

Parshas Korach

SOLID GROUND

At one point in the wilderness, people went to Moshe, and lamented that they were impure at the time the Korban Pesach was offered, and wanted inclusion in the mitzvah. Their feedback was legitimate, and the law of Pesach Sheni was revealed.

Yet Korach too sought more inclusion – that everyone ought to have access to the holy service, not just the Kohanim. His demise was swift.

What is the difference between what they wanted if their complaint was essentially the same?

There is a concept that all negative characteristics have a positive application – for example, it is permitted to be jealous of a tzaddik or great scholar. Such jealousy can foster aspirations, that if realised, transform a person. This operates on the stepping-stone principle that *בה לשמה, מתוך שלו לשמה* – misdirected thought can nonetheless develop into legitimate action and intent.

However, there is a caveat to this rule. Not all misguided actions are reparable in the long term – one type of action will never become legitimate – argument. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos 5: 17 says *כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתיקם*.

להתיקם. ושאינה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתיקם. – Any argument for the sake of Heaven, will endure in the end. One that is not for sake of Heaven, will not endure. What is the paradigm of an argument for the sake of heaven? Hillel and Shamai. What is the paradigm of an argument not the sake of Heaven? Korach and his congregation.

Is it simply that an argument in Torah will endure, and that politics will not?

R' Yaakov Minkus explains that there is more to it than that. Adding the mitzvah of Pesach Sheni was not a problem – the Torah was not closed canon yet. Korach however, was looking to cause issues and rifts.

Hillel and Shamai were looking to build halachos, and build a system to live by. From one's point of view, we understand the other better. We need both to build and consolidate. A losing argument is included in the Gemara because it is a valid view that aids in understanding the issue.

Not so with Korach. His arguments were not constructive at all. His claims and goals were literally baseless and without foundation – note how the ground on which he stood collapsed beneath him – he was not fighting for anything real. The same is certainly not true of the Pesach Sheni crowd – therein lies the difference.

The Mishna says as much too. The paradigm of an argument not for the sake of heaven is “Korach and his congregation.”. If the parallel to Hillel And Shamai were correct, it ought to have said “Korach and Moshe”. Korach wasn’t really fighting anyone at all – it was just about causing a stir and breaking down the system that existed.

This is what Rashi and the Targum mean – ויקח קרח – “And Korach took” – What did he take? Himself, to one side.

It was never about Moshe. It was about causing a stir. The Pesach Sheni people wanted to be close to God – the parallel to Korach’s falls away swiftly.

INAUGURATION

In the topic of Kodshim – the section of Torah that addresses Beis HaMikdash protocol, sacrifices, priesthood and the like – there is a procedure for designating utensils and tools for service. This made them Hekdesh – separate, and not for personal use or benefit. Historically, the procedure was done with שמן המשחה – anointing oil. It is said that the flask of oil that Moshe first used never ran dry, and the same oil was used to coronate kings of Israel.

Before the Second Temple, however, this oil was lost, along with numerous other artefacts. The Gemara in Menachos queries how they brought new utensils into service if they hadn’t been properly designated by the oil, and concludes that their use as holy items intrinsically made them holy – “avodoson mechanchosom”.

This was necessitated by circumstance. But perhaps there is a source in the Torah.

Ahron, Korach and his followers, all men of great stature, were instructed to take brand new pans, put on the same incense recipe, and God would display preference. Ahron’s was accepted, and Korach and the lead revolutionaries fell into the earth, while the remaining revolutionaries were consumed by a fire. The pans used for the test fell to the ground. Korach’s property went down into the void with him, but the pans of the great men, who had righteous intentions, remained. Their memory was not destroyed, because they truly wanted all Jews to have equal access to the holiness of the service.

God recognised this:

אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וְגַרְמֵם אֶת הַמַּחֲוֹת מִבֵּינֵי הַשְּׂרִפָּה וְאֶת הָאֵשׁ זָרָה הַלְּאָה כִּי קִדְשׁוּ. אֶת מַחֲוֹת הַחֲטָאִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּנִפְשָׁתָם
– Say to Elazar son of Ahron that he should pick up the pans from the burned area and throw the fire away, because they have become sanctified. The pans of these who sinned at the cost of their lives; they shall make them into flattened plates as an overlay for the altar (17: 3)

Their use had sanctified them, excluding the possibility of anyone using them privately ever again. They were Hekdesh – personal benefit was prohibited, and they necessarily had to become part of the Mishkan as a result.

But all things considered, they didn’t really become part of the service – they weren’t used in a capacity of pans. Is the cover for the altar part of the service? Is this a Torah proof of the concept that using an item inaugurates it?

Probably not. But there is one pan which has been overlooked – Ahron's. Korach, Dasan and Aviram's plunged into the depths of the earth, and the 250 men's became a cover for the altar, but what of Ahron's?

Ahron's was fine where it was and did not need instruction. It was in the Ohel Moed, right where it belonged – in the Mishkan – and became a part and parcel of the service. Conclusive.

TIME TO SHINE

After the story of Korach, all the pans that were used for the incense test were smelted into a cover for the Mizbeach, with an accompanying warning:

וְלֹא יִהְיֶה כְּקֹרַח וְכַעֲדָתוֹ – Do not be like Korach and his congregation.

Rashi understands that this served as a reminder to avoid spurious argument. The Yereim classifies such argument as a sin God, but not to mankind.

But argument is observably detrimental to relationships; why does argument and strife come under the category of sins against Heaven – **בין אדם למקום**?

Perhaps it stems from not understanding people's role and specialities.

The Chinuch notes that a Levi who performs the service of a Kohen is subject to the death penalty. Not because of a higher sanctity – because the inverse is also true; a Kohen who performs the service of a Levi is also punishable by death.

Moreover, abandoning a designated role is also punishable by death. If a duty is as simple as guarding the gates, and the Levi leaves his post to for the singing which is he is allowed to do as a Levi, he is also subject to the death penalty for not doing what was required of him.

Perhaps this explains what the warning is. Everyone is put on this world for a particular reason and function. Everyone has their own abilities and potential that does not infringe on any one else's – nor anyone else on yours. Missing this is a fundamental mistake and underrates yourself and your abilities.

A Korach claim that everyone is homogenous and ultimately the same, treads all over the speciality of individuals. Like a Kohen who doesn't appreciate that his work is specific to him, and feels that he can also serve as a Levi, there is a fatal flaw in their understanding of God's providence, and arguably a certain degree of heresy and apikorsus – perhaps the reason this is punishable by death!

Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.

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