

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



KORACH

One's Proper Goals

This week I had to speak at a Bar Mitzva. These are not the best weeks to speak at joyous occasions. In our Torah readings, we have the terrible whining and complaining in the second half of B'haalot'cha, then, of course, the sin of the 'spies' in Sh'lach, and this week we have the rebellion against Moshe and Aharon instigated by Korach. We would love to develop positive messages for the young men and women that we are addressing. So, we must be creative.

Before we look at a number of explanations for the behavior of Korach, I am going to offer a separate idea from one of the most clever commentaries on our Tanach these days, Rav Yoel Bin Nun: The most remarkable thing about Korach is that it was included in the Torah. The Torah does not hide from the Jewish People even the most difficult stories, the failures and the sins. These failures are not only those of the "wicked" and the "sinners", but even those of the great prophets, prophetesses, and kohanim - Aharon, Miryam, and even Moshe... What can we learn from this? First of all, that there are no perfect people

and no perfect generations, and that it is impossible to lead a nation without crises. There is no nation without politics, no generation without bitterness and rebellions.

Cool! Let's begin with some of the more normative approaches to the motivations of Korach and his cohorts. Most of the traditional commentaries are a bit perplexed by the use of the transitive verb VAYHIKACH (and he took) at the beginning of our parsha. The problem, of course, is that there is no direct object; we are not told what Korach 'took'.

Rashi claims that Korach 'betook' himself. He moved himself away from the mainstream of the nation to rebel against the status quo. Onkelos translates it ITPALEG, or 'he removed himself'. In both of these explanations, Korach is the direct object of the verb LAKACH.

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch cleverly explains that the verb is an introduction to the story. As he explains: The expression "Korach took" appears without an object. All that follows serves as the object of the "taking". Logically, the expression denotes an unauthorized action taken in one's own interest. Korach arrogated to himself the right to call Moshe and Aharon to account for their position among the people. Since this is expressed through the word "taking",

it also implies that the motive behind his action was selfish.

Rav Hirsch continues to explain how attractive the ideas presented by Korach are. Rav Soloveitchik similarly called this incident the 'common sense rebellion against God'. Rav Hirsch presents Korach's idea in the following manner: Everyone is near to God, and God is near to everyone. Therefore there is no need for an Aharon and a Moshe. The entire position occupied by them is, according to them, an unwarranted usurpation founded.

Before I present the opinion which I find the most fascinating this year, I'm going to share a truly intriguing idea from the Netziv. That great Rosh Yeshiva saw merit in the 250 leaders who joined Korach's rebellion. In spite of their joining into Korach's rebellion, they were truly spiritual individuals. The Netziv explains:

It was not possible simply to take firepans and offer incense in the Mishkan, for the Levites stood guard to prevent any unauthorized person from approaching. Therefore, they were compelled to initiate a dispute against Moshe and Aharon. All of this was the course of conduct of the 250 men. Nevertheless, since their intention was for the sake of Heaven, they were therefore punished by being consumed in the fire that emerged from the Holy of Holies; yet this also

contained an element of honor.

These firepans became holy. They were made of copper and were later 'hammered into plating for the holy altar itself' (Bamidbar 17:4 & 5). These men were executed, but their holy act became an eternal memorial to their holy intentions.

But we really must return our focus to our most interesting of villains, Korach himself. The Rebbe of Apt, the first Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (1748-1825) prefaced his comments on Korach with an appealing explanation for the differences between Kohanim and Leviyim. He avers that together they are very powerful and produce the CHASH-MAL which Yechezkel witnessed in his famous vision of the Divine Chariot. Even though modern Hebrew borrowed this mysterious term to describe 'electricity', we really have no idea what Yechezkel is describing.

So the Rebbe jumps in to explain that this term is the amalgam of the contributions of Kohanim and Leviyim. CHASH (quiet or 'shhh') is the silent Divine Worship of the Kohanim on the Holy Altar. MAL (from the word MALAL, speech) is the job of the Leviyim, who sing and make music. Korach noticed that the Gematriya of his name is 308, just like CHASH. He believed that he was destined to be a quiet kohen (how ironic!), hence his entire rebellion.

Cool! But he was wrong. Even though most of his progeny were destroyed, one survived to become the eventual progenitor of the B'nei Korach (and of Sh'muel HaNavi) who were famous musical Leviyim in the Holy Temple. They even wrote 11 poems of our book of T'hilim. Korach was clever, but his wit led him in the wrong direction, talent tragically wasted.

We all have talents and skills which must be developed and honed so that we can make great contributions to our families and our nation. But we must work hard to discover in which directions our gifts and capacity can best be developed and used.

What's the greatest tragedy? Korach deprived us of his considerable genius. Remember, be the best 'you' that you can be. Then we all win. 🙏