

PARSHAS KORACH 5778

Korach gathered a group of people to protest Moshe Rabbeinu's authority and used a number of arguments. Among those people he gathered were Ohn ben Peles, Doson and Avirom. Some people are genuinely concerned about an issue and go out to protest. Others just thrive on machlokes. That was their personality. Doson and Avirom were always involved in every machlokes.

Korach affected many of Bnei Reuvain because he was their neighbor.

Why did Korach get involved in this futile denial of Moshe Rabbeinu's authority? He became jealous. He wanted to be the nosi of shevet Levi instead of Elitzofon whom Moshe appointed by Hashem's command. He insisted that the position belonged to him. But Hashem decreed otherwise.

Korach gathered 250 roshei sanhedro'os from shevet Reuvain and dressed them in clothes made entirely of techeiles. He claimed these garments shouldn't need tzitzis if the point of tzitzis is to remind one of the sea and the sky and the kisei hakavod.

His basic argument was that he believed in democratic Judaism. He didn't want to be restricted by rigid rules and orders coming down from above. All Klal Yisroel are kedoshim—why do you Moshe feel you are superior to the rest of Klal Yisroel?

But this exchange is occurring after Ma'amad Har Sinai. Korach and all his followers were first person witnesses that only Moshe Rabbeinu was selected to come up to Har Sinai. They themselves heard Moshe being told directly by Hashem that Moshe will be the one to communicate the will of Hashem to the people. They knew that Moshe was a superior human being because they saw what happened to Miriam when she assumed that Moshe was just like everyone else. They knew Moshe was a superior human being and possessed authority over them. But jealousy has a way of distorting the truth that we know and corrupts our intellect to make up rationalizations for what we desire. Our minds are very weak in the face of extreme emotions and middos and can be bent to follow and justify our desires.

There is a mitzvah in last week's parsha that warns us about the weaknesses of our minds. Lo sosuru acharei levavchem.

The Rambam explains this mitzvah and says that our minds are limited. We need to set boundaries to what we explore with our minds because if we are left to our own devices, we can come to question and undermine every truth that we know from the Torah. We can't assume we will be able to understand everything with our own unfettered logic. The Torah has its own logic. We need to be wary of the human mind's capacity to be led astray by our base desires and personal prejudices.

Korach believed in his own logic and it clashed with the Torah's logic. His own logic told him that a cloak made of techeiles doesn't need tzitzis. His own logic told him all Jews are holy and worthy of the kehunoh. It is a very popular, common-sense idea.

But at the root, it came from jealousy and bad middos.

Moshe tried to make peace and avoid confrontation. He was rejected. So he made a contest to prove who Hashem chose to be His emissary. The one who would survive when they brought the ketores would be the Kohen Godol.

Moshe did all these miracles that they lived through. He brought the makkos, split the Yam Suf, brought the manna, and the annanei hakavod. They were living with this daily! Moshe was obviously chosen by Hashem! But Korach was so blinded by jealousy that he was willing to put his life on the line to throw off the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu. He refused to look at undeniable facts that are uncomfortable. It is the nature of people to deny the reality that is in front of them.

This is another aspect of the aveiroh of following our hearts and our eyes. The Rambam says we are not allowed to set up a lifestyle of enjoyment and indulgence in physical pleasures as a goal in and of itself. When one does that, he inevitably loses his core identity as a spiritual being, and inevitably, uses his mind to justify how it is moral and ethical to follow his base desires. It is a two-step process. You allow your base desires to rule your life and then employ your mind to justify it and rationalize it.

Korach had a terrible middah of jealousy which led him to deny the reality and justify what he wanted to do. But the Torah has its own logic and gives us absolutes by which to live.

Moshe responded with the word boker. Rashi explains that the world has day and night. Hashem created absolute limits and rules in this world. There are men and women, Jews and non-Jews. There are kohanim and levi'im. There are lines we cannot cross. There is a logic to the Torah that is above us. People have a very difficult time with the Torah because it demands two things. It demands we bend our will to Hashem's will and bend our minds to the Torah's logic. We can try to figure it out, but we can never twist the Torah's logic in order to make it fit with ours. As the Rambam says, our minds are limited and we have to acknowledge that we cannot fathom the truth on our own. Know that the Torah has its own logic and we have to work within the logic of Torah.

Don't be preoccupied with your own vices and lusts—it will cause your heart to corrupt your mind and find a way to justify all your pursuits of ego and power and money or base desires. You think that everything is flexible and negotiable, and you can get whatever you want if you are ambitious and creative and persistent enough. A person controlled by his base desires can tolerate no absolute limits.

This is the theme of the confrontation between Avrohom and Avimelech. Avimelech claimed the moral high ground and said that Avrohom had misled him into thinking Soroh was a single woman. Why did he trick him? Avimelech pleaded innocence when he had just kidnapped a woman and attempted to rape

her. Avrohom explained that he was afraid that there is no yiras Hashem in this place and he had to take precautions to avoid being murdered for his wife. When the king makes the rules and he can get whatever he wants, then anything can become moral and anything can become immoral.

A hundred years ago, abortion of an unborn fetus was considered murder, euthanasia of terminal patients was murder, and giving the death penalty to a serial murderer was justice. Now, everything is turned on its head. Abortion is a right of the mother, euthanasia is a chessed to the sick and old, and executing a serial murderer is cruel. We see how upside-down the moral logic of the liberal left has become! They look at the Palestinians as this poor, abused, victimized people who are justified in doing anything against innocent civilians. Absolutes don't exist anymore. Relative ethics based on our feelings at the time is the only guide of today's morality. It is all confused and nothing makes any consistent logical sense. The Torah has consistent logical absolutes which are necessary to navigate living in this world successfully.

Many decades ago the Conservative movement was a great threat to the Orthodox Jewish community. People were abandoning Torah and mitzvos in droves. The movement lured people in by making all kinds of so-called halachic arguments to justify chillul Shabbos—out of the need to help Judaism survive by catering to the new suburban lifestyle. They were trying to save Yiddishkeit and they winded up destroying it. They use emotional arguments and rejected the Torah's logic. Now the movement is rudderless and becoming extinct.

Korach depicted an entire sob-story of this poor widow who had all her produce taken away from her by the kohanim and levi'im. He appealed to people's emotions and common-sense. But if you listen to him carefully you will see it's all a smokescreen used by Korach to conceal his jealousy. The Torah's logic about what is chessed and what is rachamim is absolute, and our feelings and emotions are not relevant. You can try to give reasons and make it justified with human logic, but at the end of the day, the Torah has rules that cannot be bent by our logic.

Modern Jews feel very limited by the Torah's absolute rules and red lines. People now even try to rebel against the absolutes of biology and natural law. They try to argue a man is really a woman and a woman is really a man—and you can go back and forth between the two just because that's how you wake up feeling that morning.

But the rules of the natural world and the rules of the Torah are non-negotiable. We try to understand it to the best of our ability, but at the end of the day there is a Divine logic and Divine decree. We can try to explain why two brothers cannot testify together about someone else whom they are not related to, even if they are as trustworthy as Moshe and Aharon. But even if we don't come up with a satisfying explanation, the halacha cannot change. It is a gezeiras hamelech.

In the final analysis, after all of Korach's logical arguments

were made, he convinced 250 great people, probably because they also had a spark of jealousy—why they weren't as special as shevet Levi. But they still went against the Torah. The Torah is exemplified by chok and natural law is described as chok. Chok means permanently chiseled into the medium. It cannot be erased by any rationalization. The world cannot function without a stable system of law which is not bendable by people's emotions and desires. The law of gravity doesn't go away just because I find it inconvenient today. We accept it because Hashem in His infinite wisdom decreed that this is how it is. The laws of the Torah are the same.

Korach was unable to accept it. He used his jealousy to come up with a social theory that was very popular. People looked up to him because he was wealthy and influential. Who was smart enough to see the truth? We have a story of two wives in this parsha. Korach was bullied by his wife who wanted a higher position in life to usurp Moshe Rabbeinu's position. Ohn ben Peles's wife saw through the façade put up by Korach and realized that he was motivated by pure jealousy. Her husband wasn't going to get anything out of it anyway. But most people get taken by these wonderful, empowering ideas, and even the people who are selling it become absolutely convinced of their rectitude, to the point where they are willing to put their lives on the line.

Today we live in a world of confusion beyond description. Once someone is ruled by his taivos, there is no limit to what absurd ideas he can come up with to justify it. Gender can be fluid and all deviant orientations and lifestyles are completely equal to one another and arbitrary. There is no such thing as biological or physiological reality for someone with an unbridled taivoh who wants to be free of any restraints. I once had an airplane encounter with a famous Israeli media personality who also happens to be a leading advocate for deviant lifestyles in Israeli society. I tried to help him understand that there are absolutes in this world. He responded that the science supports his view. I told him that it's all politicized science—there is no study that can't be twisted and distorted to support the conclusion that you already decided you wanted from the beginning.

Hashem creates absolutes in morality. Murder is murder regardless of how much mercy and pity you feel for that terminal patient suffering beyond description. A man is a man and can't become a woman. Marriage is between a man and a woman. The biggest problem people have with the Torah today is accepting that there is an authority which imposes its will and its logic upon us.

The physical world has absolutes and the Torah has absolutes. The Rambam says the issuer of going after your mind and your eyes are complimentary issurim. Don't become preoccupied with base desires and ego gratification. If you do, it will twist your mind into believing whatever you want to believe and you will wind up denying the reality and distorting the Torah. Work within the Torah's logic and submit your mind to the logic of the Torah.