

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת קרח

ויקח קרח בן יצהר בן קהת בן לוי ודתן ואבירם בני אליאב ואון בן פלת בני ראובן

“Korach son of Yitzhar son of Kehas son of Levi took [himself] and Dasan and Aviram sons of Eliav and On son of Peles, sons of [the tribe of] Reuven” (16:1)

Why does it say "and he took" in singular form if there were many people besides for Korach listed in the posuk? The answer is that each person involved in the argument had his own motive. Korach fought against Moshe and Aharon because he was jealous and wanted to be the head of Kehas. Dasan and Aviram also had their own reasons. They were always starting arguments. Each of the other men was also in it for his own benefit. Because each participant had his own agenda and was only fighting against the leaders for his own purposes, they are referred to in singular form. None of them even cared about their partners in the dispute.

Dasan and Aviram are known as "baalei machlokes," "owners of arguments." Similarly, the Chofetz Chaim refers to gossipers as "baalei loshon hara," "owners of gossip." These are people who are so entrenched in their negative character traits that it becomes a part of them as if they "own" it. Dasan and Aviram "owned" arguments because they started them on a regular basis. One can make mistakes but he should not let them develop into habits. He should assess his shortcomings and address them. When mistakes are not confronted, they become part of the person. Chazal tell us that when a person commits a sin and then repeats it, it becomes permissible to him. One must nip his bad habits in the bud. A person must address these habits in his youth because it is more difficult to accomplish as one gets older and becomes used to his way of life. The posuk in Eicha (3:27) says: "It is good for a young man to bear a yoke in his youth." The Ibn Ezra explains that the "yoke" referred to in the verse is "mussar" or rebuke. One should take advantage of the ability to change when it is still easier to accomplish. This is not to say that adults cannot change their ways. It is certainly not as easy to undo habits in adulthood, but that is not to say that it cannot be done.

ויקמו לפני משה ואנשים מבני ישראל חמשים ומאתים נשיאי עדה קראי מועד אנשי שם

“They stood before Moshe with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for a meeting, men of renown” (16:2)

R' Avraham Yellin wrote a sefer called Erech Apayim on the subject of anger. It was one of the few seforim for which the Chofetz Chaim wrote a haskamah, an approbation. In the introduction to the sefer, he attempts to explain why an entire sefer on the subject of anger is necessary by quoting a statement of Chazal on our parsha.

Korach and his followers mocked Moshe and asked him why a room full of Sifrei Torah requires a mezuzah. After all, the mezuzah is merely a representation of the Torah on our doorposts and the room is already full of Torah scrolls? R' Yellin explains where Korach was mistaken. When he looks at the big picture, he is unable to focus on the finer details at the same time. The room may be full of Sifrei Torah, but when looking at a whole Torah, one cannot focus on the sections of Shema that are contained in the mezuzah. The mezuzah is still needed on the doorpost so that one can focus on those sections. Similarly, in the big picture of life and Torah and mitzvos, sometimes we do not focus on the character traits that are essential to spiritual growth. Therefore, writes R' Yellin, a sefer devoted to anger is a way of focusing on an important topic that is often overlooked.

Korach and his followers also mockingly asked Moshe a second question. They approached him wearing blue garments and asked whether a garment that is entirely blue still needs a blue string. R' Moshe Feinstein quotes the Gemara which states that the blue string reminds us of Hashem's presence, because the blue color is reminiscent of the heavens. If the tallis is blue, then isn't the reminder there without the blue string? The answer is that although the mitzvos have reasons, their fulfillment is not dependent on their reasons. No logic can disprove the legitimacy of a mitzva. If the Torah tells us to do something, it is immutable and it is not subject to limitation based on its reasons. To argue otherwise is to argue that all of Hashem's commands are only valid insofar as they can be understood by man. We can never let the reasons for a mitzva interfere with its actual practice. Even though logic might dictate that placing a blue string on a blue garment is superfluous, if the Torah instructs us to put a blue string on all our four-cornered garments, then we must do so.

וישמע משה ויפל על פניו

“Moshe heard and fell on his face” (16:4)

Why did Moshe fall on his face? Rashi says that this situation can be compared to a prince who is constantly getting into trouble. He asks the king's friend to intervene with the king on his behalf every time. But after a few times, he just can't stick up for him anymore. Similarly, Moshe was constantly davening for the Jews when they got into trouble. But now, after so many rebellions, he just couldn't anymore. He was so frustrated that he fell on his face.

Despite this frustration, the following pesukim describe how Moshe got up immediately and had a plan. He tried to make peace and fix the situation. He never gave up hope and stopped trying. A person must keep pushing and eventually, with the proper effort, can persevere and accomplish anything that he puts his mind to. Despair and surrender is only detrimental. Moshe may have expressed his frustration initially, but he did not allow it to hamper his efforts to resolve the problem.

ותנו בהן אש ושימו עליהן קטרת לפני ה' מחר והיה האיש אשר יבחר ה' הוא

הקדוש רב לכם בני לוי

“Put the fire in them and place incense upon them before Hashem tomorrow. Then the man whom Hashem will choose, he is the holy one. It is too much for you, offspring of Levi” (16:7)

Why did Moshe delay the resolution of the matter until the next day? Rashi explains that Moshe felt that by sleeping on it, Korach's group might come to their senses and change their mind about arguing. Rashi writes later that Korach was actually awake all night trying to rile people up for his cause. Perhaps this idea worked for the others, but Korach only saw the extra time as an opportunity to lobby for his cause.

Sometimes, the best course of action in a disagreement is to pause for a bit before continuing. When a person is in the heat of the argument, he can become irrational. A short break can help a person calm down, take a step back, and rationally approach the disagreement. They can then return to their discussion, but they will both be able to see the issue at hand clearly. Similarly, Chazal advise us not to appease a person when he is still angry. This will only make him angrier because his emotions are running high. It is best to allow the person some time to calm down on his own.

ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח
ואת כל הרכוש

“The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and the entire wealth” (16:32)

Later on, the Torah informs us that Korach's sons did not die along with the rest of their family because they repented. What made them see the light and repent before the punishment was meted out? Moshe tried his best to reach a peaceful settlement with those who were fighting against him. He did not succeed in winning Korach over. However, his words had an impact on his sons and they abandoned their father's rebellion. Sometimes, the target of a person's rebuke may not be influenced right away but some others will be.

No action ever goes for naught. Everything has ramifications even though we don't always see it. R' Tzadok Hakohen writes that if someone has fear of Hashem, his words never go unheard. Even though his words may not be listened to right now, it might have an impact on the person later on. The results may not be apparent immediately, but the seeds are planted for a future turnaround. Meaningful words penetrate the soul and stay there until they surface later on. You can never know how far your words will go. Sometimes one may try to inspire other people but is unsuccessful. He should not be depressed because he did not bring about any change. The effect is there and it could manifest itself later in life or in his children. One should not be afraid to try to influence other people because he will not be able to accomplish anything. The results of one's efforts are not always tangible.

זכרון לבני ישראל למען אשר לא יקרבו איש זר אשר לא מזרע אהרן הוא להקטיר קטרת לפני ה' ולא יהיה כקרח וכעדתו כאשר דבר ה' ביד משה לו
“As a reminder to the Children of Israel, so that no alien who is not of the offspring of Aharon shall draw near to bring up the smoke of incense before Hashem, that he not be like Korach and his assembly, as Hashem spoke about him through Moshe” (17:5)

The Torah warns us not to be like Korach and his cohorts. In fact, Chazal tell us that, based on this posuk, whoever is involved in an argument transgresses the mitzva in the Torah not to be like Korach. Whether this is a biblical commandment or not is the subject of a dispute among the Rishonim.

The simple explanation of the posuk is that one should not argue against the privileges of the Kohanim as Korach did. It can also mean not to start fights in general and not to participate in arguments. It is not enough to eschew fights but one must stay far away from them and never even come close to being party to one. This is hinted to in the name of the parsha, Korach, which contains the same letters as the word "rachok," distant. One must keep his distance from anything close to an argument. This is why Avraham asked Lot to move away from him at the first sign of trouble between their shepherds. He knew that the situation between them would deteriorate rapidly if he did not stop it. He saw a disagreement coming and he wanted to split up before it actually materialized.

Similarly, we find that the Torah commands, "Midvar sheker tirchak," "stay far away from falsehood." It is not enough to avoid lies, but one must not even give the impression of anything other than the truth. One should not tell half-truths in order to deceive others. The Torah does not say "do not lie." It says "stay far away from falsehood."

ויהי ממחרת ויבא משה אל אהל העדות והנה פרח מטה אהרן לבית לוי ויצא פרח ויצץ ציץ ויגמל שקדים
“On the next day, Moshe came to the Tent of the Testimony and behold the staff of Aharon of the house of Levi had blossomed; it brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud and developed almonds” (17:23)

What is the idea behind the blossoms and almonds growing from the staff of Aharon? R' Moshe Feinstein writes that the final product of one's efforts is not always the most important thing. The effort that brought the final product to fruition is also considered holy. That is why Aharon's staff produced flowers and buds, the early stages of growth, as well as almonds, the final product. This growth showed why Aharon was deserving of the priesthood more than anyone else. He put a lot of effort into working on himself to reach the spiritual level where he was. He did not just earn his status overnight. It took years and years of personal growth, self-scrutiny and constant toil to be worthy of becoming the Kohen Gadol. So, too, each of us are not who we are of our own doing. We are a product of what our parents, teachers and

communities have invested in us, in addition to our own personal efforts. We should realize this and we should appreciate those efforts and recognize them.

Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur
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