

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Korach

Safe Humility and Real Humility

וַיַּחַר לְמֹשֶׁה מְאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל ה'... לֹא חָמַזְר אֶחָד מֵהֶם נִשְׁאַתִּי וְלֹא הִרְעֵתִי אֶת אֶחָד מֵהֶם

Moshe was greatly distressed and he said to Hashem “...I have not taken even a single donkey of theirs nor have I wronged even one of them.” (16:15)

Our pasuk describes how, upon being accused of abusing his position of power over the Jewish people, Moshe protests to Hashem that he has not abused his position as leader to wrongfully appropriate anything of theirs or to wronged even one individual among them.

It is interesting to note that the aleph of the word “אֶחָד” in the second phrase is vowelized with a patach. This appears to be a departure from the norm where it is vowelized with a segol – “אֶחָד”, as is the case, for example in the earlier phrase (חָמַזְר אֶחָד). In fact, this change in vowelization also seems to change the meaning; for while the word “אֶחָד” simply means “one”, the word “אֶחָד” denotes a prominent personality, as we find for example, that King Avimelech refers to himself as “אֶחָד הָעַם – the most prominent among the nation.”¹ What added insight does this observation give us into Moshe’s words?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. It is easy for a person to feign humility by acting humble in the presence of those who are clearly of a much lower standing than he. Since they are obviously not his equals, he does not risk any of his gestures of honor toward them being interpreted as if he actually considers them to be greater than himself, Heaven forbid. As such, this form of humility is “safe”. The true test of humility is with one’s peers, since there is the danger that the honor he accords them is actually because he considers them to be greater than himself. Someone with false humility will therefore never apply it to his equals. Only a truly humble person will accord honor to those who be viewed as real competition for his status.

This is the type of humility we find with Moshe. When Eldad and Medad attained a high level of prophesy, and indeed, were prophesying about Moshe being denied bringing the people into the land of Israel, Moshe responds by saying, “Would that all of Hashem’s

1 Bereishis 26:10.

nation would be prophets such as these!”

This is Moshe’s intent by proclaiming before Hashem that he had never wronged any prominent individual (“אָהַד”) among the people, for, as a leader, it is primarily toward those individuals that any abuse of power on his part would have been directed.

A most profound lesson from the Meshech Chochmah, not only in the subject of humility, but also in terms of what can be gleaned by paying attention to a single vowel in the Torah.

The Test with the Staffs

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאֵתֶם מִטֵּה מִטֵּה לְבֵית אָב... שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and take from them one staff for each father’s house... twelve staffs (17:17)

With Korach and his men having received punishment in such a decisive manner for their insurrection against Hashem’s word as transmitted through Moshe, is it difficult to know what meaningful claim could still exist that would be addressed through the test with the staffs.

NATURAL DISTINCTION

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The mistake of Korach and his men was that they thought the choice of Aharon (and, by extension, the tribe of Levi) was based on merit alone. If so, then should they at some point become lacking in merit, they should forfeit their status and others more deserving could assume their role. They did not realize that Aharon’s status was inherent and hence not subject to change, as surely as the choice of the Jewish people themselves as Hashem’s nation is essential and immutable. It is with this in mind the Midrash² states that when Levi was born, the angel Gavriel brought him before Hashem, Who called him “Levi”, referring to the twenty-four gifts of kehunah that would accompany (יליו) him.

This was the message of the test with the staffs. In this instance, no expression was given to any status that did not accrue to that tribe from birth. For this reason, Menasheh and Efraim were not represented by two separate staffs. The division of Yosef into two tribes was a result of Reuven having lost the firstborn status with which he was born, which was then taken up by Yosef based on his merit. Indeed, for this reason, it appears that the division of Menasheh and Efraim into two distinct tribes is *not permanent*, as pointed out by the Rashbam and Tosafos in Bava Basra,³ citing the pasuk in Yechezkel⁴ regarding the future inheritance of the land of Israel: “שַׁעַר יוֹסֵף אֶחָד” – the gate of Yosef [will be] one.”

2 Cited in Rashi to Bereishis 29:34.

3 122a.

4 48:32.

KEHUNAH AND KINGSHIP

For Aharon's staff to blossom in this setting was an indication that his status was likewise inborn and innate. In this regard, the Sifrei⁵ states that the covenant of kehunah which was formed with Aharon was greater than that of kingship which was formed with David. For although some of Aharon's descendant's may be unworthy, they retain their status as kohanim, while the unworthiness of David's descendants led to the dissolution of the institution of kingship until such time as it will be merited again.

A SAFEGUARD FOR ALL TIMES

For this reason, after the test, Hashem commanded Moshe to place Aharon's staff in the Kodesh Hakodashim, "As a safeguard for those of contention, so that their complaints shall cease forever." In other words, should people in the future claim that Aharon and his sons were worthy of the kehunah but his descendants have since lost that worthiness, the staff will remind them that the choice of Aharon is inherently based and hence, will endure forever.

5 Korach, sec. 119.