

Rebellions, Ancient and Modern

Parashat Korach, 5771

The Midrash first presents two scenarios that Korach presented to Moshe in the form of theoretical questions in order to demonstrate what he thought was objectionable in the Jewish leader's religious¹ and political² approach:

BaMidbar Rabba 18:3

(BaMidbar 16:1) "And Korach took..." (*What did he take?*) What is written above this incident? (Ibid. 15:38) "And they will make fringes..." Korach jumped and said to Moshe, 1) "A Talit that is entirely dyed with Techelet,³ would it be exempt from the fringes?" He (Moshe) said to him, "It is obligated in fringes." Korach said to him, "A Talit that is entirely dyed with Techelet does not fulfill this Commandment; the four (blue) strands (on each of the corners) fulfills the Commandment?"

2) "A room full of Tora scrolls, would it be exempt from needing a Mezuza?"⁴ He said to him, "It is obligated in Mezuza." "The entire Tora, consisting of 275 Parashiot, does not exempt the room, but a single scroll in the Mezuza exempts the room?"

He said to him, "The solutions (to these) questions were not Commanded to you, but rather you invented them from your heart."

This is what is meant by "And Korach took"—The verb "VaYikach" is a language of separation and divisiveness, in the sense that his heart took him, parallel to what is stated, (Iyov 15:12) "Mah Yikachecha Libecha" (Why doth thy heart carry thee away?)...

¹ The questions suggest that one's common sense should determine when and where religious obligation applied. One could see such an argument as being connected to the controversy surrounding the appropriateness of supplying reasons behind Commandments. While delineating such rationales could aid an individual to more deeply appreciate and personally relate to the ritual that he is carrying out, at the same time, should a reason for a Commandment be found wanting, as in the case of Shlomo HaMelech in Sanhedrin 21b, it could lead to non-compliance with the particular Mitzva in question, and in turn a diminishment in respect for the entire system of Jewish law.

² In addition to the philosophical and theological approach to accepting ritual law as it has been revealed and interpreted, there is an additional dimension to these questions in light of Korach's plaint, (BaMidbar 16:3) "...All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them..." Just like, according to Korach, a Talit that is entirely Techelet does not need a Techelet thread and a room full of Sifrei Tora does not need a Mezuza, why should the Jewish people who are all so holy, need a specific leader, who is no holier than the others?

³ A blue dye that is derived from the murex trunculus, a sea snail, and required by the Tora to color a portion of the threads comprising the Tzitzit—BaMidbar 15:38 "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them throughout their generations fringes in the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue."

⁴ Devarim 6:9; 11:20 require that a scroll containing passages from the Tora that constitute the Shema prayer be affixed to one's doorways and gateways. The assumption is that these will serve as reminders to inhabitants and visitors alike of God's Existence and involvement in human affairs. Since the passages in the scrolls come from the Tora itself (Ibid. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; BaMidbar 15:37-41), a room full of Toras already contains the passages multiple times and logically should exempt such a room from needing a Mezuza.

The Midrash then develops the first⁵ of these scenarios into a dramatic personal and public confrontation between not only Korach and Moshe, but the 250 rebel sympathizers as well:

The scholars said: Korach was a great sage, and amongst the carriers of the Holy Ark, as it is stated, (BaMidbar 7:9) “But unto the sons of Kohath he gave none, because the service of the holy things belonged unto them: they bore them upon their shoulders.” And Korach was the son of Yitzhar who was the son of Kohath. And when Moshe said, “and they will put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue”, he (Korach) immediately gave the command and they made 250 Talitot entirely dyed with Techelet, and they (Korach’s 250 followers—Ibid. 16:2 “And they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown”—enwrapped themselves in them (the Talitot), these men who were heads of courts who rose to challenge Moshe ... Korach stood and made a festive meal for them while they were enwrapped in their blue Talitot. The children of Aharon came to receive their priestly portions from the food, the breast and the thigh (Devarim 18:3; RaMBaM, Mishneh Tora, Hilchot Bikurim 9:1) and they (the rebels) stopped them. They said to them, “Who commanded you to take this, wasn’t it Moshe?” They refused to give anything (to the Kohanim), claiming “God never Said this.” They (the Kohanim) went to tell Moshe and he went to appease them. Immediately they stood opposite him, anticipating his arrival...

R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, ZaTzaL,⁶ attributes to the rebels three fundamental errors in judgment and understanding. First, Korach and his followers did not understand the nature of the leader of the Jewish people. They thought that this nation was like all nations, and therefore in need of a political, military, administrative leader. (This is implied as well in the request for a king that is the focus of this week’s Haftora, with the people demanding [I Shmuel 8:5 “...Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”) The Rav says that the Jews are a covenantal rather than political community and therefore required a teacher-leader, a la Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher) as well as a teacher High Priest, in this case Aharon, known to bring people close

⁵ The issue of Talitot lends itself to a public demonstration more easily than a room full of Sifrei Tora, particularly in light of the two views expressed in Gittin 60a, “Megilla Megilla Nitna” (the Tora was created portion by portion, i.e., after each event occurred, the relevant section would be written down in the form that would eventually become codified), or “Chatuma Nitna” (no part of the Tora existed until Moshe first wrote it down just prior to his death as noted in Devarim 31:9, 26). Referring to a Tora of 275 Parashiot at this point in Jewish biblical history, i.e., the Korach rebellion, would be an anachronism. The Parasha of Tzitzit, on the other hand, appears in BaMidbar 15, just prior to the Korach story and therefore had already been established. Furthermore, the concept of Mezuzah containing text from Sefer Devarim 6 and 11, would be harder to substantiate, although it could be claimed that those sections of the Tora already existed “unofficially”, even if they had not as yet been codified as part of the Tora’s final format.

⁶ “Korach II: Korach’s Fault” in Avishai David, Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of R. Yosef Dov HaLevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Urim, Jerusalem, 2011, pp. 333-8.

to the Tora.⁷ The leader had to be someone dedicated to Divine and social service, rather than a person aspiring to honor and power.

Second, the rebellion of Korach in general, and the examples offered by the Midrash cited above in particular reflect the attitude that Halacha should be determined by human common sense and logic. While one is not expected to abandon his reason when engaged in Tora study and Mitzva performance, it is possible that what appears to one as logical and obvious, does not correspond with another's thinking. And then one has to contend with trying to comprehend the Divine Understanding that underlies Tora-based (as opposed to Rabbinical) Commandments. A lack of intellectual humility undermined Korach's ability to properly understand Judaism and its demands.

Finally, Korach placed undue emphasis upon the emotional aspect of religion. The Rav contends that if the color of Techelet was intended to remind one specifically of God,⁸ wouldn't one be more moved spiritually by wearing a garment completely of material dyed this particular blue color than by attaching blue thread at the clothing's four corners? The Rav counters that accurate Mitzva performance takes precedence over the emotional experience; if the latter comes about, then the individual has that much more of an intense experience. However, it is with the proper carrying out of the Commandment that the careful worshipper of God will primarily concern himself.

It would appear that the bottom line for the Rav's approach to the Korach rebellion is whether Divine Worship should be primarily deo-centric or anthro-centric, i.e., when engaging in carrying out the Commandments, should one engage in a degree of self-abnegation in order to assure the purity of the performance, or must one pursue styles and actions that will give one the most personal meaning.

Giving in to a combination of logical reasoning and passionate desires and ambition, resulting in altering or even eliminating certain religious practices, has always posed a challenge to Jewish observance, and two articles in the recent Israeli and American Jewish press reflect contemporary manifestations of such tensions. An article appearing in Yediot Achronot, and entitled "Anachnu HaDatLaSh'im",^{9 10} discusses a book by the journalist Poria Gal Getz, entitled DatLaSh'im—Masa El

⁷ Avot 1:12.

⁸ Sota 17a.

It was taught: R. Meir said, "What is unique about Techelet as compared to all other dyes? Because Techelet is like the sea, which is like the firmament which is like the Throne of Honor (Shemot 24:10 'And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness')." This comes to teach us that whomever fulfills the Commandment of Tzitzit it is as if he has been privy to the Face of the Divine Presence...

⁹ The acronym "DatLaSh" is a composite of Dati LeSheAvar, religious in the past. During the course of the article, a second term is cited, "DatLaP", Dati LePa'amim, religious from time to time.

¹⁰ <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4085549,00.html>

Olamam Shel HaDati'im LiSheAvar,¹¹ The author, a DatLaSh herself since age 18,¹² explores the manifestations and motivations for individuals who are not prepared to define themselves as Chilonim (secularists) but who have also clearly lapsed from their former overall religious practices. The term DatLaSh is contrasted with yet another category, “Chozer BeShe’ela”, (one who returns to questioning), a clear play on the classical religious construct “Chozer BeTeshuva” (one who returns to repentance). Gal Getz provides examples of the practices of individuals who find themselves in this intermediary state: one person continues to recite “Asher Yatzar” when emerging from the bathroom; others avoid bars where there is dancing or what they consider immodest clothing because they are uncomfortable regarding their bodies being observed in public. Then there are those who are disconcerted by the rituals of the Chiloni world such as Christmas and Valentine’s Day. While it doesn’t appear that DatLaSh’im are prepared to return to a fully religious lifestyle, at least not at this point, nevertheless they retain various types of ritualistic observances and attitudes, probably those that make them feel comfortable and make sense to them.

A “closer-to-home” phenomenon which is being discussed on list serves and blogs,¹³ in addition to the newspapers and wire services, is being called the observance of “Half-Shabbos” by Modern Orthodox high school students. In an article in The New York Jewish Week, entitled, “For Many Orthodox Teens, ‘Half Shabbos’ is a Way of Life”,¹⁴ Steve Lipman describes how texting on Shabbat has become an irresistible activity to many in this age-cohort. All sorts of hypotheses have been advanced for why this has become so and whether it is a passing fad or reflects new attitudes within at least one segment of the Orthodox community at large. Most common are the rationalizations (my parents also cut corners; it’s only a Rabbinic violation, etc.—arguments based upon logic) as well as the claims that the text-ers can’t help themselves (it is a type of addiction; the participants cannot bear to be socially cut off—explanations that emphasize emotion and desire).

While it could be pointed out that “nothing is new under the sun”,¹⁵ with each generation and community confronting its own challenges and temptations and struggling with the constants of human nature, one would hope that Jews would learn from their past and apply greater efforts and focus in order not to repeat the errors evidenced so blatantly in the insurrection of Korach and his followers.

¹¹ A Journey into the World of Those Who are Known/Refer to Themselves as Religious in the Past.

¹² One wonders if a “participant observer” was a better investigator of the phenomenon than someone who would analyze the dynamics at play from without.

¹³ E.g., <http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2010/09/13/half-shabbos/>
<http://kavvanah.wordpress.com/2010/11/03/half-shabbos-again/>

¹⁴ http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/national/many_orthodox_teens_half_shabbos_way_life

¹⁵ Kohelet 1:9.