

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

בס"ד

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PARSHAS KORACH

Might Not Always Right

...then the man whom Hashem will choose, he is the holy one... (16:7)

This week's *parsha* chronicles Korach's infamous rebellion on the authority of Moshe. Korach, driven by jealousy, was upset that he was passed over for the position of head of the family of Kehas in favor of a younger cousin whom Moshe appointed (see Rashi 16:1). Obviously, Korach couldn't merely complain that he disliked Moshe's appointment to the head of the Kehas family; that would be too transparently self-serving. Instead, he decided to discredit Moshe's authority and show that Moshe had an inappropriate bias. He came with an entire entourage to confront Moshe and Aharon, and charged them with the conspiracy of nepotism. In other words, they claimed that Moshe had decided on his own to appoint his brother Aharon as Kohen Gadol and that this was unfair as many others were just as worthy.

Moshe became very distressed when he heard this. He responded to this charge by devising a test to see who would be worthy of bringing the *ketores* (incense offering offered by the Kohen Gadol), as this would prove who should rightfully be appointed to the office of the priesthood. Long story short: good guys won, bad guys lost (i.e. Korach and his mutinous cronies die a gruesome death and Aharon retained the title).

Rashi (16:7), rather bluntly, asks a very pointed question: What caused Korach, who was a very clever person, to engage in such a stupidity? Meaning, Korach knew the veracity of Moshe's claim that Aharon had been appointed by Hashem, he knew that he was wrong and that he was putting his life at risk by challenging Moshe. How could Korach, who was actually a very wise man, engage in such folly?

Rashi answers that Korach saw that Shmuel

Hanavi would be one of his descendants. According the Gemara (*Ta'anis* 5b), Shmuel Hanavi was, in some sense, equal in greatness to both Moshe and Aharon. In addition, he saw that he would have descendants that would serve in the Beis Hamikdosh, all of them having a level of divine prophecy. Bottom line, many great people descended from him. When Moshe said that only one of the people who brought the incense would survive, Korach automatically assumed that it would be him. Alas, he was mistaken; he didn't realize that his children would repent and actually live – it was from them that these great people later emerged.

Rashi ends his comment with a curious remark; "but Moshe did see properly." That is to say, even though Moshe also saw the greatness that would eventually descend from Korach, he knew that it would come from Korach's children. What could Rashi possibly mean to say? Rashi cannot be explaining why Moshe wasn't afraid for Aharon's life; Moshe was confident in the life or death test he devised because he knew that Hashem had asked him to appoint Aharon, and that he wasn't guilty of nepotism. What difference does it make that "Moshe did see properly"?

Rashi is telling us that even though Moshe knew that Korach was in the wrong and that he deserved to die for his terrible insubordination and challenge to Moshe's authority, the only reason Moshe felt comfortable in pursuing this course of action was because he knew that Korach's future descendants would be unaffected by Korach's untimely death.

This teaches us an incredible lesson regarding conflict and its consequences: Even when you know you're right and you



have the power to enforce your vision of what you deem to be right, you have to take a long and hard look at the consequences of your actions. Being in the right doesn't give one carte blanche to impose that position. Every possible eventuality must be considered before implementing one's agenda, even when it's a righteous one. Whether one is a hard line conservative, or a far to the left liberal, no agenda should ever be implemented until all the consequences of one's actions are fully considered. After all, Moshe wouldn't execute someone who absolutely deserved to die unless he saw that the future would remain unchanged (see also *Shemos* 2:12 and Rashi ad loc).

Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha*, Bnei Yisroel complained about the tribe of Levi's appointment to service in the Mishkan. Thus, Hashem commanded Moshe to take a staff to represent each of the heads of the tribes and to have them write their name on it. Aharon wrote his name on the staff of the tribe Levi. The staffs were then left overnight in the Holy of Holies, and in the morning Aharon's staff, representing the tribe of Levi, had blossomed and almonds were ripening on it, thereby proving that the tribe of Levi was chosen. Afterwards, Hashem tells Moshe to keep that staff in the Holy of Holies, next to the *Aron* as a reminder for future generations that the priesthood was chosen.



Bikur Cholim

If these die like the death of all men, and the destiny of all men is visited upon them, then it is not Hashem that has sent me (16:30).

A little known fact about this week's *parsha* is that the Gemara (*Nedarim* 39b) uses the above statement by Moshe ("*and the destiny of all men is visited upon them*") as a source for the obligation of *bikur cholim* – visiting the sick.

Moshe had intended to say that if the mutinous group that challenged his authority should die a natural death (i.e. die on their deathbeds in a natural manner) then they are right and he is wrong; but, if they should die in an unusual manner (e.g. the earth swallows them up) then he is right and they are wrong. However, the Talmud derives from the seemingly superfluous comment "*and the destiny of all men is visited upon them*" a source for the obligation of *bikur cholim*.

In other words, Moshe was adding to the test of their "natural death" whether or not people would come to visit them while they lay on their deathbeds. From this the Gemara derives the obligation of visiting the ill.

This teaching, extrapolated from the text, is difficult to understand; what possible reason could Moshe have to add this as a critical component of what constitutes a natural death? What does visiting the sick have to do with this conflict? In addition, we find a different Gemara (*Sotah* 14a) that derives the obligation of *bikur cholim* from the fact that Hashem visited Avraham Avinu on the

third day after his circumcision. As the Gemara (ad loc) points out, we are obligated to follow in the path that Hashem has laid out for us; just as Hashem visited the sick so must we. What possible reason do we need to add yet another source for *bikur cholim*?

There are two types of visits to the sick, each with its own responsibility. The first type is similar to when Hashem went to visit with Avraham Avinu and was there to help support him while Avraham was in pain recovering from his *bris*. There is an element to visiting the ill to help them recover, whether in easing the burden of their suffering or as the Talmud (*Nedarim* 39b) states; that a person who visits removes one sixtieth of the illness. This was the type of *bikur cholim* that Hashem engaged in when visiting Avraham Avinu and that we are obligated to emulate: Helping to relieve an ill person's pain and easing their recovery.

However, there is another kind of affliction, the kind that one does not recover from. A patient who is terminally ill requires a totally different type of *bikur cholim*. Their suffering transcends physical pain; they also suffer the pain of nonexistence. One who is terminally ill is painfully aware that he is not going to recover and will shortly leave this world. Most people spend their entire lives blissfully ignoring the fact that at some point they will no longer be on this earth. A person that is terminally ill begins to confront this reality in a very real way.

The only way to really begin to ease their pain is to give meaning to their life. A person who is dying needs to know that their life made a difference. In other words, they need to know that their existence made an impact and that there is something remaining even after they're gone. The responsibility of this *bikur cholim* is to convey to the ailing that your own life has been changed by their existence. The way to do this is to give them a feeling of how much you feel connected to them and appreciate them, and even though they will soon pass from this world, their existence mattered in a very real way.

This second type of *bikur cholim* is what Moshe is referring to in this week's *parsha*. Korach intended to create a division within the Jewish people. In fact, the first Rashi in this week's *parsha* clearly states that Korach wished to separate himself off to one side. This division, or *machlokes*, becomes the quintessential *machlokes* that is not for the sake of heaven (*Avos* 5:20). This is why Moshe had so precisely added the criteria of being visited on their deathbeds to those collaborating with Korach. Meaning, if people would go to visit with them and express how connected they felt to them before they passed, then Moshe was obviously wrong because in that case their cause had been just and not caused a permanent rift or *machlokes*.

Did You Know Continued

The Medrash (*Me'em Lo'ez Korach* Ch.7) tells us some additional details about this otherwise unknown staff:

1. These staffs didn't come from the heads of the tribes. Moshe was instructed to take a single tree and split it into 12 pieces, so there couldn't be complaints of unfairness. Not only that, but Aaron's staff was placed in the middle of the group, so no one could say it happened because it was near the Aron and had for this reason produced almonds.
2. One of the miracles was that not only did the almonds blossom and then sprout two buds, but that while one of the offshoots shed its leaves in the normal manner, the other remained intact from then on, both in summer and winter.
3. The second miracle was that it brought forth two kinds of almonds— sweet ones (on the right side) and bitter ones (left side). Whenever the Jews were good, the sweet ones grew luxuriantly, while if they went against Hashem, those on the bitter side would flourish and the sweet ones would even turn bitter.
4. They were almonds because the root word of "almond tree" is the same as "hasten to perform" (שקד). This fruit is appropriately named as the almond tree is one of the first trees to produce fruit. Hashem was therefore teaching Bnei Yisroel that he would hasten to pay back those who challenged the tribe of Levi.
5. The reason why Hashem told them to take 12 staffs was that one of the Hebrew words for tribe is the same as staff (מטה). This showed that each one represented the entire tribe, so that when the tribe of Levi was chosen, everyone would agree.



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