

## KORACH

In the Sedra Korach which we will read in shul this Shabbos, a curious incident takes place. This sedra deals with rebellion of the Levite Korach, a cousin of Moses, and the Reubenite Dason and Avirom. They openly challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron and try, through all sorts of demagogic tricks, to set the people against them. They are immediately joined by 250 elders of the community who dispute the right of Aaron's family to be the sole priests in the nation and claim the right for themselves. The whole congregation of Israel gathers in front of the Tabernacle to watch while Korach confronts Moses. From the text it is clear that the congregation does not take any part at all in the revolt. They just have come to see who is going to win. Suddenly the glory of G-d descends and G-d speaks to Moses, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment." Moses and Aaron immediately fall on their faces and say, "O, G-d, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and wilt Thou be wrath with all the congregation?" G-d then speaks again to Moses, "Speak unto the congregation saying, "Get you up from about the dwelling of Korach, Dason, and Avirom."

This is a very puzzling episode. Why did G-d first want to destroy the congregation and then change His mind? Some of our commentators are so puzzled by this passage that they say Moses misinterpreted G-d's original comment. They say that when G-d first said He was going to destroy the congregation He was only referring to Korach and the 250 elders who wanted to be priests. Moses interpreted this to mean the whole congregation. This, though, does not seem to make sense. Why then did G-d tell Moses to tell the entire congregation to get away from the dwelling of Korach, Dason, and Avirom?

The best interpretation, to my mind, is given by the Malbim. The Malbim states that G-d really, at first, wanted to destroy the entire Jewish people. The entire congregation was guilty of a terrible sin. They had committed the sin of straddling the fence, the sin of indifference. True, they had not supported Korach but

they had not opposed him either. They had adopted a "wait and see" attitude. It, after all, wasn't their business to pass moral judgements. If Moses should win, well and good. They would continue to work with him. If Korach should win, well and good. They would work with him. They were guilty of not opposing what they knew to be wrong. They say their community was being threatened, but they did not want to get involved. For this G-d wanted to destroy them, for condoning evil. Moses protested, though, claiming, "But, G-d, they haven't done anything. Why should You punish them?" G-d replied, "That's the trouble. They haven't done anything. If they want to be saved, let them actively disassociate themselves from the evil about them. Let them get up from about the tents of Korach, Doson, and Avirom."

Unfortunately, it is not enough to do nothing. We must do something to oppose evil. How many people do we have in our community who are repeating the sin of the community in Moses' time, who see many things wrong in our Jewish community and do not take steps in any way to combat them or disassociate themselves from them? Let us remember that the sin of doing nothing is many times the greatest sin of all.

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In the Torah portion, Korach, we learn about the great rebellion of Korach against the leadership of Moshe and Aaron. Moshe, who usually is so patient with the Jewish people, the same Moshe who interceded for the Jewish people with G-d when He was so angry with them after the sin of the golden calf and after they refused to go into the Land of Israel, now loses patience. He even tells the people to "part, turn away please from the tents of these wicked people". He even asks G-d to make a miracle. He wants the earth to open and swallow them up. Moshe even earlier when the revolt started to gain steam, looks at the members of his own tribe who have joined the rebellion against him and he says "Ravlochem, it is enough for you, sons of Levi". The Rabbis explain that there were really two different types of people who joined this revolt. There were the people who, like Korach and Dason and Avison, fomented for the revolt just because of personal ambition. Korach was the richest man in Israel. He was a member of the tribe of Levi and already had special privileges. In fact, in Yiddish there is an expression "to be as rich as Korach". The more he had the more he wanted. He was also a demagogue. He used his great oratorical gifts to stir up the people. Dason and Aviron also were people of ambition. All they wanted to do was bring down Moshe and Aaron. They wanted to just see if they could do it. There are a lot of people who just want to see whether they can make another person squirm. They like to exercise power. This was the first group who opposed Moshe. Then there was a second group which was composed of the members of the tribe of Levi and some from the tribe of Reuven who really wanted to have a spiritual experience. They thought that Moshe was shutting them out from the Sanctuary. He was giving too much to Aaron, but they were sincere like many of our young people today who want some sort of a spiritual experience. They do not know how to get it so they turn to drugs or alcohol or cults or other perverse means. Moshe, though, was angry at all of them. He was probably right in labelling the first group as evil people. The Rabbis teach us that there are four kinds of evil people. Here, of course, we are only speaking in moral terms not legal terms. They say a person is evil if, one, he raises his hand to strike someone even if he does not strike him. This, of course, means that you force a person to do things that he knows he should not do even if you do not physically force him. For example, use emotional tricks and make

him feel ashamed or guilty and say, "What's wrong with you, are you medieval?" In other words, you exercise power over a person just for the fun of it. The second person the Rabbis say is evil is one who borrows and does not pay back. The third is the person who is impudent or arrogant and the fourth is the person who is always stirring up arguments. This is true in all interpersonal relationships. Anyone who wants to destroy a relationship, all he has to do is follow these four points: use emotional trickery on a person to try to get them to do what they want; also never pay back. Usually in every relationship there is a giver and a taker, but the person who gives wants something back, a compliment, a nice word, a note of appreciation, but there are many people who refuse to give it. They even refuse to show any gratitude at all. They will never pay back. There are others who are always arrogant and impudent. They are always putting down the other partner in the relationship, and, finally, there are always those who are stirring up trouble for no reason. All they want to do is make a fight to see what they can do. Korach, Dason, and Aviron were those kind of people. They just wanted to see what they could do, but you know, you can always develop up or down. A lot of the sensitivity training we have is also insensitivity training, trying to make a person feel good about certain things that they should feel disgusted about. Korach, Dason, and Aviron went down not up when they tried to just use power for power's sake. The Rabbis, though, are not happy with Moshe Rabbeinu when he spoke to the second group when he said, "Ravlochem, that is enough for you". It is true that these people were misguided, that they were trying to find spiritual growth the wrong way. The Rabbis even say that Moshe Rabbeinu was punished by these same words when later on he wanted to go into the Land of Israel. G-d told him "Ravlochem Moshe". After all, why did Moshe want to go into the Land of Israel? Not for the riches that are there or the trees or the mountains that are there, but for the spiritual experiences which could be there. The Rabbis say that Moshe should have told these other people that in order to have a spiritual experience we should raise families. That is the way we feel G-d's presence. G-d creates and forms us and we, by creating and forming and shaping a family, are imitating Him and have a true spiritual experience. We, of course, must base our family upon mutual respect and love, and today I am glad to see

a young couple who are about ready to form a family. Spiritual growth cannot come from drugs or alcohol, but it can come from forming a family. When a family is formed with the idea of helping each other and helping make this a better world, it will lead to great spiritual growth.

The story about a boy who was very shy and he could not take out a girl because he did not know what to say. His friend told him, "It's easy. The first thing you do is talk about a family. The second thing, talk about love and likes and dislikes. The third thing, you talk about is philosophy." His friend said, "O.K." and he asked a girl out. He first asked the girl, "Do you have a brother?" She said, "No". That took care of the first topic. He then asked her "Do you like noodles?" She said, "No". Second topic gone. He then remembered he had to talk about philosophy. He asked, "If you had a brother, would he have liked noodles?" You cannot base a relationship on such insubstantial things. We all must respect and never put anyone down, not try to use emotional tricks, and not try to stir up things and appreciate. Then our relationships will last.

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There is a difference between a liar and the demagog. The liar is quickly found out because his words do not conform to reality. However, a demagog is different because he includes a lot of truth in what he says. In fact, the more truth the better the lie. If you want to really tell a convincing lie add a lot of truth to it. That is the difference between the Hebrew word "Emes" and "Sheker." Emes stands for truth and all its letters have at least two points rooted into the ground, but the word Sheker has only one point rooted in the ground. A lie to really be effective has to have some truth. That's what we learned about today with Korach. Korach was a very wealthy man. In fact, in Yiddish we still say "Reich as Korach" "rich as Korach." Korach was also a very smart man. He, however, used his brilliance to just further his ambitions. Many times brilliance blinds a person, as I wrote about in the article this month, how excessive concentration on one thing takes it out of context and distorts it. Other times there are brilliant people who stir things up with words. They plant half truths and get everybody all riled up, and many times they just sit back in the corner not saying a word while other people do their work. This, too, was Korach. It says "Vayeechak Korach" "and Korach took" but it does not say what he took. The rabbis say he took words. He stirred up the sons of Reuven because they were not first in the march. After all, Reuven was the first born. He stirred up the Levites because they felt they were being excluded from the sanctuary with only Aaron and his sons being the priests, and he stirred up others who felt their ambitions were being thwarted. His claims seemed to make sense. He said, "All the congregation is holy and in the midst is G-d. Why do you, Moshe and Aaron, lift yourselves up above the congregation of G-d?" He was a skilled demagog. He asked Moshe questions in order to ridicule the Torah and Moshe's position. He said, "Does a room that contains a hundred Sefer Torahs need a Mezuzah?" When Moshe said yes he and others scoffed at Moshe saying, "A hundred Sefer Torahs are not enough. Here a room that has no Sefer Torah, a piece of the Torah is good enough, but here a room in which there are a hundred Sefer Torahs is not as good as a little piece of parchment on the door."

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He asked Moshe, "If a garment is made of all blue wool, does it need to have a blue Tzitzis?" Moshe answered yes and again he scoffed. It is easy to take things and make them look ridiculous. Every principle can be made to look ridiculous if it is put into the wrong context. During this past week I received many calls from people who are "Tzidduring" "trembling" because they are afraid of the Jewish principle that parents should not testify against children and children should not testify against parents. What are they Tzidduring about? It is a very good principle. In Communist countries children spy on their parents. Do we want that to happen here? Family is very important. In American law there is no such thing as family except in inheritance. Maybe that's why there is so much crime and violence. People are not afraid to do things because it will harm their families. Maybe we should put more safeguards about the family in our law. Maybe the family should be recognized more in law. After all, we have the exclusionary rule where evidence cannot be used if it was seized without a search warrant. We have rules where confessions cannot be used if the defendant was not warned adequately. We have lawyer-client relationships and doctor-client relationships and priests are allowed not to testify against confessants. This principle we have is a good principle. We may be confronted with a terrible case here. I do not know anything about the case. This principle has even been adopted by several states. Why all this obsequiousness and lack of self-respect? Every principle can be made to look ridiculous if put in a certain context. Even in our Shul we have taken certain donations and tried to extrapolate them to all donations. Obviously, when a person buys a yehrzeit plaque which we pay \$20 for and we charge \$200 for, he is paying for the service, not for the bronze plaque. Every yehrzeit we take the plaque, put it in the chapel, and light a light by it. We light a light every Yizkor. His name is in the Book of Remembrance, but just because it makes sense for a memorial plaque it does not mean it makes it sensible for all the other donations to the Shul. It is ridiculous to make a person pay when he wants to give something to the Shul. We have lost so many gifts to the Shul because of this. All things taken out of context

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can be made to look ridiculous and ludicrous. Korach was wrong. You need a Mezuzah on the door. It is not enough just to be Jewish inside. You have to be Jewish on the outside and proclaim it to the world. You need to have fringes on your Tallis. It is not enough just to have a garment without fringes. Fringes speak about potentiality and vision. You must have potentiality and vision as I spoke about last week, and the principle that parents should not testify against children and children against their parents. However, there is nothing wrong with the principle. It may not be accepted yet in the State of Texas and, of course, we have to obey the law, but that does not mean that we cannot say that this principle is also accepted here as it is in other states. Every principle can be put in the wrong context, but it does not invalidate the principle. Family in Judaism is very important. I am happy today to see that this principle of family is being furthered by many of you here today. I am reminded of the story they tell about two people and an Aggie who wanted to get into the Olympic games. Tickets were all sold out. One man, undeterred, grabbed a manhole cover and ran to the gate and said, "Brown - discus" and was let in. The second man grabbed a pipe, ran to the gate and said, "Jones - pole vault" and was let in. The Aggie grabbed some barbed wire, ran to the entrance and said, "Smith - fencing." He, of course, was not let in. Taking principles out of context to make them ludicrous is easy, but it does not destroy the principles.

# Can Brilliance Lead To Stupidity

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Many times we run across people whose very brilliance causes them to act stupidly. Great concentrative powers are needed ~~in order~~ to obtain vast amounts of knowledge and to use this knowledge intelligently. You can usually immediately tell a good student by whether ~~or not~~ he has the ability to concentrate. ~~They~~ once asked (Oliver Wendell Holmes) what it took to become a brilliant lawyer or judge ~~he~~ said all it took was the ability to concentrate on the subject at hand.

However, this great ability to concentr<sup>a</sup>te is a great gift. The ability to concentrate is like a laser. By combining all the different strands  of light and focusing it on an object, we can get right to the core of the object. However, we can also destroy and burn it. In order to concentrate you have to blot out from your mind everything except the subject matter at hand. Many times I have seen great scholars, great Talmudic Chachomeem who, in the midst of chaos, are completely oblivious to their surroundings and who are so completely immersed in their studies that they do not see or hear anything that goes on around them. Many times you have to shake them, literally, quite hard several times in order to gain their attention. We are all aware of the stereotype of the absent<sub>x</sub>-minded professor, but really this image of the absent minded professor is only another way of stating that some people with great intellectual powers concentrate so much on the subject at hand that they are oblivious to most of their surroundings. I am reminded of the famous story they tell about a professor a hundred years ago who was debating Darwin's theory of evolution with his son, and how he got so involved in the subject that ~~he~~<sup>he</sup> completely lost his perspective and said, "Maybe your father was a monkey but mine

certainly wasn't."

This ability to completely concentrate all one's intellectual energies on a particular subject to the exclusion of all else is a wonderful tool for research, but many times it has disastrous interpersonal consequences. It destroys relationships and does not allow for the subject under decision to be put in its proper context. Fanaticism and demagoguery of all kinds, even if well meant, owe much to the distortion of this great analytical tool, the ability to concentrate on the subject at hand to the exclusion of everything else. A surgeon, when he operates, drapes the body to hide and cover every other area of the body ~~except~~ <sup>so that he will concentrate only on</sup> the area in which he is operating. However, a surgeon always has an anaesthesiologist and assistants who monitor a patient's vital signs so ~~they will never say~~ <sup>NEVER WANT IT SAID</sup> that the operation was a success but ~~the patient died.~~ <sup>that a patient's total health as well as the area being operated on will</sup> *always be considered. We*

In life, too often, a person's ~~excessive zeal and~~ excessive concentration on a worthwhile goal, ~~which he or she even may achieve,~~ may in the process destroy the very institution of ~~the~~ <sup>f</sup> marriage or the relationships which he or she was trying to enhance, <sup>in pursuing this goal</sup>. We must always alternate excessive concentration with a glance at the general situation. Analysis and synthesis must go hand in hand. We Jews have always recognized this. That's why we developed the stories of the wise men of Chelm. These were people who were so smart they became stupid. Everything they said made 100% logical sense, but it was taken out of context and became ludicrous, like the time they asked the men of Chelm what was more important, the sun or the moon. They immediately replied, "The moon because it shines when there is no light."

In the Torah portion, Korach, we learn about such a person. Korach was a man who was so smart that he became stupid. The rabbis tell us that Korach was the richest man in Israel, a man who was not only clever and smart but very persuasive. He was able to marshall 250 of the most important community leaders in a rebellion ~~publicly challenging~~ <sup>agent</sup> Moshe's leadership. He fanned discontent in the hearts of the Jewish people by telling Moshe, "You take too much upon yourself seeing that all the congregation is holy." He dressed each of the 250 men who were with him in four-cornered garments made of blue threads, and then he asked Moshe if these robes conformed to Jewish law. According to Halacha, any time a person wears a four-cornered garment he must put on Tzitzis, fringes, on each corner, and ~~on each corner of the Tzitzis in those~~ <sup>in those days</sup> ~~days there was~~ <sup>A</sup> ~~a blue thread,~~ <sup>was required on each corner.</sup> Moshe looked at the robes and saw <sup>they</sup> they had no Tzitzis. He said they did not conform to Jewish law. Korach ridiculed Moshe by saying, "Four <sup>blue</sup> threads satisfies Jewish law, but a whole robe made of blue threads do not!" Korach continued mocking Moshe by saying, "Would a whole room filled with Torahs need a mezuzah?" When Moshe answered yes, he said, "What kind of a law have you given us, Moshe? An empty room which has a quotation from the Torah <sup>in the Torah</sup> is kosher, but a whole room filled with holy books without a quotation is not?"

Korach then went on to show all the injustices that could follow from following the Torah as given to them by Moshe. He made a story up about a poor widow who only owned one field. She could not plow it properly because the Torah forbade plowing with an ox and an ass together. She could not plant it properly because the Torah forbade

planting with mixed seed. She could not even harvest all her meager crop because the Torah says you must leave the corners of your field for the poor. Because of all these hardships, she was forced to sell her field and bought <sup>with</sup> with the money ~~lamb~~. Of course, Korach did not stop there. He said, "From these few sheep she had to give part of the fleece to the priests and the first born to the priests. Look who is impoverishing her! Moshe's law and the priests!"

Korach, by concentrating his arguments and not putting them in the proper context, had made a convincing case against Moshe and Moshe's Torah. However, you cannot plow with an ox and an ass together. The animals walk at different paces. Sowing with different seeds makes harvesting difficult and getting a good price for the crop impossible as well as making the resulting seed sterile. All of Korach's criticisms can be rebutted if put in context. Sometimes, for the sake of argument and for the sake of research, it is important to disregard the context and just look at the logical conclusions of one's thoughts. (Boullian algebra, a system of computation which is <sup>based</sup> ~~based~~ on just a yes or no answer, was thought to be an oddity until computers came along. Many human experiments in very limited contexts can have a wider application as important tools in modern life, but we must always recognize their limitations.

Many times people, especially in interpersonal relationships, by pushing their arguments to the limit, leave out so much they invariably

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make the wrong decisions. I know so many people who have come to me with different marriage or business problems, and many of the problems they have, have come about because they have looked at their problems in such a narrow way. Instead of looking at the many good things, the 90%, the 95% good things they have in their relationships, they look at only the 10% or 5% or 1% bad things. This very small percentage drives them crazy. They do not have the proper perspective. This was Korach. He wanted to be high priest so badly that he magnified the faults in Aaron and Moshe while minimizing his and other leaders' important roles in the community. He was able to convince himself and others that Moshe and Aaron were <sup>over-weening</sup> overweening, arrogant people who had usurped authority which did not belong to them.

In Hebrew the word "Korach" can also mean "to uproot" and also "to rob a person of alternatives." "Kereach Meekan U'Meekan." Korach, by his overwhelming concentration on fulfilling his own ambition, had robbed himself and others of alternatives. He stirred up so much trouble that he made the issue either <sup>chose me OR chose Moshe</sup> ~~Moshe~~ or ~~him~~. The issue was settled when he was literally swallowed up by the earth. 250 followers were consumed by fire, by the fire of their own ambition. We must all learn how to be filled with enthusiasm without being burnt by the fires of our own passions. The problem with an excessive concentration on particular issues is that you end up guarding one tree so well that all the rest of the forest is cut down before you even know what happened.

We must always put everything in perspective. Judaism teaches balance and moderation. Even in Jewish learning we distinguish between theory

