

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Korach

Korach's Claim: A Deeper Look

BACKGROUND AND SOME QUESTIONS

Much of our parsha deals with Korach's rebellion, whereby he assembled a group of two hundred and fifty individuals who claimed that they, too, should be allowed to perform the avodah (Divine service), and not just Aharon. To this, Moshe responds by proposing the test with the *ketores* (incense) to determine who is qualified to do the avodah. Moshe then proceeds to say:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל קִרְחַי שְׁמַעוּ נָא בְנֵי לֵוִי. הֲמַעַט מִכֶּם כִּי הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעֵדֻת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן ה'... וּבִקְשׁוּתְכֶם גַּם כְּהֹנֵה.

Moshe said to Korach, "Hear now, sons of Levi: Is not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the assembly of Israel to draw you near to Him, to perform the service of the Mishkan of Hashem... and yet you seek priesthood as well!"

This lengthy remonstrance with the tribe of Levi is most perplexing. Korach's assembly, as far as we know, is comprised of people from the cross-spectrum of the tribes of Israel, as indeed verse two introduces them: "two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel." We are not aware of Levi, as a tribe, being especially prominent within this group or making any claims beyond those of the other tribes. Why, then, does Moshe see them as a sub-group that warrants a mote lengthy response? Indeed, even Moshe's initial response in which he outlines the test with the *ketores*, which is ostensibly addressed to the *entire assembly*, concludes with the words: "רַב לָכֶם בְּנֵי לֵוִי – It is too much for you, sons of Levi"!

On a different note, it is very interesting that while throughout the entire parsha Hashem, is referred to with the *Shem Havaya* (the Tetragrammaton)¹ verse nine, describing the separation of Levi, refers to Him with the name "אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – the God of Israel." What is behind the anomalous usage of this name within our parsha?

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE CHET HA'EHEL

The argument of Korach's assembly, as explained by many commentators, was that they felt the avodah in the Mishkan should not be restricted to Aharon and his descendants. Rather, it should be available for

1 I.e. YUD-HEY-VAV-HEY.

the firstborn of every family, regardless of what tribe they were from, as was originally the case before it as transferred to the Kohanim.

However, this argument appears instantly and fatally flawed. While it is true that the avodah originally resided with all the tribes of Israel, all that changed when they forfeited that privilege as a result of the sin of the *Egel* (Golden Calf). How can they simply ignore this catastrophic event and the changes it brought in its wake? Things are different now as a result of that tragic episode, and the avodah no longer resides with the firstborn!

There is one further point to consider, however, for there was one tribe that was not involved in the *Egel* – the tribe of Levi. There is room to argue that in the same way that they did not participate in that sin, they should likewise not be impacted by its consequences.² We will appreciate that this is of particular relevance for someone like Korach, who was both a firstborn and a Levi. As such, he would appear to have all the qualifications required to perform the avodah plus immunity from it being removed from him.

We can now understand that, upon being confronted by Korach and his men Moshe immediately surmises that the only group with a truly credible claim – and with whom he needs to remonstrate at any length – are those among them from the tribe of Levi. Hence, after dismissing the assembly in general with an instruction to come back the next morning for the test with the *ketores*, he proceeds to devote particular attention to the Leviim, explaining that they are asking for too much.

And what is the answer to their claim? *Why*, in fact, are they no longer eligible for the avodah? Why should they have to bear the consequences of a sin that they did not commit? The answer is: because they are part of the people of Israel, and that entails sharing in the national experience of that people, both positive and negative. As such, if circumstances have changed as result of the *Egel*, they have changed for everyone, including the Leviim. For them to continue as if the *Egel* had never occurred would mean to detach themselves fundamentally from the rest of the People.

**LEARNING A MIDRASH:
KORACH'S ASSEMBLY AND THE SALE OF YOSEF**

In his blessing to his son, Shimon and Levi, Yaakov says:

בְּסֹדֶם אֶל תְּבֵא נַפְשִׁי בְּקִהְלָם אֶל תִּחַד בְּבִדְי כִּי בְאַפָּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרִצְנָם עָקְרוּ שׂוֹר

Let my soul not enter into their counsel, let my honor not enter into their assembly; for in their rage they killed people, and through their will they hamstrung an ox.

The Midrash explains the phrase "let my honor not enter their assembly" as a reference to the assembly of Korach, who was from the tribe of Levi. The four phrases in the verse contain two statements of disassociation and then two of explanation. This means that the fourth and final phrase "and through their will they hamstrung an ox", which refers to their plotting against Yosef, is said in repudiation of the later assembly of Korach, referred to in the second phrase.

How are these two incidents connected?

One of the primary explanations for the extreme action the brothers took against Yosef was that

they saw his bring bad reports about them to their father as an attempt to sideline them from being included in the future of the Jewish people, much as Yishmael and Esav had been excluded in the two preceding generations. As such, the judged him as a *rodef* – one who was seeking to bring about their spiritual demise – and hence decided to prevent this from happening through whatever means necessary.³

This, then is what Yaakov is saying. In light of how you yourselves reacted when you perceived one of your number as looking to exclude you from being part of the Jewish people, I am protesting against any association with your later attempts to do just that to your own brothers during the episode of Korach.

THE MEANING OF THE NAME YISRAEL

Rabbeinu Yitzchak Arama, in his commentary Akeydas Yitzchak to Parshas Vayigash states the connotation of the name “Yisrael” in describing the Jewish people is as comprised specifically of all the twelve tribes. He direct our attention to the verse involving the confrontation between Eliyahu and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel:⁴

וַיִּקַּח אֱלִיָּהוּ שְׁתַּיִם עֵשֶׂרָה אֲבָנִים בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁבַטֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה דְבַר ה' אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר
יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהִי שְׁמֶךָ

Eliyahu took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes of the children of Yaakov, to whom the word of Hashem came, saying, “Your name shall be Israel”

We see that the verse elaborates on and specifies the connection between the number of twelve tribes and the changing of Yaakov’s name to Yisrael, for that is a key element within the designation of Yisrael.

Likewise, in the episode of *Pilegesh be’Givah*, when one of the twelve tribes, Binyamin, nearly got wiped out, the verse states:⁵

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָמָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵיטָה זֹאת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַפְקֹד הַיּוֹם מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל שְׁבֵט אֶחָד

They said, “Why, Hashem, God of Israel, has this happened in Israel, that one tribe today should be removed from Israel?”

The name “Israel” is repeated three times in that one verse, for the extinction of one of the twelve tribes would be an abrogation of the meaning of that name.

With this in mind, let us return to verse 9 of our chapter. We noted that, although throughout the chapter the name “Hashem” is used, this one verse departs from that pattern and refers to “the God of Israel.” As we have seen, the deeper goal behind Korach’s claim was, ultimately, for the tribe of Levi to detach themselves from the joint experience of the rest of the people. To this end, Moshe informs them that the degree to which they have already been separated from the other tribes in recognition of their non-participation in the *chet he’egel*, attending to the Kohanim,

3 See e.g. commentaries of Rokeach and Malbim to Bereishis Chap. 37.

4 Melachim I, 18:31.

5 Shoftim 21:3.

represents the maximum that Hashem – “The God of Yisrael” – will allow in the post-*Egel* era. To separate them any further, allowing them to continue as if the *Egel* never happened, would effectively sever all ties between them and the other tribes, nullifying their status as Yisrael. This is something that the God of Israel would not allow.

A PROCLAMATION FOR ROSH CHODESH

The Gemara relates⁶ that Rabbah bar Bar Chanah was taken by an Arb nomad to the place where Korach and his men were swallowed. The guide told Rabbah to put his ear to the ground and listen. When he did, he heard voices proclaiming “משה ותורתו אמת והם בדאים – Moshe and his Torah are true, and we are liars.” The Arab informed Rabbah that this proclamation is one that they are forced to make once every thirty days. The Rashbam there explains that this takes place on Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the month.

What is the connection between Rosh Chodesh and Korach’s dispute?

The twelve months of the year correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, with each Rosh Chodesh constituting a festival of sorts for one of the tribes. Therefore, on the first day of each month, Korach and his men need to proclaim the falsehood of their claim which entailed the rejection of the tribe associated with that month.

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