

KORAH AND HIS FALL: OBSERVATIONS ON HOLINESS

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In the text of the Torah, much is recorded of the complaints of the children of Israel about the conditions of their journey through the wilderness. They murmured about their lack of food and drink, and found their daily portion of manna unappetizing and unenticing. These were, however, not their only expressions of discontent. Also prominent is the criticism of Korah and his followers, which was, however, of a different character altogether. It was not prompted by felt physical needs and desires, but derived from personal ambition and ideological influences. For this reason, it was all the more scandalous and unbearable.

Korah charged that Moses was an imposter, who assumed leadership over the nation without warrant. In a society where all the people are holy and God dwells in their midst, he argued, *'the congregation are holy, everyone of them, and the Lord is among them'* (Num. 16:3). There was no need for a personal intermediary between God and Israel. In fact, it was insulting to the people's dignity and stature. Holiness is inherent in the nation, and hence commandments are dispensable and fraudulently presented as God's word, so argued Korah.

According to the Midrash, Korah even sought to ridicule Moses, and show the inconsistency of the commandments. He had his men wear all blue garments and presented them to Moses, asking, "Do these men have to attach fringes, tzitzit, to their garments?" When Moses answered Yes, they all brought forth in derisive laughter, "If according to your instructions, four threads satisfy the ritual, should not a whole garment of blue do the same?"

Attacking the authority of Moses and slandering his status as a prophet meant, of course, the tearing down of the pillars upon which the Torah rests. Without authorization its teachings would be floating in air, without sanction and source. Moreover, denouncing Moses would spell the collapse of the community and the end of Israel's mission.

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Moses, though taken aback by the onslaught, understood that this was a rebellion that only God could resolve. Confidently, he therefore challenged Korah and his followers. If, as they claimed, they were all holy and hence worthy and eligible to minister like Aaron before God, then take cup and incense and offer it to God, to see whether He will accept it. This challenge, however, implied a warning to them, inasmuch as bearing incense on own's own can be fatal, as the deaths of Nadav and Avihu had shown.

Korah, though flattering the people and calling them all holy, committed an unforgivable error. Granted, holiness is inherent in the community as a collective, by virtue of its being elected and called an *Am Kadosh* [Holy Nation]. However, individual members must aspire to and achieve holiness through their own efforts. The totality of the nation transcends the sum total of its individual members.

Holiness is not, as Korah might have thought, a *gemul*, a bestowal or benefaction that is conferred without merit. Holiness is an achievement, a realization, attained, if at all, by striving and struggling to reach it. It is a *madregah*, an elevated level, arrived at after scaling many preparatory character-forming, scholastic and disciplinary steps. If holiness were a *gemul*, a gift of grace bestowed upon blessed souls, why would there be a need for the Torah to enjoin the people to strive to become holy and lead a holy life? As the Torah states in Leviticus 19:2, *You shall be holy for I am holy*, and it spells out the principle and particulars how to achieve it.

An individual who has devoted himself to serving God in holiness by study, discipline and self-mastery, may well reach this stage and receive the call to leadership and prominence, a distinction that Moses attained and merited.

Korah also failed to remember that when God wishes to address mankind or a section thereof, He does so by means of a chosen spokesman, as was the case with Noah and Abraham.

The end that Korah and his followers met was swift, dramatic, and unique. No other punishment mentioned in the Torah was so instantaneous and spectacular, in itself a sign of the extreme danger of Korah's rebellion that could easily infect the minds and hearts of the people. Korah and his followers sank into the ground; *the earth opened her mouth* and swallowed them up. Why such a conspicuous punishment? What is the connection between their audac-

ity and the denouement? In general, justice must exemplify a discernible relationship to the transgression. It must be *midah k'neged midah* [measure for measure], a reflection of the offence. The connection should be so perceived that the transgression be detected in the punishment.

Such was indeed the case with Korah's end. He sought to pull down the relationship between God and nation, and by preaching and opening his mouth, he uttered heresy and tried to smash the foundation and pillars of the Torah and the authority of Moses. His punishment was analogous. The ground under him was pulled away, the earth opened up, swallowed him and he disappeared.

One wonders at times why the Torah insists on reporting details of conduct and attitudes of the Israelites that redound to their shame and discredit. They are depicted as stubborn, ungrateful, rebellious, and defiant, hardly deserving to be known as the chosen people, who merited their miraculous redemption and be taken under God's providential care. Nor is the Bible a normal historical chronicle that must record all events and incidents, whatever their nature. Surely, there must be good reasons for the Torah to be so frank and honest.

The obvious explanation that suggests itself is that these records should serve as a warning and deterrent, lest later generations be tempted to imitate the offences of their ancestors. When forebears paid a terrible price for their unfaithfulness and ingratitude, and relation of such occurrences in the Torah is meant to spare others who came after them from such experiences.

What seems, however, a more relevant and persuasive explanation is the Torah's need to convey an important message, though this is unstated and implied. In spite of Israel's frequent and almost unforgivable acts of disloyalty and rebelliousness, the *brit*, the Covenant between God and Israel was not affected. It endured and remained in force. Nowhere is there even a hint that God has rejected or abandoned the nation. Though the people often provoked His anger, and were punished for it, the deed and the terms of the Covenant remained fresh and valid. Telling the story of Israel's many failings is the Torah's way of demonstrating the irrevocability of the Covenant down the ages. The people may be punished, exiled and rebuked, but God's commitment to Israel is constant and inviolate.