

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors:

- Adele and Mervyn Myers, in loving memory of Adele's father, Shabtai ben Efraim Idel, z'l, whose *Yahrtzeit* is the 6th of Tamuz. May his *neshama* have an *aliya* and may Adele and Mervyn be rewarded for their generosity with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health!

Mazel Tov to Yoni Klein on his *aufruf* this morning and his upcoming marriage to Shevi Alhadeff. Mazel Tov to Yoni's father, Isaac Klein, and to the entire Klein family! Mazel Tov to Shevy's parents, Jeff and Emily Alhadeff. May Yoni and Shevy be *zoche* to build a *bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael*.

The Jewish Caring Network is finishing their annual fundraiser this week with a virtual 5K race. This wonderful organization helps so many families in our shul and community, and I encourage everyone to participate and support them! Shomrei has a "virtual running team" led by our President, Kenny Friedman, which I am pleased to be a part of. Please run and donate!

This afternoon begins our annual Shabbos afternoon women's lecture series. Except for my introductory lecture today, this series is by women for women. This year's topic is והיו עיניך רואות את מורידך, discussing great Jewish leaders who passed away during the past year. I look forward to speaking this afternoon at 5pm about Rav Yehuda Herzl Henkin, the *mechaber* of the 4-volume set of *Shailos U'Teshuvos Bnei Banim*, with whom I had a personal relationship. Thank you to everyone who organizes and participates in this wonderful program!

Parshas Korach outlines a rebellion and call for a regime change, the *machlokes* waged by Korach. He was an adversary of the great Moshe Rabbeinu, who had led the people out of Mitzrayim and through whom Hashem communicated directly to the Jewish people. Korach was clearly in the wrong in this battle, as evidenced by the miracle surrounding his tragic demise.

We can learn many lessons from this episode about revolution and peer pressure, about conflict and resolution, but the question that lingers, long after Korach and his followers were swallowed up by the earth and all the dust had settled, is what was Korach's fundamental mistake? Beyond the very notion of an uprising against God's chosen prophet and leader, were his arguments wrong?

Korach comes to Moshe and says: כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֹּלֵם קְדוּשִׁים וּמְדוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קַהֵּל
The entire nation is holy, what makes you better than everyone else?

This seems to be a fair question.

Some commentators say that Korach's real fault was that he was not being honest in his claims; what he said was not what he meant. He really wanted to be the leader himself, but he clearly could not make such a direct claim. His question did not spring from an intellectual curiosity; rather, he was challenging Moshe's authority, not to give the power to the people, but to take it for himself. This challenge כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֹּלֵם קְדוּשִׁים was disingenuous. Korach was couching a self-serving ambition in idealistic words.

Indeed, the **Gemara in Sanhedrin 109** teaches that Ohn ben Peles, who was originally part of Korach's rebellion, was saved by his wise wife. She convinced him that the argument was not sincere, and that Korach was just looking to take power himself. She told him that he would gain

nothing by remaining loyal to Korach. Under Moshe's leadership, he was "plain" Ohn and under Korach's leadership, he would remain "plain" Ohn. He would not achieve any greater status than before. She clearly saw through Korach's idealistic-sounding claims as self-serving.

But, even after careful analysis, the question still lingers—taking him at face value--was Korach incorrect in his rally cry; in his statement *כי כל העדה כולם קדושים* Why should one Jew be more powerful than another? Isn't it true that every Jew is holy? Did not Moshe Rabbeinu himself call the Jewish people a *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קודש* a kingdom of priests and a holy nation? Did not the same Moshe Rabbeinu tell the Jewish people *קדושים תהיו*, you are all holy?

Is it possible that Korach's argument is, indeed, correct? Is leadership and holiness any more than the simple function of opportunity or chance? Why Moshe, more than Korach or Ohn or any of the other 599,998 Jewish men in the Midbar, who experienced revelation and saw God up close in His miracles throughout the exodus?

If only God had appeared to Korach or Ohn or Dasan and Aviram in the burning bush, would they be leading right now?

Going back generations, maybe if Hashem had appeared to Haran instead of Avraham, maybe he would have been holy?

Why are some people chosen and others sidelined?

As the ancient antisemitic jingle goes "*How odd of God to choose the Jews.*" Is it just random? Is it just chance?

On the surface, Korach's argument seems to be valid. As good Americans, we have been brought up to believe that "*All men are created equal.*"

Where did Korach go wrong? What is the answer to Korach and all who shared his belief, throughout world history? On a social level, on a religious level...

I believe the core of this *machlokes* is in how we define holiness and in how we understand the statement *קדושים תהיו*.

Korach read it—*קדושים תהיו* you will be holy—as a statement of an existing state of being. As something predetermined.

Moshe understood *קדושים תהיו* as a commandment; a challenge, a goal, something one can achieve through hard work. It is up to us to become holy...

As indicated in the response to the ancient antisemitic jingle "*It was not odd, **the Jews chose God.***"

To borrow **Shakespeare's** formulation in *Twelfth Night*: "[S]ome are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em." Korach saw greatness and holiness as a condition of birth, as something thrust upon certain people. In today's language, he believed that some are born privileged, and others are born oppressed. Achievement is not a function of hard work, determination or grit, but of circumstance. And, thus, he argued—it is not fair! Why should some people have more wealth or prestige?

If it is all luck—the way to fight it is to complain, and make demands!

But Moshe understood that holiness, and all greatness and success, as something one must work to achieve. He understood that he was chosen because of his *middos*, his dedication, and his commitment to his people. Moshe was chosen to lead because of his life choices. Although he was raised in the privileged palace, ויצא משה אל אחיו וירא בסבלותם, he left the comfortable palace to help his people. He saved a Jew who was being attacked by a *Mitzri*. When he was shepherding his sheep, he ran after one little sheep, and סר לראות he turned aside to see the bush which was burning. He was aware of, and concerned about, the plight of all around him--Jews, animals, plants. It was no accident he was chosen to lead. It was not random or a coincidence that he was chosen. He was a man of empathy, a man of action. As a response to his choices, he was chosen to lead.

At the Pesach seder, we tell the *rasha* (normally translated as the wicked son), בעבור זה עשה ה' לי, בצאתי ממצרים. The Exodus was carried out **in order** for generations of Jews to commit our lives to *avodas Hashem*, including conducting our own Pesach sederim. We point out to the *rasha* who does not understand the need for hard work למה העבודה הזאת לכם, that our status as a chosen nation still depends on the choices we make and the effort we put into our religious observance. Through Moshe's leadership, Hashem rescued us from Egypt, on the condition and with the expectation that we fulfill His will. Freedom and holiness are not free. They are given to us on condition... Every day of our lives, it is something we must work to earn.

God never said that--no matter what--everyone is automatically holy. ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים is an expectation. He delivered the mandate to make ourselves holy and provided us the tools to do so. קדושים תהיו means you shall become holy; it is a statement of potential; it is the promised result of a lifestyle based on an arduous commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. But קדושה depends on how we live and the choices we make. Our own deeds determine the holiness we can achieve in our lives.

When Korach argued that **everyone** was holy, that he too could have achieved what Moshe Rabbeinu achieved, if only he had been given the proper opportunities, he was arguing on the very philosophy of holiness, and the foundation of Judaism.

Chazal paint a picture of Korach arguing against two specific *mitzvos*—*tzitzis* and *mezuzah*. He confronted Moshe on two points: Does a garment which is all *techeles* require *tzitzis* and does a room filled with Torah scrolls require a *mezuzah*?

What was the deeper meaning behind these two questions? **Rabbi Shlomo Riskin** writes that Korach was challenging Moshe's basic worldview--that no matter the inherent basic holiness of a person, he still requires dedication and commitment to achieve the desired levels of holiness. He must perfect himself through his own actions—symbolized by *tzitzis* and *mezuzah*-- no matter the inherent *kedusha* of the garment or home. A garment can be totally blue and room can be full of Sifrei Torah, and we are still tasked with looking for ways to do more, to find ways to add more holiness... through *mezuzah* and *tzitzis*.

Moshe Rabbeinu's answer--that the *techeles* garment still requires *tzitzis* and that the room filled with *sifrei Torah* still requires a *mezuzah*--is a statement that we must all constantly strive to improve. No matter the inherent *kedusha* in a Jew who is a descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, it takes constant work to achieve the desired holiness. We can never afford to be complacent.

Moshe Rabbeinu's everlasting message to the Jewish people is that holiness, indeed all success and achievement, is a choice, a choice we all must make, knowing that it is within reach of anyone who strives for it. And, as Jews, with a Torah and a beautiful legacy, we have the roadmap to achieve that greatness. The **Rambam** writes (Hilchos Teshuva 5:2) that everyone can be a *tzadik* like Moshe rabbeinu. That there is no such thing as fate.

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה ב

אל יעבור במחשבתך דבר זה שאומרים טפשי אומה"ע ורוב גולמי בני ישראל שהקב"ה גוזר על האדם מתחלת ברייתו להיות צדיק או רשע, אין הדבר כן אלא כל אדם ראוי לו להיות צדיק כמשה רבינו או רשע כירבעם או חכם או א סכל או רחמן או אכזרי או כילי או שוע וכן שאר כל הדעות, ואין לו מי שיכפהו ולא גוזר עליו ולא מי שמושכו לאחד משני הדרכים אלא הוא מעצמו ומדעתו נוטה לאי זו דרך שירצה

Why does the Rambam use Moshe as his example and not Avraham Avinu? I believe that the Rambam is responding to Korach's attack on Moshe's status. Moshe reached the highest levels of righteousness through his arduous efforts, but Korach claimed that Moshe achieved his prominence only by chance and, in essence, that anyone who had such a chance would achieve similar greatness. The Rambam is teaching a lesson for the ages from this story--that with hard work, motivation, and the proper drive, we can all achieve holiness in our lives, we can all become *tzadikim* like Moshe Rabbeinu.

May we all recognize our own great potential to become holy. May we be ready and willing to put in the necessary work, and may we merit soon to see the day when all will recognize the glory of Hashem, and accomplish our mandate of יהיו קדושים תהיו... *bimhera v'yamenu...amen*.