

Parshat Korach 5779

Throughout their 40 years in the wilderness, the Children of Israel faced many tests and each time Moshe intercedes on their behalf. Korach's rebellion is the exception. Moshe is so angry (16:15), he requests that Hashem should punish them in an unnatural and miraculous way with the earth swallowing them:

כח ויאמר משה בואת תדעון כי-ה' שלחני לעשות את כל-המעשים האלה כי-לא מלבי. כט אם-
 כמות כל-האדם ומתון אלה ופקדת כל-האדם ופקד עליהם לא ה' שלחני. ל ואם-בריאה יברא ה'
 ופצתה האדמה את-פיה ובלעה אתם ואת-כל-אשר להם ויגדו חיים שאלה וידעתם כי נאצו
 האנשים האלה את-ה'.

And Moses said, By this you shall know that it was the LORD who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the LORD who sent me. But if the LORD brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the LORD (16:28-30)

We would expect that punishment of this magnitude would shock the people into repentance but the opposite occurs. It spurs further rebellion (17:6) resulting in 14,700 deaths. What was the point of this miracle and what did Korach do that was so terrible?

The eighth principle of the Rambam's 13 Principles of Faith (Maimonides introduction to Perek Chelek) is that the Torah is from Heaven. His proof text is 16:28 above. Moshe's words when asking for the sinners to be swallowed up. According to the Rambam, Korach sought to deny the Divinity of the Torah. This varies from the peshat in which Korach and his followers question the validity of Moshe and Aaron's leadership (16:1-3) but there is nothing to indicate they did not accept the Torah was from heaven. In fact, they assert that G-d is among the congregation. Co-rebels Dothan and Aviram complain that they left a land flowing with milk and honey to die in the wilderness (16:12-14).

To comprehend the severity of their sin we need to appreciate the mindset of the people. Having departed from Egypt the previous year with the promise of entering Israel they are now told that, following the sin of the spies, they would remain in the wilderness for the next 40 years.

We can only imagine their despair and disillusionment.

Moshe is not reassuring. He doesn't say it will all be wonderful. Worse, he declares that during these 40 years all the men between the ages of 18 and 60 are going to die.

Perhaps we can empathise with their lack of confidence in leaders who do not deliver what they promised. We expect our leaders to provide instant solutions. We are interested in their delivering on their promises within 2 or 3 years and not after we die.

The people are between a rock and a hard place. In last week's parsha we saw how they experienced the cowardice of the spies who preferred their miraculous existence in the wilderness, being sheltered by the pillars of cloud and fire and fed by the maan, rather than risk entering Israel. Immediately afterwards they witnessed the fate of the ma'apilim who decide to take matters into their own hands and attempt to reach Eretz Yisrael. They know they are stuck and Dothan and Aviram's claims are true - לֹא נֵעֲלָה - we will not go up (16:14) - you have bought us here to kill us- you just told us we will all die here! For the next 40 years they are stuck in the 'middle of nowhere'.

Where is the hope and encouragement they expect from a leader? What is the point of continuing, striving to be better people? We were promised this special land and now we won't have it in our lifetime.

Total disillusionment is very dangerous as it threatens the very foundations of the establishment. The situation is ripe for fomenting dissent and rebellion.

At this point when the nation is at its most vulnerable Korach intervenes. He takes Dothan and Aviram's claim that every land is equal - flowing with milk and honey; Eretz Yisrael, Egypt, anywhere - and develops it into an insidious argument that is so powerful it has appeal in every generation. We are all equal, all holy, all equally able to know Hashem's will. Korach exploited the people's longing for the false promise of utopian equality.

Moshe understands the implication of this argument. He says to Hashem, acceptance of their offerings indicates support for Korach's argument, that we are all equally capable of deciding in which way we worship Hashem and thus the Torah is not from heaven but Moshe and Aaron's creation.

To refute the magnetic appeal of this enticement something spectacular is required. Only the creation of a miraculous new phenomenon, the earth opening and swallowing the rebels, can counteract the loss of motivation, the lack of aspiration and the nebulous promise of instant gratification provided by this false leader.

Moshe represents Netzach Yisrael, the word of Hashem, and he needs this great miracle at this time of dejection and despondency to ensure that the people remember and they must never stop striving to fulfil Hashem's will.