

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Korach

Two Hundred and Fifty plus One

קחו איש מקחתו ונתתם עליהם קטורת

And let each man take his fire-pan and place ketores on them. (16:17)

When Korach and his men complain about being excluded from the service in the Mishkan, Moshe responds by telling them each to offer the ketores; for through that, the one whom Hashem chooses will be known. Why, out of all the korbanos, does Moshe choose the ketores as the means to clarify who is fit to do the avodah?

The Meshech Chochmah explains this matter by taking a step back and analyzing the demand of these men. Did they have any actual basis for their claim that they were fit to do the avodah?

In their minds, they did.

MISHANDLING SUCCESS

Among these two hundred and fifty men were the twelve nesiim¹ who each offered their own korbanos on the twelve inaugural days of the Mishkan. Their korbanos on that occasion consisted of three categories: *chatos*, *olah* and *shelamim*.² These were exactly the same categoris of korban offered by Aharon on his inaugural day;³ something which itself gave the nesiim reason to believe that their avodah was on a par with that of Aharon.

However, there was more. Part of the korbanos of the nesiim was an offering of ketores.⁴ Ketores is something that may never, under normal circumstances, be offered by an individual from his own assets, yet during those twelve days, the private ketores of the nesiim was accepted. In contrast to this, on the very first day of the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu – two kohanim – attempted to offer ketores of their own and were killed on the spot!⁵ In this instance, the nesiim's avodah was apparently considered *more acceptable*

1 See Bamidbar Rabbah, parsha 18 siman 3.

2 As detailed in Bamidbar perek 7, see e.g. ibid. pesukim 15-17

3 See Vayikra 9:2-4.

4 Bamidbar 7:14.

5 Vayikra 10:1-2.

than that of Aharon's own sons. This was used by them as further evidence that they were as qualified – if not more so – to perform the avodah as were Aharon and his family. Thus, they confronted Moshe with the claim that “the entire congregation is holy,”⁶ referring to the nesiim, “and Hashem is in their midst,” for He accepted their korbanos on the day of the inauguration of the Mishkan. They clung to this belief even in the face of an explicit injunction from Moshe in Hashem's name the avodah was off-limits for them and that those inaugural days were the exception – not the rule. Therefore, explains Meshech Chochmah, the test which became their undoing was also with the ketores, whose one-time acceptance they abused and developed into the basis of rebelling against Moshe as emissary of Hashem.

LEARNING A MIDRASH

With this in mind, the Meshech Chochmah provides a chilling interpretation of a comment of Chazal concerning these nesiim. The Midrash states that the usage of the word “ויהי” in the Torah carries with it a connotation of calamity. The Midrash then raises a question on this assertion from the Torah's description of the first inaugural day of the Mishkan,⁷ “וַיִּהְיֶה הַמִּקְרִיב בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן וְגו'” – *It was, the one who offered on the first day etc.*” The Midrash responds that this instance, too, has calamitous overtones, for the twelve nesiim described during these inaugural days would subsequently meet their end as part of Korach's dispute with Moshe.

On the face of it, this answer of the Midrash is very difficult. Seeing as we are dealing with the joyous time of the inauguration of the Mishkan, why would the Torah see fit to allude to the tragedy that occurred at a much later time, under completely different circumstances? The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, is that the tragic end of these nesiim is alluded to at that earlier time because *the inauguration itself* was part of what led to that tragedy. For the nesiim refused to accept that their success on that occasion was not an indication of their qualification to perform the avodah on an ongoing basis!⁸

KORACH'S MEN – AND KORACH

As much as Korach's men made a tragic – and fatal – error, it is important to recognize that, ultimately, their intent was to perform the avodah. Indeed, as much as they had to be punished, they nonetheless merited that the fire-pans upon which they placed the ketores were used to plate the copper altar as a reminder of their mistake. This “mixed” verdict of castigation on the one hand and sanctification on the other is itself an expression of the Torah's recognition of their pure motivation even as it led them to unacceptable actions.

Not so, Korach. He manipulated the lofty ambition of his peers and presented himself as one of them, but his root intention was purely to undermine Moshe Rabbeinu. The point where the divide between him and his men became apparent was when Moshe instructed all those who sought the avodah to offer ketores. The pasuk states⁹ that

6 Pasuk 3.

7 Bamidbar 7:12.

8 It should be pointed out that the Meshech Chochmah concludes this section with a discussion as to why Nachshon ben Aminadav, Nasi of Yehuda, was not able to dissuade his peers from becoming involved in the rebellion of Korach. In other words, it is clear to him that Nachshon himself was not involved in the rebellion. Rav Copperman, in his commentary, notes that it is not entirely clear what the basis of this assertion is.

9 16:18.

the two hundred and fifty men proceeded to place ketores on their fire-pans, but makes no mention of Korach doing likewise. Indeed, the pasuk in a later chapter¹⁰ relates that, unlike these men who were consumed by the fire from their ketores, Korach was swallowed up by the ground along with Dasan and Aviram.

Why did Korach not participate in offering the ketores?

The answer is that, unlike his men, for Korach to do so would lead him further away from his goal. The intention of his men was to prove themselves worthy of performing the avodah. Upon being informed by Moshe as to how to go about doing so, they immediately complied. Korach's goal, by contrast, was to undermine Moshe's authority. As such, the last thing he was prepared to do was listen to Moshe about anything, even if it involved attaining the goal of avodah that he was officially pursuing!

Indeed, pasuk 19 states that Korach "gathered the entire assembly around them to the entrance of the Mishkan." Chazal¹¹ inform us that Korach's intent was to scoff at them. The question is – at whom was he scoffing? The common understanding is that it was for purposes of mocking Moshe and Aharon. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that when Korach gathered the assembly to the Mishkan, it was for purposes of mocking his own men! Korach was saying, "Look at them. They claim that Moshe's instructions are untrue and then proceed to follow his instructions!" It was here that the gulf between Korach and his men became apparent. People who moments earlier had been his comrades in revolt now became the objects of his scorn and derision.

Hence, when Moshe and Aharon pleaded that the Jewish People as a whole be spared the retribution of the rebellion, they said,¹² "הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחַטָּא וְעַל כָּל הָעֵדָה תִּקְרָא" – *Shall one man sin and You be angry with the entire assembly?* With these words, they separated Korach from the others in his group as the only individual in that group whose sin stemmed from evil intent.

This is a key lesson to be learned from the Parsha of Korach. When a machlokes is conducted not for the sake of Heaven, even allies are often one step away from becoming each other's adversaries.

10 26:10.

11 Quoted in Rashi ibid.

12 Pasuk 22.