

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

KORACH

G-d said to Moshe, "Return the stick of Aharon before the Ark of Testimony to be preserved as a symbol and warning to the rebellious people, so that their complaining will end and they will not die" (17:25).

Up until now, the Parasha tells us of a wave of revolts against Moshe's and Aharon's authority. These were responsible for the death of Korach and his 250 men, and a further 14,700 in the plague (17:14).

As Rashi explains, the core of the first revolt, led by Korach, was driven by his own angry disappointment in that the position of leader of the tribe division of Kehat did not go to him, but to Elitzafan ben Uziel, someone considerably below him in ancestral tree of the tribe of Levi. Korach did not accept that the reason he was passed over was because that was what G-d wanted (3:15,30), and that was that. So we learn of Korach and his company with popular support challenging Moshe's authority. Moshe responded with the challenge to take on a key position and see what would happen: to offer the ketoret whose unfitting use had caused the death of Aharon's two eldest sons, Nadav and Avihu.

And like with Nadav and Avihu, the

fire poured out and killed the company, with Korach and his associates already swallowed up in the ground. The Torah then tells of the steps to ensure that the lessons learnt from what happened would be engraved in Klal Yisrael's conscience for all time.

Yet the people didn't listen. Instead, they 'fought fire with fire'. They rebelled against Moshe and Aharon a second time, blaming Moshe and Aharon for their deaths: "You have killed the people of G-d" (17:6). 14,700 died through plague, a far larger number this second time round. We are told that the numbers would have been much higher, but for the ketoret. Ironically: it was the ketoret that took the lives of the people in smaller numbers in the first episode and yet saved the lives of the people in much larger numbers in the second episode.

Only then, finally, G-d demonstrated that He chose Aharon and his tribe, the Levites, to be the spiritual leaders of the Israelites. He did this in a gentle way: namely that when the stick of the tribe of Levi was placed next to the sticks of all the other tribes, it was the only one which miraculously blossomed and produced almonds (17:16-24). It was after that miracle of the blossoming almonds - a controlled experiment - that the Israelites paid attention and quieted down.

So it took a lot to restore order among the fissiparous and rebellious Israelites. It wasn't the earth swallowing up Korach as Moshe prompted that did it. It wasn't the death of the 250 who got too close with the ketoret. It wasn't the death of the 14,700 that inspired t'shuva. No. It was the 'small, silent voice' in the shape of Aharon's stick that almond-blossomed that got the message across. The people listened, and they learnt.

That opens the question. Why, instead of asking the earth to open up and swallow the rebels, didn't Moshe respond to Korach and Co with "Watch this" and perform the controlled experiment with the almonds to demonstrate to all and sundry that Aharon was the man that G-d chose to head His Service? After all, the Torah tells us that that is what worked. Why didn't he do that straight away instead of leaving a wake of thousands dead before he finally got round to it?

In responding, let's consider a very rare skill which sounds easy, but is very widely sought after. That is the capacity to listen. Indeed, today many people pay fortunes to those in the mental health profession to simply listen to what they have to tell, as they cannot find such people among their family and friends. Those other people are all too wrapped up in their own journeys through life to listen.

As were the waves of people sucked into Korach's rebellion and its aftermath. They weren't in a state to listen. They couldn't listen even if they wanted to. They were lusting for their own power, in the disguise of democracy (16:3). Such people don't listen. That is human nature, and Moshe Rabbeinu knew it. He might have been our teacher, but as all teachers know, teaching extends to the teachable, not the unteachable. And Moshe judged that Am Yisrael was unteachable at that moment: with so many wrapped up in their own agendas, own pride, and own kavod, there were no 'reasonable' ways to move them. Only after experiencing the series of shocking events would they find themselves moved - to listen.

This is true in life, today very much included. ASEI L'CHA RAV - make yourself known to a worthy mentor. Fortunate are those who do listen when suitably instructed, corrected, and admonished, even when the rav tells them things that they don't want to hear. But the world contains egoistic, kavod-driven, and patently toxic individuals of all ages that will not listen to reason. And Moshe Rabbeinu knew that it was futile to even try. He knew that they would have to suffer unpleasant, jarring, life-changing experiences first.

Only then they would be ready to listen... 