

## Parshat Korach 5778

**Crime and Punishment:** “Rebellion against a king may be pardoned, or lightly punished, but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death”. So wrote Samuel Adams following the Shays’ Rebellion in Massachusetts 1786/87.

In Parashat Korach, we read of the dramatic rebellion of Korach, Datan and Aviram, and their co-conspirators – members of the tribe of Reuven and 250 important leaders of Israel. Korach protested against Moshe and Aaron for what he thought was the lack of fairness in the makeup of the leadership of Israel and on the grounds that they were haughty and elevating themselves above the community beyond what was necessary. Korach thought that as a member of the noble tribe of Levi himself and as part of the special family of Kehat, he was clearly entitled to play a major leadership role in Israel.

Though many sinned before him and many sinned after him, why was Korach punished in such a unique and severe manner. Korach was not even the first to turn against G-d in the desert, why did Korach deserve such an ignominious death?

One answer is given by Rabbi Lazer Gurkow of the Congregation of Beth Tefilah, London, Ontario. “Korach was not only held responsible for his own sin but for the affect it had on the nation. His rebellion divided the nation. His disparaging remarks about Moshe stimulated questions about Moshe’s legitimacy. It was the first fissure in the confidence that Moshe had been able to inspire. He introduced the community to conflict and deprived it of its most precious possession: its unity.”

Pirkei Avot 5:21 says: “A controversy for heaven’s sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven’s sake will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for heaven’s sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of a controversy not for heaven’s sake? The rebellion of Korach.” The Torah describes the followers of Korach as “250 princes of the assembly, famous in the congregation, men of renown.” The commentator Kli Yakar explains that these men rebelled not for the sake of heaven, but rather for personal gain, both in power and material goods. They wanted to become “men of renown.” This led to their severe and gruesome punishment.

Bamidbar 16: 30 *‘But if the LORD make a new thing, and the ground open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down alive into the pit, then ye shall understand that these men have despised the LORD.*

*31 And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was under them.*

*32 And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korach, and all their goods.’*

Ramban (Nahmanides) wrote “.....that the earth should cleave apart is not a new creation, but that it should open its mouth to swallow people up is a total innovation, for when the earth splits open, as it frequently does in an earthquake ... it remains open and the cleft fills up with water, like a lake, but that it should open and close again at once, like someone opening his mouth to swallow and then closing it, this is the thing that was created on that day, as if ex nihilo...”

In Pirkei Avot 5:8 we are told that “Ten things were created at twilight on the (first) Shabbat eve: The mouth of the earth .....” Rabbi Marcus Lehmann in his commentary tells us that “This Mishnah deals not with miracles but with entities created by G-d and specifies precisely when they were created. .... Miracles are proof that G-d can at any time suspend the laws of earthly nature, of the ordinary course of the world, when it is required by the higher order of things for which the world on earth was called into existence. The ten things that are the subject of this Mishnah have existed since the beginning of the world, in a state that bridges the lower, material and the higher, spiritual worlds. We only become aware of them when the moment for which they were intended has arrived. The mouth of the earth, in which Korach, his associates and all their belongings were swallowed up, was not an earthquake or a geological fault. .... To punish Korach with Divine justice, however, the earth opened, swallowed him and closed up again, without leaving a trace.”

“Korach’s followers attacked Moshe with their mouths by making fun of him and provoking rebellion against him. Their sin was compounded by their lowly spiritual stature compared to that of Moshe. Therefore, they were punished measure for measure: The lowly of lowlies, the ground opened its mouth and swallowed them.”  
Abarbanel

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis says that “the Torah gives us a mitzvah *v’lo tihyeh k’Korach v’hadato* – one should not be like Korach and his assembly. Apart from the *machlochet l’shem shemayim*, when there is a dispute for the sake of heaven, dispute is something we should avoid. Such controversies bring so much bitterness in our midst - there are clearly no winners. Let us rather adopt the pathway towards peace and that way we will guarantee a sweet and productive life for ourselves and our communities.”