-off guests steal from their hotel rooms) many of those interviewed felt they were paying more for their hotel rooms due to theft in the industry (it is estimated ten percent of hotel room prices are meant to cover the inevitable loss to the industry from theft) and they were going to get their money's worth! In other words; *I deserve more!* Interestingly, this can very often be intertwined with feelings of envy and jealousy; a person feels they deserve better, or at least as much as their neighbor for whatever the reason; they have higher expectations for themselves.

And sometimes this will also lead to anger; anger is usually all about expectations; I expect something and when I don't get it, I get angry.

There is a certain arrogance to taking; a person takes when he or she feels deserving; taking to a certain degree is also often based on expectations.

And all this is the story of Korach, who was jealous because the position (of High priest) he expected and felt he deserved, was being given to someone else.

There is a second aspect to the story of Korach which is worth mentioning as it seems to be part and parcel of the challenge the Torah is describing.

The order of our *parshiot* (portions) itself always contains a powerful message.

So, one wonders why this week's portion of *Korach*, which seems to be all about the dangers of the arrogance of takers, is followed immediately by next week's portion of *Chukat* which seems to be about the incomprehensible in life. *Chukat* begins with red heifer ceremony for purification from death which seems to represent in Jewish tradition that which we cannot possibly understand.

Indeed, the primary theme that seems to run through *Chukat* is death, as we read of both Aaron and Miriam's deaths in the fortieth year in the desert. And of course, death is the ultimate phenomenon which we can never fully comprehend.

So what does this have to do with the story of *Korach*? Why does this naturally follow Korach's rebellion?

There is a fascinating Midrash (rabbinic legend) on the story of *Korach* quoted in Rashi:

Korach in Jewish tradition asked Moshe two famous questions, challenging his leadership.

First, if there is a mitzvah to have one sea-blue (*techelet*) thread on a set of white *tzitzit* (fringes), then certainly a garment which is entirely sea-blue should be exempt from the need for *tzitzit*, yet it still requires the *tzitzit* fringes!

Similarly, asked Korach, if a house is full of Torah parchments, it should be exempt from the need for a *mezuzah* (parchment with the *Shema*) on the doorpost, yet it is not!

What is this debate all about?

Perhaps Korach felt that in order to believe in something, we have to be able to understand it; if something is incomprehensible then it cannot be true. Korach could not accept a Torah, indeed a Judaism that seemed illogical to him. Thus, the Midrash paints a picture of Korach asking questions based entirely on logic. Logically it makes no sense to have to put blue strings on an entirely blue garment (a *tallit she'kulo techelet*) and in his arrogance, Korach believed it always has to make sense.

Putting aside for a moment the arrogance of assuming we can possibly understand everything in a world created by G-d (Hashem), imagine a life where everything has to make sense.

Imagine raising children where everything we tell them to do has to first make sense to them.

And imagine a marriage where we only listen to our spouses when it makes sense; how long would such a marriage last?

The message of the Korach story is all about the dangers and pitfalls of allowing arrogance to seep into our lives; and how much of a better world we would have if we were all able to acquire the humility of knowing that there is so much, that we will never really understand, and that's actually OK. I don't need to understand everything my wife or my children, or even my friends and colleagues ask of me; I just need to know they do it from a place of love and caring. And if that is true for each other it is certainly true for our relationship with Hashem (G-d); if I know Hashem loves me, I don't need to understand it all, even if there is a value in trying.

Perhaps that is also why last week's portion (*Shlach*) ends with the *tzitzit* fringes; the four sets of fringes on the corners of a garment, each with the string of deep-sea blue, reminding us that Hashem, representing the fathomless deep mysteries of the sea, and the unreachable heavens (the blue sky) is all around us, and always there.

Korach reminds us to let go a little and take comfort in knowing we are in bigger hands, and that in the end, it will somehow all work out....

Shabbat Shalom

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