"Now You Don't See Them and Now You Do"

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler
Parashat Pinchas

We thought that we had heard the last of Korach and those associated with him.

When the Tora recounts the story of Korach's rebellion, it appears that not only do the organizers of the revolt meet an unnatural end,[1] but their families die as well. (BaMidbar 16:32-33) "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their "BATIM" (houses)[2] and all of the men/people belonging to Korach[3] and their property. And they and everything belonging to them descended alive to the grave, and the earth covered upon them and they were lost from the congregation." If the Tora had not subsequently given us any more information concerning the fate of these individuals, we would not have suspected that there was more to the story.

A verse in Parashat Pinchos disavows the reader of that notion.

However, two Tora portions later, in Parashat Pinchos, when a census is taken to establish how many Israelites remain following the plague precipitated by Jews yielding to the seductions of the women of Moav,[4] a four word verse declares that not all of Korach's family suffered the same destructive fate: (BaMidbar 26:11) "And the sons of Korach did not die."[5]

Issues that are raised by this verse.

Commentators are beside themselves trying to address the many questions that this brief verse engenders:

a) Why was this information not provided in Chapter 16, which would thereby have prevented us from initially drawing the wrong conclusion concerning what happened to these individuals

---

[1] Moshe made the legitimacy of his prophecy dependent upon a supernatural death being meted out to Korach and his followers in BaMidbar 16:28-30.

[2] As Emek Davar points out on 16:32, the term "Batim" (houses) cannot be understood literally, since they lived in tents rather than in structures that qualified as "houses". The term therefore should be associated with family members and children, paralleling the expression "Beit Yaakov" (the house of Yaakov) in Shemot 12:23, 27.

[3] The phrase "VeEt Kol HaAdam Asher LeKorach" (And all persons that are to Korach) is understood by commentators such as RaMBaN and Emek Davar as representing servants that Korach owned, as opposed to family members, the latter being covered by "Batim". Sephorno understands the phrase as referring not so much to the people that Korach owned in a legal sense, i.e., servants, but rather the people that belonged to Korach spiritually and emotionally, as in fellow travelers and sympathizers. This latter view is more consistent with the position that is developed further along in this essay that Datan and Aviram were more resolute rebels than was Korach himself, and therefore suffered a greater, more comprehensive punishment. Whereas the interpretation of "followers of Korach" would include even those primarily associated with Datan and Aviram, "slaves owned by Korach" would appear to punish specifically Korach rather than the likes of Datan and Aviram.

[4] BaMidbar 25:9.

[5] While 26:11 is the earliest indication that Korach's sons survived, there are additional biblical texts that can only be interpreted in such a light. They include: 26:58 and Tehillim 42:1; 44:1; 45:1; 46:1; 47:1; 48:1; 49:1; 84:1; 85:1; 87:1; 88:1.

b) Since Korach and his sons are Levi'im,[6] shouldn't their survival be mentioned when the entire tribe's population is listed, later in Parashat Pinchos, in 26:57 ff.
c) Once it is decided that the survival of the sons of Korach is not going to be mentioned along with the rest of the Levi'im, why insert this fact specifically between the reports on Reuven (26:5 ff.) and Shimon (26:12 ff.)?
d) Why is the status of Korach's sons referred to as "they did not die" rather than the more positive and unequivocal "they were alive"?

The two general approaches of the commentators to explaining this verse.

Attempts to answer these questions appear to fall into two categories. Some commentators are truer to the "Peshat" (the literal implication of the verse in question) and therefore argue that the verse is to be understood as maintaining that Korach's children were alive and well at this point in the Tora narrative. Others claim that while the lives of these individuals did not end completely at the time that the rest of the participants in their father's rebellion died, nevertheless, they were not fully alive either.

The "Pashtanim" assert that the descendants of Korach survived the punishment of the rebels.

Commentators like Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni, and Ohr HaChayim represent the former school of thought. They posit without reservation that Korach's sons survived the rebellion along with other non-participants in the insurrection. As for the seemingly arbitrary placement of the verse, they assert that this was in order to provide a stark contrast to the fate suffered by Datan and Aviram and their families, referred to once again in 26:9-10, immediately preceding the information concerning the survival of Korach's offspring. "And the sons of Eliav, Nemuel and Datan and Aviram, these are Datan and Aviram who were communal heads, who strove against Moshe and Aharon during the organizing of a group by Korach, when they strove against HaShem. And the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed them as well as Korach, when the group died, when fire consumed the 250 men,[7] and it was a miracle." Since the only modification in Parashat Pinchos regarding the survival of parts of the families of the rebels concerns Korach's children, by inference, the destruction of the "Batim" in 16:32 per force includes the children of Datan and Aviram, since there is no later contrary indication of their ultimate fates.

Why should some of the descendants of the rebels have survived, while others were destroyed?

The lesson that Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni derive from the Tora's distinction between the two groups of offspring, i.e., Datan and Aviram's families are completely obliterated, whereas Korach's children live on, is that Datan and Aviram were apparently more committed to the rebellion than was Korach himself, resulting in their suffering more dire and far-reaching consequences not only to themselves, but also to their families. The difference in degree of punishment may suggest that Korach was more the "front man" in the rebellion by virtue of his increased public credibility deriving from his Levitic status, than the actual fomenter of the controversy. An additional Rabbinic indicator of Korach's possible hesitation to follow through with a challenge to Moshe, has been cited previously in the essay on Parashat Korach[8] which focused upon Ohn ben Peles and his being convinced by his wife to withdraw from the rebel

---

[6] See 16:1.
[7] See 16:35.
[8] http://text.rcarabbis.org/parashat-korach-the-disappearing-act-of-ohn-ben-peles-by-yaakov-bieler/

movement. Sanhedrin 109b-110a contends that in contrast to Ohn's wife who positively influences her husband, it is Korach's wife who is the actual instigator of the rebellion against Moshe and who at least eggs on her spouse, if not actually inspires him in the first place to take the lead in forming an opposition party.

> …Meanwhile, Korach's wife JOINED THE REBELS and said to him (Korach), "See what Moshe has done? He himself has become king;[9] his brother he appointed High Priest; his brother's sons he made vice High Priests. If Teruma is brought, he decrees, 'Let it be for the priest.' If Ma'aser is brought, which belongs to you (the Levi'im), he orders, 'Give a tenth part to the priest.' Moreover, he has had your hair cut off, and makes sport of you as though you were dirt; for he was jealous of your hair."
>
> SAID HE TO HER: "BUT HE HAS DONE LIKEWISE!"
>
> She replied: "Since all greatness was his, he also said, (Shoftim 16:30) 'Let me die with the Philistines.' Moreover, he has commanded you, 'Set fringes of blue wool at the corners of your garments.' But if there is virtue in blue wool, then bring forth blue wool, and clothe your entire group with it!"
>
> Thus it is written: (Mishlei 14:1) "Every wise woman builds '"BEITA" (her house)'-this refers to the wife of Ohn ben Peles; "BUT THE FOOLISH WOMAN PULLS IT DOWN WITH HER HANDS"-this refers to Korach's wife.

A critique of the "Pashtan" position leading to a clarification of the intentions of Korach's offspring.

The perspective of Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni, however, does not take into account the individuality of Korach's children, but rather views them as mere extensions of their parents, without minds of their own. Targumai Yonatan and Yerushlami suggest that rather than following their father, Korach's children self-consciously remained loyal to the teachings of Moshe. The lesson therefore becomes one that is taught not by Korach's less than absolute commitment to the cause, but rather by the merits of the children, who despite the natural, universal tendency to be supportive of one's parents, particularly during a time of controversy, thought for themselves, and distanced themselves from their parents' doomed fulminations.

Even if Korach's children disagreed with their father (and mother), how pure was their motivation?

But it seems to me that the approach of the Targumim raises an additional consideration that does not appear to be addressed by either Midrashic sources or commentators. If we are prepared to posit that Korach's offspring refused to accede to the rebellion in which their parents were key participants, and consequently were saved due to their independent and critical thinking, how old were they at this time? On the one hand, adolescents, during the course of their working through their inevitable identity crises, as has been amply demonstrated by the likes of Erik Erikson in e.g., Childhood and Society,[10] seek to individuate from their parents, and often oppose their parent's views and lifestyle for the sake of simply being separate and different. Would a parting of the ways simply because they wished to be different from their parents constitute sufficient justification for their being deemed righteous by their own lights and therefore immune to the fate to be suffered by the other

---

[9] For cross-references in this Talmudic source, see the essay on Parashat Korach cited in fn. 8.

[10] Norton, New York, 1950.

members of their family, or should we understand that their disagreement was purely motivated by faith and trust, and had nothing to do with typical adolescent rebellion? Of course, there is also a middle position, that would invoke the principle of Rav[11] "SheMiToch SheLo LiShma Ba LiShma" (that an ulterior motivation can evolve into a pure motivation), i.e., even if the initial reason for the children's conflict with their parents was more psychological than ideological, "at the end of the day" they were associating with the proper approach and were consequently rewarded for it. Continuing to consider the issue of age, would it make a difference if the children were profoundly young, or might they have been older individuals who had unremarkably completely separated from their parents and were living lives of their own, in the spirit of Beraishit 2:24? Unfortunately, we can do little more than speculate about such matters.

A Midrashic approach.

An alternate scenario that presumes that Korach's children consciously opposed their father's rebellion, yet still did not survive the punishments in the normal sense, is advocated by commentators like RaShI and Rabbeinu Bachaye, basing themselves on BaMidbar Rabba 18:20 and Sanhedrin 110 a-b. RaShI claims that, originally, Korach's children were in fact supporters of the rebel cause, but they subsequently repented. As a result, they were swallowed up along with the other sinners due to their original error in judgment, but were nevertheless placed in a special part of Gehinnom (perdition) where their ongoing songs of praise to God, recorded by David in Tehillim-see fn. 5-could be regularly heard by those who were privy to a particular geographical location. The following appears in Sanhedrin:

> "The children of Korach did not die"-A Tanna taught: It has been said on the authority of Moshe our Teacher, "A place was set apart for them in Gehinnom, where they sat and sang praises to God."
> Rabba bar bar Chana said: I was proceeding on my travels, when an Arab said to me, "Come, and I will show you where the men of Korach were swallowed up." I went and saw two cracks from which smoke arose. Thereupon he took a piece of clipped wool, soaked it in water, attached it to the point of his spear, and passed it over there, and it was singed. He then said to me, "Listen to what you are about to hear." And I heard them saying thus: "Moshe and his Tora are true, but they (Korach's company) are liars." The Arab then said to me, "Every thirty days Gehinnom causes them to turn back here like meat in a pot, and they say this: 'Moshe and his Tora are true, but they are liars.'"

BaMidbar Rabba adds to Rabba bar bar Chana's discourse in the Talmud:

> And in the future to come, God will Take them out from there, and concerning them it is said, (I Shmuel 2:6) "God Causes death and Brings back to life, Sends down to the grave, and Brings up again."

It would appear that the Gemora and Midrash are making a clear distinction between Korach's sons, the constant "singers of songs" and Korach and the rest of his followers, with the latter conducting themselves according to a schedule whereby, each

[11] See for example Pesachim 50b.

thirty days following atoning, purifying requirements that take place again and again, in Promethean and Bill Murray's "Groundhog Day" fashion, must revisit and confess their sin repeatedly, until the day of ultimate redemption.[12]

Conclusing reflections.

On a literary level, whereas the first group of commentators take BaMidbar 26:11 literally, and consequently are ready to revisit 16:32-33, the latter school of thought attributes more credence to the verses in chapter 16, and therefore are compelled to interpret the reference in Parashat Pinchos in an innovative manner.

But, in my opinion, the much more intriguing issues that arise from this debate concern the dynamics of disagreements between parents and children over major issues of belief and public policy, and the consequences of such disagreements, even when one finally recognizes his/her error and sincerely repents. Even in terms of the Talmud's and Midrash's view of the sons of Korach, while their ongoing litany is not as monotonous as that of the other conspirators—the continual singing of songs is made up of a variety of Psalms as in fn. 5—nevertheless it appears that by means of singing God's Praises in an ongoing fashion, atonement is demanded from them as well. Were the children of Korach above reproach, had they immediately recognized that their father's issues were wrongheaded and therefore required disassociation on their parts, <u>or</u> had they initially been swept away by the fever of rebellion, only to stop short at some point, and beat a hasty retreat? If we adopt the second approach, while Ohn ben Peles had his wife to set him straight regarding how to extract himself from his situation,[13] how did Korach's sons reach their conclusion? What triggered their reconsideration of where they stand? There appears to be room for considerable speculation regarding such issues.

---

[12] This long-term regimen of repentance is reminiscent of a particular view in ChaZaL that maintains that Pharoah survived the incident at the Sea of Reeds in order that he would spend the rest of his life recounting what had happened and what he had done.

> Midrash Aggada (Buber) on Shemot 14:28 (Bar Ilan CD ROM)
>
> "…there was none remaining of them except one"—this is Pharoah who remained of them (the Egyptian force that attacked the Jews at Yam Suf) and did not die, in order to recount the Greatness of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, as it is said, (Shemot 9:16) "For the sake of this have I placed you in this position." …

This Midrash is complimented and expanded upon by a Rabbinic view that Pharoah's learning his lesson was manifested upon his becoming the king of Nineveh to whom Yona prophesied:

> Yalkut Shimoni Yona #550
>
> And the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Saved him from death in order to proclaim the Power of His Might, as it is said, "For the sake of this have I placed you in this position", and he ruled in Nineveh. And the people of Ninveh wrote writings of affliction, and stole and engaged in homosexuality. And the Holy One Blessed Be He sent Yona to prophesy regarding it (Nineveh) to destroy it. And Pharoah heard and stood up from his throne and tore his clothing and put on sackcloth and proclaimed to all of his people that everyone should fast for three days…

[13] It would appear that Sanhedrin 110 a-b would be in conflict with the view recorded in 109b-110a concerning Ohn ben Peles. Ohn also at least initially was in cahoots with Korach, and changed his mind during discussions with his wife. Why should the repentant children of Korach nevertheless be destined to Gehinnom, however special their position there may be, while Ohn seems to not have to undergo any sort of unpleasantness, at least immediately? Is this a case of more being expected from the Korach's children than from Ohn?