

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Korach

Numbers 16:1-18:32

Torah Reading for Week of June 29-July 15, 2003

Korach, "the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi," incites a rebellion against Moses. He is joined by Dathan and Aviram, and On the son of Peleth, all of the tribe of Reuben. Also participating are 250 "leaders of the community, those regularly summoned to assembly, men of renown."

And they massed upon Moses and Aaron and said to them: "Enough! The entire community is holy, and G-d is amongst them; why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of G-d?"

And when Moses heard it, he fell on his face.

When it becomes clear that Korach and the 250 "men of renown" are aspiring for the *Kehunah* (priesthood) themselves, Moses challenges them to offer *ketoret* to G-d—the most sacred of the Divine services in the Sanctuary, permitted only to a priest, and only under special circumstances.

Aaron, whose appointment as Kohen Gadol (High Priest) they are contesting, will also offer the *ketoret*. "Come morning, and G-d will show who is His, and who is holy... and whom He has chosen will He bring near to Him."

Korach and the 250 men accept the challenge. "And they took every man his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense on them, and stood in the door of the Tent of Meeting with Moses and Aaron." The people are sympathetic to Korach's rebellion, and gather en masse at the entrance to the Sanctuary.

## Fire and Earth

G-d's anger is aroused, and he says to Moses and Aaron: "Separate yourselves from among this congregation, and I shall consume them in a moment!"

And they fell upon their faces and said: "O G-d, G-d of the spirits of all flesh! Shall one man sin, and Your wrath be upon the entire community?"

Dathan and Aviram had already refused Moses' summons; now Moses goes to them, in an effort to quell the mutiny. But they remain defiant.

The moment of truth arrives.

## Commentary

**KORACH... THE SON OF YITZHAR, THE SON OF KEHAT, THE SON OF LEVI (16:1)**

What moved him to start a quarrel? He was moved to it by the fact that Elitzafan, the son of his father's brother, was appointed prince over his family; as it says (Numbers 3:30), "And the prince of the father's house of the families of the Kehatites was Elitzafan the son of Uzziel." Korach argued: My father was one of four brothers; as it says (Exodus 4:18), "And the sons of Kehat: Amram, and Yitzhar, and Hebron, and Uzziel." As for Amram the firstborn, his son Aaron attained to greatness and Moses to royalty. Who then should rightly take the next office? Is it not the next in line? Now I, being the son of Yitzhar, should by right be the leader of the Kehatites. Yet Moses appointed the son of Uzziel! Shall the [son of the] youngest of my father's brothers be superior to me? Behold, I shall dispute his decision and put to naught all that has been arranged by him...

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

**AND DATHAN AND AVIRAM (16:1)**

They were the ones who forced Moses to flee from Egypt (by informing on him to Pharaoh that he killed the Egyptian — Exodus 2:13-15). They were the ones who hurled harsh words at Moses and Aaron in Egypt (ibid. 5:20-21). They were the ones who left over from the manna (in defiance of Moses' instructions — ibid. 16:20) and went out to gather the manna on Shabbat (ibid. v. 27). And they joined in Korach's mutiny.

(Torah Sheleimah)

**AND DATHAN AND AVIRAM... OF THE TRIBE OF REUBEN (16:1)**

From this text the saying is derived: "Woe to the wicked and woe to his neighbor!" It applies to Dathan and Aviram, neighbors of Korach, who both camped to the south side of the Sanctuary, as it is written: "The families of the sons of Kehat were to pitch on the side of the Sanctuary southward" (Numbers 3:29); and it says, "On the south side shall be the standard of the camp of Reuben" (ibid. 2:10).

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

**AND ON THE SON OF PELETH (16:1)**

Said Rav: On the son of Peleth was saved by his wife. She said to him, "What matters it to you? Whether the one remains leader or the other becomes leader, you will be but a follower." Said he: "But what can I do? I have taken part in their counsel, and they have sworn me to be with them"... She said: "Sit here, and I will save you." She gave him wine to drink, intoxicated him and laid him down within [the tent]. Then she sat down at the entrance and loosened her hair. Whoever came [to summon him] saw her and retreated.

Meanwhile, Korach's wife joined in and said to him: "See what Moses has done! He himself has become king; his brother he appointed High Priest; his brother's sons he has made the vice High Priests. If *terumah* is brought, he decrees: Let it be for the priest. If the *tithe* is brought, which belongs to you [i.e., to the Levite], he orders: Give a tenth part thereof to the priest. Moreover, he has had your hair cut off (cf. Numbers 8:7) 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 the greatness was his, he said also, 'Let me die with the Philistines'..."

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And Moses said: "Hereby you shall know that G-d has sent me to do all these works; for I have not done them of my own mind.

"If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; then G-d has not sent me.

"But if G-d creates a new creation, and the earth opens her mouth, and swallows them up, with all that appertain to them, and they go down alive into abyss; then you shall understand that these men have provoked G-d."

And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground split beneath them.

And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained to

Korach, and all their goods...

And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them; for they said: Lest the earth swallow us up also.

As for the contenders for the priesthood, "there came out a fire from G-d, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered the *ketoret*."

## More Ketoret

G-d instructs that the pans in which the 250 men offered the ketoret should be retrieved, and hammered into plates to be used as the copper covering of the Altar. "For they offered them before G-d, and they have become holy." Also, this will serve as "a memorial to the children of Israel, that no stranger, who is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before G-d; that he be not like Korach and his company."

The next day, the people again massed upon Moses and Aaron. "You have caused the deaths of the people of G-d!" they accuse them.

G-d's anger is again aroused, and a plague breaks out among the people. "Take a censer," cries Moses to Aaron, "and put fire in it from off the altar, and put on ketoret, and

## Commentary

Thus it is written, "A wise woman builds her house" (Proverbs, 14:1) — this refers to the wife of On the son of Peleth; "but the foolish woman destroys it with her hands" (ibid.) — this refers to Korach's wife.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 109b)

**"THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY IS HOLY AND G-D IS AMONGST THEM; WHY DO YOU RAISE YOURSELVES ABOVE THE CONGREGATION OF G-D?" (16:3)**

Korach said to them: All heard at Sinai the commandment, "I am the L-rd your G-d"! If you alone had heard it while they had not, you could have claimed superiority. But now that they have all heard it, "Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of G-d?"

(Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

Korach took two hundred and fifty magistrates, most of them from the tribe of Reuben his neighbors, and dressed them in garments that were wholly of blue wool. They came and stood before Moses and asked him: "If a garment is made entirely of blue wool, what is the law as regards it being exempted from the obligation of tzitzit?" Moses answered them: "It is subject to the obligation of tzitzit." They began to laugh at him, saying: "If a garment of another sort is absolved by a single thread of blue wool, this garment, composed wholly of blue wool, cannot absolve itself?"

Korach further challenged Moses: "If a house is full of Torah scrolls, what is the law? Does it need a mezuzah on its doorpost or not?" Replied Moses, "It is obligated." Said Korach: "The entire Torah, consisting of 275 chapters, does not absolve this house, and the [two] chap-

ters in the mezuzah absolve it? G-d did not command you these laws — you have invented them yourself."

(Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

## AND WHEN MOSES HEARD IT, HE FELL ON HIS FACE (16:4)

Moses was thrown into a tremor... for this was already their fourth offense. To what can this be compared? To a prince who had offended his father the king and for whom the king's friend had effected a reconciliation, once, twice, and three times. When the prince offended a fourth time, the king's friend lost courage, saying to himself: How many times can I trouble the king?

So it was with Moses. When Israel had sinned in connection with the Golden Calf, "Moses besought G-d" (Exodus 32: 11). When "the people were as murmurers" then "Moses prayed" (Numbers 11:2). In connection with the Spies, "Moses said unto G-d: 'When Egypt shall hear...'" (ibid. 14:13). When the dissension of Korach broke out he said: How many times can I impose myself on G-d? So "When Moses heard it, he fell upon his face."

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

## COME MORNING, AND G-D WILL SHOW WHO IS HIS, AND WHO IS HOLY... AND WHOM HE HAS CHOSEN WILL HE CAUSE TO COME NEAR TO HIM (16:5)

Why this reference to "the morning"? Moses said to Korach: G-d has set boundaries in His world. Can you transform morning into evening? If you can, you can change this... It is written: "It was evening and it was morning... And G-d distinguished..." (Genesis 1:4-5); in the same way, "And Aaron was distinguished, to be consecrated..." (I Chronicles 23:13).

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take it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them; for wrath is gone out from G-d..."

And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation; and, behold, the plague had begun among the people...

And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.

## The Blossoming Staff

G-d instructs Moses to conduct yet another "test" to prove Aaron's chosenness as the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Each one of the twelve tribal heads should place their staff in the Sanctuary; Aaron, as the head of the tribe of Levi, will place his staff as well. Each should write his name on his staff. "And it shall come to pass that the man's staff, whom I

shall choose, shall blossom; and I will put to rest the murmuring of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you."

And Moses placed the rods before G-d in the Tent of the Testimony.

And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the Tent of the Testimony; and, behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had blossomed; *it brought forth blossoms, produced budding fruit, and bore ripe almonds.*

And Moses brought out all the rods from before G-d to all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his staff.

G-d instructs that Aaron's staff should be returned to the Sanctuary and placed there as a memorial and testimony for generations to come.

## The Priesthood

And the children of Israel spoke to Moses, saying: "Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish.

"Everyone that comes at all near the tabernacle of G-d dies; shall ever stop dying?"

## Commentary

(Rashi; Midrash Rabbah)

## AND YOU DESIRE ALSO THE PRIESTHOOD? (16:10)

Moses said to them: Among the religions of the world there are various customs, and they do not all gather in the same house [of worship]. We, however, have but one G-d, one Torah, one law, one Kohen Gadol and one Sanctuary; yet you, two hundred and fifty men, all desire the High Priesthood! I, too, desire it!

(Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

If Moses, who personifies the sefirah (Divine attribute) of Truth, said "I, too, desire it," this was no mere debating tactic: Moses truly desired the position of Kohen Gadol for himself. This means that Korach's desire for the highest spiritual state attainable by man was, in and of itself, a positive thing. The difference between Korach and Moses in this was that Korach acted upon this desire, in defiance of the Divine decree.

This explains why our Torah reading is named "Korach." The Talmud tells us that it is forbidden to name one's child after a wicked person, in keeping with the rule, "The memory of the righteous should be to blessing, and the name of the wicked should rot" (Proverbs 10:7). So how is it that an entire section in the Torah carries the name of a person whose deeds were most negative and destructive?

But the name "Korach," as the name of a Parshah in Torah, pays tribute to the positive aspect of Korach's "rebellion". While the story of Korach comes to teach us what not to do — not to act on even the most lofty of ambitions, if such action is contrary to the will of G-d — it also

comes to teach us that we should desire and yearn for the highest ideals, even those which we are prohibited from actually attaining.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

## AND MOSES ROSE UP AND WENT TO DATHAN AND AVIRAM (16:25)

Resh Lakish said: This teaches that one must not be obdurate in a dispute.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a)

## AND THE EARTH OPENED HER MOUTH, AND SWALLOWED THEM UP (16:32)

Rabbah 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 in the earth from which issued smoke. 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. Said I to him: "Listen to what you are about to hear." And I heard them saying thus: "Moses and his Torah are true, and they [Korach's company] are liars."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a)

## AND ALL THEIR GOODS (16:32)

Rabbi Levi said: The keys to Korach's treasure houses were a load for three hundred white mules, though all the keys and locks were of leather.

Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina said: Three treasures did Joseph hide in Egypt: one was discovered by Korach; one by Antoninus the son

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G-d reiterates that it is the Kohanim, assisted by the Levites, who bear the responsibility of serving in proximity to the Divine, where the slightest digression has most drastic consequences. All "strangers" (i.e., laymen) are warned to keep their distance.

The Levites and the Kohanim will receive no portion in the Land when it is divided among the tribes and families of Israel. The people, in whose stead the Kohanim and Levites serve in the Sanctuary, are to support them with the ordained *mattanot kehunah*, "gifts to the priesthood." A number of these 24 "gifts" are enumerated in the closing chapter of Korach:

Meal offerings, sin-offerings and guilt-offerings brought by the Israelites to the Sanctuary are eaten by the Kohanim, as are portions of the peace-offering (as detailed in the Parshiot of Vayikra and Tzav).

A *terumah* ("uplifting") from every crop of grain, wine and olive oil is given to the Kohen, as are *bikkurim*, the first-ripening fruits of the orchard.

The firstborn belong to the Kohen: firstborn sons are "redeemed" by paying the Kohen five silver shekels, and firstborn sheep and cattle are offered in the Sanctuary and their meat eaten by the Kohen.

The Levites receive a *tithe*—ten percent—of the Israelite farmer's crop; a *tithe of the tithe* is given by the Levite to the Kohen.

*Out of all that is given to you, you shall set aside all that is due as a gift to G-d; of the choicest thereof, the hallowed part of it.*

## Commentary

of Severus, and the third is stored away for the righteous in the World to Come.

(Midrash)

AND THEY, AND ALL THAT WAS THEIRS, DESCENDED INTO THE ABYSS (16:33)

Rabbi Berechia said in the name of Rabbi Chelbo: even their names flew off all written documents. Rabbi Yossei bar Chanina said: Even a needle of theirs on loan in the hands of another man, was swallowed up with them.

(Jerusalem Talmud)

AND THE EARTH OPENED ITS MOUTH AND SWALLOWED THEM.... AND A FIRE CAME FORTH FROM G-D AND CONSUMED THE TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY MEN WHO OFFERED THE KETORET (16:32-35)

Korach himself was smitten with both afflictions — he was consumed by the fire and swallowed up by the earth.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

There were two distinct groups in Korach's following. There were the 250 "leaders of the community, of those called to the assembly, men of distinction" who were driven by the aspiration to attain the ultimate in closeness to G-d through the offering of the ketoret. But Korach's camp also included a mob of rabble-rousers, including the infamous Dathan and Aviram, jealous of Moses and discontent with the "burden" of the divine commandments he had introduced into their lives.

The difference between these two groups is illustrated by the manner in which they met their tragic end. The two hundred and fifty men who offered the ketoret were consumed by a heavenly fire, while Dathan and Aviram and their ilk were swallowed up by the earth. As for Korach himself, the Midrash tells us that since he was responsible for both these groups, he received both penalties: his soul was consumed by fire, and his body was swallowed by the earth.

Korach's mutiny also had both a soul and a body: the positive forces that agitated it and the negative form they assumed. At its climactic end came a separation of these two elements: its "soul" ascended on high in a holy conflagration ("fire" being the process in which the energy implicit in a substance is released and rises through the atmosphere), while its "body" fell away to be absorbed by the earthly abyss. Released from its iniquitous embodiment, the spirit of Korach could now be reclaimed for its pure and holy applications.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

LIFT UP ... THE OFFERING-PANS OF THESE MORTAL SINNERS, AND BEAT THEM INTO SHEETS WITH WHICH TO PLATE THE ALTAR; FOR THEY HAVE BEEN OFFERED TO G-D, AND HAVE BECOME SANCTIFIED (17:2-3)

These pans have been sanctified, said G-d to Moses. Their very metal has been hallowed by an act which, though sinful and severely punished, was motivated by a holy desire — a desire to come close to Me. The copper plating of the Altar holds an eternal lesson: If such is G-d's regard for a piece of inanimate metal, certainly no human being is irredeemable. For no matter how deleterious his deeds, they hide a desire and striving, intrinsic to every creature of G-d, for the goodness and perfection of the Divine.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

TO BE A MEMORIAL TO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL... THAT HE BE NOT LIKE KORACH AND HIS COMPANY (17:5)

Anyone who engages in divisiveness transgresses a Divine prohibition, as it is written, "That he be not as Korach and his company."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a)

Why does the Torah not say, "And G-d saw that it was good" on the second day of Creation (as it says in all other days)? Because on that day divisiveness was created; as it is written (Genesis 1:6) "Let there be a firmament within the water; and it shall divide between water and water"...

(Midrash Rabbah)

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## IT BROUGHT FORTH BLOSSOMS, PRODUCED BUDDING FRUIT, AND BORE RIPE ALMONDS (17:23)

Ness, the Hebrew word for miracle, means “elevation”. The purpose of a miracle is to elevate those who experience it to a higher consciousness, to a recognition of the Divine reality which underlies the natural reality we encounter in our everyday lives.

There are two types of miracles: a) miracles which utterly disregard the laws of nature; b) miracles which, though they may be no less “impossible” by the standard norms and no less obvious a display of the hand of G-d, nevertheless occur by natural means, employing natural phenomena and processes to achieve their ends.

At first glance, it might seem that the second miracle’s “need” to resort to natural processes makes it less of a miracle. In truth, however, a miracle that operates through nature is more elevating — hence, more “miraculous” — than a miracle that supersedes it.

A sudden, shattering change has not transformed nature — it has only gone beyond it. But when a miracle is integrated into the workings of nature, nature itself is elevated. Otherwise stated: a supra-natural miracle liberates the person who experiences it from the natural order; a natural miracle liberates the natural order itself.

The bearing of fruit by a dry stick of wood would surely have sufficed as a Divine sign of Aaron’s chosenness. But G-d did not simply make almonds appear on Aarons staff. Rather, He stimulated in it the full natural process of budding, blossoming, and the emergence and the ripening of the fruit. Aaron’s staff defied nature’s laws and restrictions, yet it conformed to the phases of growth that the almond naturally undergoes. It transcended nature, but did so on nature’s own terms.

*(The Chassidic Masters)*

## AND G-D SPOKE TO AARON, BEHOLD, I HAVE GRANTED TO YOU... THE GIFTS RAISED TO ME, ALL THE HALLOWED THINGS OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL... (18:8)

Korach was a comedian, who made jest of Moses and Aaron. What did he do? He gathered the entire congregation, and began to say to them words of jest. He said: A widow with two orphan girls, who lived in my neighborhood, had a single field. When she came to plow it, and Moses said to her: “Thou shalt not plow with an ox and a donkey together” (Deuteronomy 22:10). When she came to sow, Moses said to her: “Thou shalt not sow your field with mixed seed” (Leviticus 19:19). She came to harvest and make bundles, and he said: Leave behind leket (“gleanings”), shikchah (“forgotten bundles”) and pe’ah (unharvested “edge of field”—cf. *ibid.* v. 9; Deuteronomy 24:19). She came to make her silo, and he said: Give terumah (the portion “uplifted” for the kohen), first tithe and second tithe. She accepted the law and gave him. So what did this poor woman do? She sold her field and bought two sheep, to clothe herself from their shearings and profit from their offspring. No sooner had they given birth, that Aaron came and said to her:

Give me the firstborn, for so has G-d said to me, “All firstborn... you shall sanctify to G-d” (Deuteronomy 15:19). She accepted the law and gave them to him. The shearing season arrived and she sheared them; comes Aaron and says: Give me the first shearings, for so said G-d, “And the first shearings of your sheep you shall give to him” (*ibid.* 18:4). Said she: I have no more strength for this man! I shall slaughter them and eat them! As sooner had she slaughtered them, he said to her: Give me the foreleg, the cheeks and the belly! (cf. *ibid.* v. 3). Said she: Even having slaughtered them, I have not saved them from him! I proclaim them sacrosanct! said he to her: If so, all is mine, for so said G-d: “All things declared sacrosanct in Israel shall belong to you” (Numbers 18:14). He took them and went his way, leaving her weeping. This is what happened to this poor woman. All this they do, and attribute it to G-d...

*(Yalkut Shimoni)*

The concept of mattanot kehunah, the gifts given to the Kohen, represents the crux of Korach’s objection to the priorities taught by Moses.

Mattanot kehunah means that a person dedicates the choicest portions of the yield of his material labors to a spiritual cause. In a person’s own life, it means that even if the great majority of one’s day is devoted to material pursuits, its best hours are devoted to Torah study and prayer. In other words, it means that a person regards the spiritual aspect of his life as “higher” than its material aspect, even when accepting that his mission in life demands that the bulk of his time, talents and resources be applied to interacting with the material world.

This perspective on the interrelation between the material and the spiritual is the antithesis of Korach’s claim that everyone and everything is equally “holy” and that there’s no reason to set any person or thing on a “higher level” than its fellow’s.

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

## OUT OF ALL THAT IS GIVEN TO YOU, YOU SHALL SET ASIDE ALL THAT IS DUE AS A GIFT TO G-D; OF THE CHOICEST THEREOF, THE HALLOWED PART OF IT (18:29)

Everything that is for the sake of G-d should be of the best and most beautiful. When one builds a house of prayer, it should be more beautiful than his own dwelling. When one feeds the hungry, he should feed him of the best and sweetest of his table. When one clothes the naked, he should clothe him with the finest of his clothes. Whenever one designates something for a holy purpose, he should sanctify the finest of his possessions; as it is written, “All the fat is to G-d.”

*(Maimonides)*

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## FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

## Who Was Korach?

A study of the biblical account of Korach's rebellion against Moses, and of the numerous Midrashim and Commentaries describing Korach's personality and actions, yields a complex, even contradictory picture. Korach was no ordinary rabble-rouser. He was a leading member of Kehatites, the most prestigious of the Levite families. Joining him in his mutiny against Moses and Aaron were "two hundred and fifty men of Israel, leaders of the community, of those regularly called to assembly, men of renown." Korach's difference with Moses was an ideological one, driven by the way in which he understood Israel's relationship with G-d and by the manner in which he felt the nation ought to be structured.

Yet Korach is regarded as the father of all quarrelers: his very name is synonymous with disharmony and conflict. The Talmud goes so far as to proclaim: "Anyone who engages in divisiveness transgresses a divine prohibition, as it is written: 'And he shall not be as Korach and his company.'" But if there is more to Korach — the person and the idea — than a jealousy-drive power struggle, why does every petty squabbling fall under the umbrella of "Don't be like Korach"?

Obviously, there is something at the heart of Korach's contentions that is the essence of all disunity.

The particulars of Korach's campaign also require explanation. What exactly did Korach want? His arguments against Moses and Aaron seem fraught with contradiction. On the one hand, he seems to challenge the very institution of the *kehunah* ("priesthood"), declaiming to Moses and Aaron: "The entire community is holy, and G-d is within them; why do you raise yourselves over the congregation of G-d?"

(Moses had divided the people of Israel into several classes of holiness: "ordinary" Israelites, Levites, Kohanim ("priests") and, at the pinnacle of this pyramid, the *Kohen Gadol* ("High Priest"). The Israelites — the farmers, merchants, craftsmen, soldiers and statesmen of Israel — were to pursue the "normal" existence of physical man — a life and vocation that involve the bulk of a person's time and

talents in the material world. The tribe of Levi, however, was "distinguished by the G-d of Israel from the community of Israel, to be brought closer to Him," to serve as spiritual leaders and priests, "instructing Your laws to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel; placing incense in Your nostrils and burnt offerings upon Your altar" (Numbers 16:9; Deuteronomy 33:10). Within the tribe of Levi itself, Aaron and his descendants were consecrated as "Kohanim" and entrusted with the primary role in serving G-d in the Sanctuary. Aaron himself was appointed *Kohen Gadol*, "the greatest of his brethren" in this hierarchy of holiness. Korach seems to be objecting to this spiritual elitism.)

But from Moses' response ("Is it not enough for you that the G-d of Israel has distinguished you from the community of Israel... that you also desire the priesthood?") we see that Korach actually desired the office of the *Kohen Gadol* for himself!

This paradox appears time and again in various accounts of Korach's mutiny in the Midrashim and the commentaries. Korach comes across a champion of equality, railing against a "class system" that categorizes levels of holiness within the community. Yet, in the same breath, he contends that *he* is the more worthy candidate for the High Priesthood.

In a number of talks, the Lubavitcher Rebbe analyzes the arguments, motives and spiritual profile of Korach and his compatriots. If Korach is the essence of divisiveness, says the Rebbe, then an understanding of the dynamics of conflict and harmony will explain Korach's challenge to Moses. Conversely, an understanding of the subtleties of Korach's argument will shed light on the very fine line separating divisiveness from true peace. For although divisiveness and peace look very different from each other in their full-blown, actual states, in their essence and origins they are amazingly similar. In fact, they are very nearly indistinguishable from each other.

*What is peace?*

Our Sages have said: "Just as their faces are not alike, so, too, their minds and characters are not alike." Such is the nature of the human race: individuals and peoples differ from each other in outlook, personality, talents, and the many other distinctions, great and small, which set them apart from each other.

It is only natural to expect these differences to give rise to animosity and conflict. And yet, at the

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core of the human soul is the yearning for peace. We intuitively sense that despite the tremendous (and apparently inherent) differences between us, a state of universal harmony is both desirable and attainable.

But what exactly *is* peace? Is peace the obliteration of the differences between individuals and nations? Is it the creation of a “separate but equal” society in which differences are preserved but without any distinctions of “superior” and “inferior”? Or is it neither of the above?

*The “Firmament”: Separation of Spirit and Matter*

In the Torah’s account of G-d’s six-day creation of the world, each day’s work concludes with the statement: “And G-d saw what He had created, and behold, it was good.” Each day, that is, except for the second day, which is the day that “G-d made the firmament [i.e., the “heavens”], and divided between the waters which are below the firmament and the waters which are above the firmament.”

Explains the Midrash: “Why does it not say ‘it was good’ on the second day? Because on that day divisiveness was created; as it is written, ‘it shall divide between water and water.’” However, the Midrash then goes on to point out that on the third day the phrase “it was good” appears twice, because then “the work of the waters,” begun on the second day, was completed.

In other words, the division effected on the second day was a less than desirable phenomenon, but only because it was not yet complete. On the third day, when the “work of the waters” was completed (involving even further division of the lower waters’ domain into “dry land” and “seas”) this divisiveness itself is deemed “good”.

Our sages tell us that G-d’s six days of creation correspond to the six millennia of human endeavor that follow. Therein lies the significance of the Midrash’s words: in the third millennium of the world’s existence, the element that resolves the conflicts created by diversity was introduced into our lives. This is the Torah, revealed to us at Sinai in the year 2448 from creation.

Indeed, the Talmud states that “The Torah was given to make peace in the world.” The Midrash expresses the peacemaking quality of Torah with the following metaphor:

*Once there was a king who decreed: “The people of Rome are forbidden to descend to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to ascend to Rome.” Likewise, when G-d created the world He decreed and said: “The heavens are G-d’s, and the earth is given to man.” But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original gezeirah (“schism” and “decree”), and declared: “The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms.”*

The schism and decree to separate the heavenly from the earthly, effected by G-d’s “division of the waters” on the second day of creation, was thus alleviated on the third “day” of history with the revelation at Sinai. No longer were the material and the spiritual two irreconcilable realms. The heavens descended to earth, and the earth was empowered to ascend to the heavens.

But the Torah did not come to blur the distinction between the heaven and earth. In fact, its self-proclaimed task is “To differentiate between the holy and the mundane, between the pure and the impure” (Leviticus 10:10). Nor does Torah endeavor to create a uniform world society: its detailed laws delineate the many different roles (man and woman, Jew and non-Jew, Israelite, Levite and Kohen, full-time Torah scholar and layman, etc.) to comprise the overall mission of humanity.

Indeed, a uniform world could no more represent a harmonious state than a single-hued painting or a symphony composed entirely of identical notes could be said to be a harmonious creation. Like the third day’s “work of the waters” that harmonizes the divisiveness of the second day by means of further delineation, the Torah makes peace in the world — peace between the conflicting drives within the heart of man, peace between individuals, peace between peoples, and peace between the creation and its Creator — by defining and differentiating, rather than by blending and homogenizing.

This is why, explain the Chassidic masters, the Torah is associated with the third day and the third millennium. The number “1”, connoting a single entity or collection of identical entities, can spell unanimity but not peace. If “1” represents singularity and

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“2” represents divisiveness, then “3” expresses the concept of peace: the existence of two different or even polar entities, but with the addition of a third, unifying element that embraces and pervades them both, bringing them in harmony with each other by defining their common essence and goal, but also their respective roles in the actualization of this essence and the attainment of this goal — and thus their relationship with each other.

So the “third day” does not undo the divisions of the second. Rather, it introduces a “third” all-transcendent element which these divisions serve. And it is this dynamic of harmony by diversity that “completes” their differences and renders them “good.”

*Back To Korach*

In light of this, Korach felt, how can we speak of “higher” and “lower” roles in G-d’s world? How can one say that the *Kohen Gadol* is loftier than the common laborer? True, the *Kohen Gadol*’s life is wholly devoted to spiritual pursuits while “ordinary” Israelites must contend with the mundanity of the marketplace. But “within them is G-d” — they serve the divine purpose no less in the fulfillment of their role than does the *Kohen Gadol* in the fulfillment of his.

Korach was not opposed to a division of roles within the community, nor to the distinction between spiritual and material. On the contrary, he himself yearned for the spiritual path of the High Priesthood, to serve G-d utterly free from worldly affairs. What he *did* contest was the way in which Moses defined this division of roles.

“Why do you raise yourselves over the congregation of G-d?” he argued. Why this “ladder” of spirituality, on which the Moseses and Aarons of the generation occupy a *higher* rung than the farmer who works his land or the merchant engrossed in his accounts? Why is the “ordinary” Jew told to regard Aaron as the one who represents him in the Sanctuary and who facilitates his relationship with G-d? Is G-d closer to heaven than to earth? Is serving Him by transcending the material a more important part of humanity’s mission than utilizing the material existence to fulfill His will?

Give *me* the High Priesthood, said Korach, and I

will eliminate the connotations of “leadership” and “superiority” that Moses and Aaron have given it. To me, the most spiritual and the most material of lifestyles, and all gradations between, are all distinct but parallel paths in our endeavor to serve the Almighty.

*Korach and the Spies*

Korach’s challenge to Moses’ and Aaron’s leadership followed another tragic mutiny among the Jewish people, that of the Spies, of which we read in [last week’s Parshah](#).

Ten of the twelve tribal leaders sent to scout the land of Canaan returned to dissuade the people from their mission of conquering the land. Here in the desert — they argued — sustained by manna from heaven and shielded from a corporeal and hostile world by the heavenly “clouds of glory,” our souls are free to pursue the divine wisdom in Torah and soar in meditative attachment to G-d; there, in the Land, we shall be subject to the political and economic mundanities intrinsic to an earth-bound existence. “It is a land that consumes its inhabitants,” they warned the people, reminding them that many a spiritual giant had been corrupted when exposed to the enmeshments of material life. So why abandon our spiritual idyll for a life of subsisting off the land?

The Spies erred in confining their relationship with G-d to the realm of the spirit, rejecting, in effect, the purpose of the Exodus and the very essence of Israel’s mission: to conquer and settle the land of Canaan as the “Holy Land” — to realize the *land*’s potential for holiness and sanctity. Korach took the lesson of the Spies’ error to the other extreme, contesting the very distinction of spiritual life as something loftier and more desirable than material life. The Spies spurned the mundane; Korach and his followers denied that there was anything mundane about the mundane.

*The Uplifted Part*

This also explains Korach’s particular aversion towards the *mattanot kehunah*, the “gifts to the Kohanim,” instituted by Moses. The giving of the *matanot kehunah* was commanded by G-d, but Korach argued that Moses had misinterpreted their function and significance.

Why was the Jew commanded to “separate” and “uplift” a portion of his crop, the “first shearings” of his flock, and other “gifts”? On the practical level, Kohanim and Levites need to eat. The tribe of Levi

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was to be given no allotment in the Land of Israel, since “G-d is their lot” and the perfection of the spirit their vocation. Their material needs would therefore need to be provided by their brethren, in whose stead they serve in the Holy Temple and whose lives they supply with the spiritual dimension of Israel’s mission. On a deeper level, the *matanot kehunah* represent the resources that each and every individual reserves for the “Kohen” within himself — the time, energy and possessions he allocates for his own spiritual pursuits.

Here, again, Korach did not object to the *matanot kehunah* per se. But why do we speak of these gifts as things “uplifted” (*terumah*) to G-d? Korach refused to accept the notion that the bushel of grain that the Israelite farmer reserves for the Kohen, or the daily hour or two he devotes for study and prayer, are somehow loftier and “holier” (i.e., closer to G-d) than the rest of his harvest or day. Yes, agreed Korach, the materially-involved individual ought to designate a certain portion of his life and wealth for matters of the spirit. But to see these as the “choicest” elements of his life? As the ultimate objective of everything he does? Why, demanded Korach of Moses and Aaron, do you insist on defining it as the apex of our communal and individual endeavors? The entire community is holy, and G-d is amongst them and in their every positive effort. Why do you *raise* yourselves, and the spiritual ideal that you — and, indeed, I myself — represent, above the congregation of G-d?

## “Lowly” Defined

Korach was right: our involvement with the material can be no less G-dly an endeavor than the most transcendent flights of spirit. Indeed, our sages consider man’s sanctification of material life the ultimate objective of creation. “G-d desired a dwelling in the lowly realms,” states the Midrash; “This,” writes Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi in his *Tanya*, “is what man is all about; [this is] the purpose of his creation, and the creation of all worlds, supernal and terrestrial.” But Korach erred in his understanding of the nature of this “dwelling in the lowly realms” that G-d desires, and the manner in which man can indeed fashion a divine home out of his material self and world.

But first we must understand why it is that the material is regarded as “lower” than the spiritual.

Should not the focus and objective of G-d’s creation be considered its loftiest element? And yet, in the very sentence in which the Midrash states that the Creator’s desire lies specifically in the physical existence, it refers to it as “the lowly realms”!

The Chassidic masters explain: The cardinal law of existence is, “There is none else besides Him” (Deuteronomy 4:35). G-d is infinite and all-pervading; any other existence or reality we may identify — the objects and forces of the physical universe, the axiomatic truths we contemplate, the “I” of our identities — are not existences “besides Him” but expressions of His all-embracing reality.

This is why the physical reality is the “lowest” element of G-d’s creation. The more “existence” a thing possesses, the more presence it presumes and exudes, the greater a distortion it is of the divine truth. While spiritual realities also possess definition and existence, these are far more ethereal than the brute tangibility of the physical. More importantly, the spiritual entity is of a “selfless” nature, always expressing and serving a reality greater than itself, while physical matter manifests only the “I am” of its tactual being. An idea or an emotion is always about something else; a stone or tree is ostensibly about itself. A person praying or studying is demonstrably relating to a higher truth; a person dealing or eating is demonstrably affirming his individual being.

To again quote the *Tanya*, of all the “worlds” and realities created by the Almighty, the physical reality is “the lowest in degree, of which there is none lower — ‘lowest’ in the sense that it most conceals His manifest reality. It is a world of doubled and redoubled darkness, so much so that it even contains ‘evil’ — elements which oppose the reality of G-d, declaring: ‘I am the ultimate.’”

Nevertheless — indeed, because of this — the “lowly realm” of the material world is where G-d’s purpose in creation is realized. For G-d desired more than the spiritual’s natural affirmation of His truth. He desired that the physical world, whose nature is inhospitable — indeed contrary — to the divine truth, be made to “house” Him, to serve and express His all-transcendent, all-pervading reality.

We achieve this by living a material life, but

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doing so in the service of a higher, spiritual goal. When a person spends ninety percent of his life earning a living, eating, sleeping, recreating and otherwise attending to his physical and material needs, yet does so in a way that demonstrates that all this is only to enable the ten percent he devotes to prayer, study, charity and other G-dly endeavors, he or she is transforming the very nature of the physical. The “I exist” of the physical, which so blatantly belies the divine truth, has now become partner to the reality that “There is none else besides Him.” It has acknowledged its subservience to that which is greater than itself.

In other words, as long as the material is not made to express its subservience to the spiritual, it remains the element of creation that is “furthest” from its divine source. Yet when the “inferiority” of the material is made manifest, when the materially-involved individual orders his priorities so that his every material act is for the sake of the Kohen and the Kohen within himself, then the “lowliest realm” of creation becomes its G-dliest — its greatest assertion of the divine truth.

*If You Feel Inferior, You're Superior*

This is where Korach's mistake lay. The different levels of spirituality among the various segments of the people, and within each individual's life, do take the form of a “hierarchy” — a ladder on which the materially-involved individual looks up to his more spiritual brother, and regards his own spiritual moments as the loftiest part of his day. The farmer regards the produce that he gives to the Kohen as the holiest part of his yield, for it represents the spiritual focus of all his endeavors. The businessman looks to the scholar as his ideal; he feels trapped and stifled by the demands of his vocation and lives for those few precious moments which he manages to devote to study.

This is not because those who fill the more spiritual roles occupy a more important place in G-d's world. On the contrary — the “lowly realm” of the material is the arena in which the divine purpose in creation is realized. But the specialty of the materially-involved individual lies precisely in that he deals with the lowest elements of creation (that is, those which least express the reality of G-d in any manifest

way) and, recognizing their lowliness, directs them towards the higher purpose of serving his spiritual endeavors and spiritual brethren.

If we refer back to the Midrash's parable of the Romans and the Syrians, we can see where Korach's vision departs from with the Torah's definition of peace. The distinction between the two realms (the material and the spiritual) is preserved, but there is movement and interrelation between them. And their relationship is defined in terms of “higher” and “lower”: the heavenly *descends* to earth and the earthly *ascends* to heaven.

*False Peace*

This is also why Korach's approach, ostensibly the very picture of harmony, is actually the source of all divisiveness and discord.

Korach's vision seems the paragon of harmony: diverse elements unified by a common goal. But while his “separate but equal” world may unite its various components in that they all serve the same overall goal, it fails to provide for any true connection between them. The paths may converge at the destination, but they are separated by walls which isolate and divide them. Without a reciprocal relationship between them, without any sense of where they stand vis-a-vis each other, their separateness inevitably disintegrates into factionalism and conflict.

By pointing to Korach as the father and prototype of divisiveness (*machloket*) the Talmud is saying: This pseudo-peace, this “Parallelism” that says, “I do my thing, you do yours, but it's all equally good, there's no objective ‘higher’ and ‘lower’, so there's neither need nor responsibility of one toward the other” — this is the source of all conflict in our world.

*Korach the Parshah*

Interestingly enough, although Korach disavowed a “vertical” relationship between matter and spirit, he himself was a prime example of it! For Korach himself was not content with his divinely-ordained role as a Levite, and desired the High Priesthood.

So in the final analysis, Korach's own internal state constituted the ultimate rebuttal of his argument against Moses and the ultimate refutation of his own divisive “peace”. His own desire for the High Priesthood, his yearning upward for a rung on the “spiritual ladder” higher than his own (though he,

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himself, would not have defined it as such), demonstrated the truth that, whatever a person's place and role in life, his commitment to it must be coupled with the desire for something higher. Korach's failing was twofold: that in regard to his own self, he had the desire but lacked the commitment (a state analogous to being "consumed by fire"); and in regard to what he was advocating, he saw only the commitment, and not the desire (a state analogous to being "swallowed by the earth").

This explains why an entire section of Torah carries the name "Korach", the name of an unrepentant sinner. For we are to derive the positive aspect of Korach's deed — his striving for an existence more spiritual than his own — and apply it to our lives.

*Based on the teachings of  
the Lubavitcher Rebbe, www.therebbe.org;  
adapted by Yanki Tauber, editor@chabadonline.com*