

The Problem With Korach

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According to the Midrash when the Israelites were in Egypt, Korach had a high position in the Egyptian government and was actually in charge of Pharaoh's treasure houses. Korach then used that appointment to enrich himself from Pharaoh's jewels. In this context, and knowing that at the end of the story Korach and his followers are swallowed whole by earth, the Midrash cites the verse: "One who amasses wealth by unjust means; in the middle of his life it will leave him, and in the end he will be proved a fool" (Jeremiah, 17:11; Bamidbar Rabbah, 18).

Since Korach took the money from the wicked Pharaoh who was enslaving the Israelites, Korach probably justified his actions by saying he was taking the money from an evil man. However, the Dubnover Maggid explains via a parable why Korach's actions were deeply problematic and unjustifiable:

Once there was a big party passing through a small town that stopped at a local tavern to celebrate. Everyone was drinking and eating freely and having a merry time. Meanwhile a thief snuck in and started going through everyone's bags and stealing their money. When the tavern owner saw this, he seized the thief by the shirt, took back the money from the thief, and then threw him out of the tavern at once. The thief said to the tavern owner, "Why are you getting involved? This has nothing to do with you. I am not stealing your money. I am only taking the money of these travelers." The tavern owner responded: "And what do you think is going to happen when these customers try to pay me and have no more money? So, in fact, you are not only stealing their money, you are also stealing my money."

Explains the Dubnover Maggid, Korach thought he was only stealing money from Pharaoh, but he was also stealing money from his fellow Israelites. Hashem had promised the Israelites that they would eventually leave the land of Egypt with great wealth (Bereishit, 15:14), which would come from Pharaoh and other Egyptians. For this reason, from the Divine perspective it was not actually Pharaoh's money in the treasury. Pharaoh was only holding the money as a deposit for the future for when all the Egyptian treasures would be transferred to the Israelites. Therefore, Korach was not only stealing from Pharaoh, he was also stealing from the *Benei Yisrael* (cited in *Vekarata Leshabbat Oneg*, volume 2, 339-340).

We came across a text in our daf yomi studies this week which also sheds light on what was so problematic about Korach's actions. The Talmud tells us that R. Elazar b. R' Yosi had been given access to the treasure houses of Rome and, when he was there, he was able to see some sacred items that had been pilfered from the Beit Hamikdash (Yoma, 57a). A fuller version of this story is found in tractate Meilah:

*On one occasion the gentile monarchy issued a decree that the Jewish people may not observe Shabbat, and that they may not circumcise their sons, and that they must **not** obey the laws of niddah.... The Sages said: Who will go and nullify these decrees?*

Let Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai go to Rome, as he is accustomed to experiencing miracles. And who shall go after him, i.e., with him? Rabbi Elazar bar Rabbi Yosei. When Rabbi Yosei, Rabbi Elazar's father, heard this suggestion, he said to the Sages: But if Abba Ḥalafta, my father, were alive, would you be able to say to him: Give your son to be killed? If so, how can you ask me to send my son to Rome, where he is likely to be killed? Rabbi Shimon said to the Sages: If Yoḥai, my father, were alive, would you be able to say to him: Give your son to be killed? Nevertheless, I am prepared to risk my life and go to Rome, and if so, Rabbi Elazar bar Rabbi Yosei should accompany me. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yosei said to the Sages: If so, I will go in place of my son. I do not want him to go with Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai, as this is what I fear: My son Elazar is young and quick to answer, and I am concerned lest Rabbi Shimon, who is hot-tempered, will become angry with him and punish him. Rabbi Shimon accepted upon himself that he would not punish Rabbi Elazar.... The Gemara continues the story: As they were journeying, a demon named ben Temalyon emerged to greet them. He said to them: Do you wish that I will join you and come with you in order to help nullify this decree? When he saw that a demon was coming to help save the Jewish people, Rabbi Shimon cried and said: What, even for a maidservant of my father's home, Hagar the Egyptian, who was Abraham's handmaid, an angel was made available to appear to her three times to help her. Each of the three mentions of "and the angel of the Lord said unto her" (Genesis 16:9–11) in the story of Hagar is understood as a reference to a different angel. But I apparently do not deserve assistance from an angel even one time, but only help from a demon. In any case, let the miracle come and save the Jewish people, even if only through a demon. The demon ben Temalyon went before them and ascended into the emperor's daughter and possessed her. When Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai arrived there, the emperor's palace, he said: Ben Temalyon, emerge! Ben Temalyon, emerge! And once Rabbi Shimon called to him, ben Temalyon emerged and left the emperor's daughter, and she was cured. When the emperor saw that Rabbi Shimon had cured his daughter, he said to them: Ask from me any reward that you want to ask. And he took them up to his treasury to take whatever they wanted. They found that letter there that contained the decrees against the Jewish people, and they took it and tore it up, and thereby nullified the decrees. The Gemara adds: And this is the background for that which Rabbi Elazar bar Rabbi Yosei said (Yoma 57a): I saw the Curtain of the Sanctuary in the city of Rome, and on the Curtain were several drops of blood from the bull and the goat of Yom Kippur. When the emperor took them into his treasury Rabbi Elazar saw the Temple vessels that the Romans had captured when they conquered Jerusalem, including the Curtain (Meilah, 17a-b). (For a full discussion of all the Temple artifacts that the rabbis saw in Rome and its modern day implications, see Steven Fine, [https://repository.yu.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12202/5836/Fine%20When I Went to Rome There I Saw the Men-1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.yu.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12202/5836/Fine%20When%20I%20Went%20to%20Rome%20There%20I%20Saw%20the%20Men-1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).)

This story in some ways parallels the story from Korach. In both stories our ancestors have access to the valuable treasures of our enemies. However, while Korach unjustly enriches himself, the rabbis in the Talmud refrain from doing so. The rabbis in the Talmud are indeed offered full access to take whatever they want from the Roman treasury. Yet, not only do they not enrich themselves, but they do not even take back what rightfully belongs to the Jewish people. They don't take back the curtains of the Temple (*parochet*) and, based upon other

versions of the story, they also do not take back the Menorah and the clothing of the Kohen Gadol (Jerusalem Talmud, Yoma, 4:1.)

Why the reluctance of these two holy rabbis to take something from the treasury of Rome? The story from the Talmud hints to the reason. When the demon, ben Temalyon, offers help, R. Shimon b. Yochai has no choice to accept the demon's help. For how else could he save his people from the harsh decree? But he only accepts the devil's help with tears in his eyes. He weeps at having to receive help from this unsavory source. In contrast to Korach who didn't mind enriching himself from Pharaoh, these rabbis only accepted the bare minimum help that was necessary and wanted no part of the enormous wealth of the Romans. The rabbis of the Talmud understood that it is deeply problematic to be enriched from a morally repugnant source.

The Talmud doesn't cite the verse, but it could easily have turned to an incident from Genesis as a proof-text as, our ancestor, Avraham, says to the King of Sodom: I don't want your money.

Then the king of Sodom said to Avram, "Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself." But Avram said to the king of Sodom, "I swear to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth: I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours; you shall not say, 'It is I who made Abram rich'" (Bereishit, 14:21-23).

In a similar manner, our sages are sure to point out that Moshe Rabbenu's great wealth, did not come from unscrupulous origins. It only came from the holiest of all sources—the sacred tablets:

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: Moses became wealthy only from the waste remaining from hewing the Tablets of the Covenant, as it is stated: "Hew for you two tablets of stone like the first" (Exodus 34:1). "Hew for you" means that their waste shall be yours. As the tablets were crafted from valuable gems, their remnants were similarly valuable (Nedarim, 38a).

Unlike Avraham and Moshe who were exceedingly careful about how they enriched themselves, Korach took money from the most problematic of all sources—Pharaoh. Korach enriched himself from the enemy who had enriched himself from slave labor of his own brothers and sisters.

The irony of this is that while Korach had no qualms taking Pharaoh's money, he himself also accused Moshe of financial impropriety. We do not know in exact detail all of Korach's claims against Moshe, but we know that Moshe Rabbenu was forced to defend himself and declare to Hashem: "Pay no regard to their oblation. I have not taken the donkey of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them" (16:15). Rashi explains that this means that Moshe Rabbenu did not even ask the Israelites to cover his travel expenses: "*I have not taken the donkey of any one of them; — even when I went from Midian to Egypt and placed my wife and my sons on the donkey (Exodus 4:20), and I surely ought afterwards to have taken the price of that donkey from their money, yet I took it only from my own*" (Rashi, ad. loc).

Rav Moshe Yosef Ruben (1895-1980) notes that Moshe rebukes Korach by saying “*rav lachem benei levi*, which literally means, “you have gone too far, sons of Levi” (16:7). Rav Rubin explains that the reason the word *lachem* –literally “you”-- is used is to emphasize that a public critic like Korach has to be careful not to include too much of themselves in their critique; i.e. the critical comments of the critic may sometimes reveal much more about the critic than the person or institution that they are criticizing. For example, in some cases a public critic is motivated by their own honor or their own self-interests and not the communal good. (See Pardes Yosef, from Harav Moshe Yosef Rubin, p.44.)

In the case of Korach, according to our rabbis, that is exactly what motivated Korach. According to Rashi, Korach’s public complaints were because he felt slighted by the fact that he was passed over for an honor:

And what induced Korah to quarrel with Moses? He was envious of the princely dignity held by Elzaphan the son of Uziel (Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 1) whom Moses had appointed prince over the sons of Kohath although this was by the express command of God (Numbers 3:30). Korah argued thus: “My father and his brothers were four in number — as it is said, (Exodus 6:18) “and the sons of Kohath were [Amram and Izhar and Hebron and Uziel]”. — “As to Amram, the eldest, his two sons have themselves assumed high dignity, one as king and the other as High Priest; who is entitled to receive the second (the rank next to it)? Is it not “I” who am the son of Izhar, who was the second to Amram amongst the brothers? And yet he has appointed as prince the son of his (Amram’s) brother who was the youngest of all of them! I hereby protest against him and will undo his decision” (Rashi, 16:1).

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin is one of the great teachers of the Torah of interpersonal behavior. In his book, *Love Your Neighbor*, he gives us real world practical advice and warns us all about how not to engage in disputes or to be wrongly influenced by disputants:

From here we see a fundamental principle that applies to many disputes. Quite often the person who instigates a dispute is motivated by the desire for personal gain. In order to attract followers, however, he claims he is interested in the good of others. A person should be aware of this tendency so he will not be misled by people who desire to create a dispute (348).

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<https://youtu.be/99WIEbaZTTg>