

לע"נ

הרב יעקב צבי ב"ר דוד אריה

ז"ל

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ז"ל

When Truth Is Sacrificed to Power

Korach

What was wrong with the actions of Korach and his fellow rebels? On the face of it, what they said was both true and principled. "You have gone too far", they said to Moshe and Aharon. "All of the community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's people?" (Bamidbar 16:3-4)

They had a point. God had summoned the people to become "a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation" (Sh'mot 19:6), that is, a kingdom every one of whose members was in some sense a kohein, and a nation every one of whom was holy. Moshe himself had said, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would place His spirit upon them all!" (Bamidbar 11:29). These are radically egalitarian sentiments. Why then was there a hierarchy, with Moshe as leader and Aharon as Kohein Gadol?

What was wrong with Korach's statement was that even at the outset it was obvious that he was duplicitous. There was a clear disconnection

between what he claimed to want and what he really sought. Korach did not seek a society in which everyone was the same, everyone the Kohen. He was not as he sounded, a utopian anarchist seeking to abolish hierarchy altogether. He was, instead, mounting a leadership challenge. As Moshe's later words to him indicate, he wanted to be Kohein Gadol himself. He was Moshe's and Aharon's cousin, son of Yitzhar, the brother of Moshe's and Aharon's father Amram, and he therefore felt it unfair that both leadership positions had gone to a single family within the clan. He claimed to want equality. In fact what he wanted was power.

That was the stance of Korach the Levite. But what was happening was more complex than that. There were two other groups involved: the Reuvenites, Datan and Aviram, formed one group, and "250 Israelites who were men of rank within the community, representatives at the assembly, and famous" were the other. They too had their grievances. The Reuvenites were aggrieved that as descendants of Yaakov's firstborn, they had no special leadership roles. According to Ibn Ezra, the 250 "men of rank" were upset that, after the sin of the Golden Calf, leadership had passed from the firstborn within each tribe to the single tribe of Levi.

They were an unholy alliance, and bound to fail, since their claims conflicted. If Korach achieved his ambition of becoming Kohein Gadol, the Reuvenites

and the "men of rank" would have been disappointed. Had the Reuvenites won, Korach and the "men of rank" would have been disappointed. Had the "men of rank" achieved their ambition, Korach and the Reuvenites would be left dissatisfied. The disordered, fragmented narrative sequence in this chapter is a case of style mirroring substance. This was a disordered, confused rebellion whose protagonists were united only in their desire to overthrow the existing leadership.

None of this, however, unsettled Moshe. What caused him frustration was something else altogether: the words of Datan and Aviram:

"Isn't it enough that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert, and now you want to lord it over us! What is more: you have not brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us a inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you think that you can pull something over our eyes? We will definitely not come!" (16:13-14)

The monumental untruth of their claim - Egypt, where the Israelites were slaves and cried out to God to be saved, was not "a land flowing with milk and honey" - was the crux of the issue for Moshe.

What is going on here? The Sages defined it in one of their most famous statements:

"Any dispute for the sake of Heaven will

have enduring value, but every dispute not for the sake of Heaven will not have enduring value. What is an example of a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of one not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his company" (Mishna Avot 5:21).

The Rabbis did not conclude from the Korach rebellion that argument is wrong, that leaders are entitled to unquestioning obedience, that the supreme value in Judaism should be - as it is in some faiths - submission. To the contrary: argument is the lifeblood of Judaism, so long as it is rightly motivated and essentially constructive in its aims.

Judaism is a unique phenomenon: a civilisation all of whose canonical texts are anthologies of argument. In Tanach, the heroes of faith - Avraham, Moshe, Yirmiyahu, Iyov - argue with God. Midrash is founded on the premise that there are "seventy faces" - seventy legitimate interpretations - of Torah. The Mishna is largely constructed on the model of "Rabbi X says this, Rabbi Y says that". The Talmud, far from resolving these arguments, usually deepens them considerably. Argument in Judaism is a holy activity, the ongoing internal dialogue of the Jewish people as it reflects on the terms of its destiny and the demands of its faith.

What then made the argument of Korach and his co-conspirators differ-

ent from that of the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Rabbeinu Yona offered a simple explanation. An argument for the sake of Heaven is one that is about truth. An argument not for the sake of Heaven is about power. The difference is immense. In a contest for power, if I lose, I lose. But if I win, I also lose, because in diminishing my opponents I have diminished myself. If I argue for the sake of truth, then if I win, I win. But if I lose, I also win, because being defeated by the truth is the only defeat that is also a victory. I am enlarged. I learn something I did not know before.

Moshe could not have had a more decisive vindication than the miracle for which he asked and was granted: that the ground open up and swallow his opponents. Yet not only did this not end the argument, it diminished the respect in which Moshe was held:

"The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moshe and Aharon. 'You have killed the Lord's people,' they said" (17:41).

That Moshe needed to resort to force was itself a sign that he had been dragged down to the level of the rebels. That is what happens when power, not truth, is at stake.

One of the aftermaths of Marxism, persisting in such movements as postmodernism and post-colonialism, is the idea that there is no such thing as truth. There is only power. The prevailing "discourse" in a society

represents, not the way things are, but the way the ruling power (the hegemon) wants things to be. All reality is "socially constructed" to advance the interests of one group or another. The result is a "hermeneutics of suspicion", in which we no longer listen to what anyone says; we merely ask, what interest are they trying to advance. Truth, they say, is merely the mask worn to disguise the pursuit of power. To overthrow a "colonial" power, you have to invent your own "discourse", your own "narrative", and it does not matter whether it is true or false. All that matters is that people believe it.

That is what is now happening in the campaign against Israel on campuses throughout the world, and in the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement in particular. Like the Korach rebellion, it brings together people who have nothing else in common. Some belong to the far left, a few to the far right; some are anti-globalists, while some are genuinely concerned with the plight of the Palestinians. Driving it all, however, are people who on theological and political grounds are opposed to the existence of Israel within any boundaries whatsoever, and are equally opposed to democracy, free speech, freedom of information, religious liberty, human rights, and the sanctity of life. What they have in common is a refusal to give the supporters of Israel a fair hearing - thus flouting the fundamental principle of justice, expressed in

Roman law in the phrase Audi alteram partem, "Hear the other side".

The flagrant falsehoods it sometimes utters - that Israel was not the birthplace of the Jewish people, that there never was a Temple in Jerusalem, that Israel is a "colonial" power, a foreign transplant alien to the Middle East - rival the claims of Datan and Aviram that Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey and that Moshe brought the people out solely in order to kill them in the desert. Why bother with truth when all that matters is power? Thus the spirit of Korach lives on.

All this is very sad indeed, since it is opposed to the fundamental principle of the university as a home for the collaborative search for truth. It also does little for the cause of peace in the Middle East, for the future of the Palestinians, or for freedom, democracy, religious liberty, and human rights. There are real and substantive issues at stake, which need to be faced by both sides with honesty and courage. Nothing is achieved by sacrificing truth to the pursuit of power - the way of Korach through the ages.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- (1) Do you think Korach's original claim had merit?
- (2) What caused the resolution of the dispute among the Jewish people and their leadership?
- (3) How do you imagine a place of

learning such as a university can best function as a "home for the collaborative search for truth"?

יהי זכרו ברוך