‘BS”D

Parshas Korach 5776

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*There is no such thing as a passive onlooker.*

Korach’s Bystanders

In our portion, Korach, first cousin of Moshe Rabeinu, challenges Moshe’s leadership. Why should Aharon be the High Priest? Why should serving G-d be restricted to the Cohanim? The whole congregation is holy! Let any and every man come forward and serve!

Moshe arranges a contest of sorts. Korach and his 250 followers, as well as Aharon, are to offer incense before G-d. G-d alone will choose who is fit to serve Him. Korach gathers the entire congregation (eidah) in front of the Sanctuary to witness the event.

Suddenly G-d’s glory is revealed. G-d tells Moshe to separate himself from the community so that G-d can instantly destroy them.

Moshe says to G-d that surely if one man sins, the entire congregation should not be penalized.

G-d then tells Moshe to instruct the congregation to go away from the dwelling places of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram. Moshe tells the people to do so. Then he calls upon G-d to vindicate him by opening the earth and swallowing Dasan and Aviram and their followers.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This indeed takes place, and they are swallowed by the earth. Meanwhile a fire goes out from before G-d and consumes the 250 incense burners.

Why did G-d at first want to destroy the whole congregation? Why did He “change His mind” when Moshe said that it was unjust and unfair?

The Ramban quotes an interpretation by Rabeinu Chananel. When G-d said He would destroy the whole congregation, He actually meant only the congregation of Korach. When G-d said, “Separate yourselves from the community,” He meant that *all* of the rest of the Jews, not just Moshe and Aharon, should separate themselves from Korach’s community and G-d would destroy only Korach et al.

The Ramban offers several criticisms of this interpretation.

First of all, Hashem tells Moshe to separate from the congregation. But three people, that is Korach, Dasan, and Aviram hardly qualify as a congregation.

Also, it is hard to say that Moshe, the great prophet, misunderstood what G-d meant.

The Ramban explains the passage differently. The congregation of Israel gathered around the Sanctuary because they thought that perhaps Korach was right. G-d was, in fact, justified in threatening to destroy them. Moshe and Aharon spoke up for the Jews. They hadn’t actually done anything yet. Korach, who was goading them on, should be held responsible alone and punished, not the Jews that he was duping.

This is a Biblical pattern. On one level, there is a degree of guilt by allowing oneself to follow someone else’s bad idea. But the righteous person defends the people by saying that the main blame should be placed on the actual perpetrator and the rest of the people, although not totally blameless, should be excused.

The Ramban gives an example of when G-d brought a plague on the Jewish people when King David counted them. (It is forbidden to directly count the Jewish people.) David said, “I alone have sinned; I alone have done wrong; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand fall upon me and my father’s house.” (Shmuel II 24: 17)

In fact, the Jews of Dovid HaMelech’s time were also culpable for allowing themselves to be directly counted. They could have each given a shekel coin, and the coins would have been counted which would have been permitted. Yet David argues that they were only misled, the only one who would be punished is the one who ordered the count: David himself.

I would suggest a slightly different way of understanding these passages which is a little closer to Rabeinu Chananel. The key question is who exactly were the congregation that Korach gathered and thus who was the congregation that G-d threatened and Moshe defended? I suggest they were one and the same congregation—like the Ramban says—but they were not all of the people of Israel—like Rabeinu Chananel says.

Immediately after Moshe prays that G-d only punish the guilty man, G-d says to him, “Speak to the congregation and say, ‘Withdraw from the tents of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram.’” (Bamidbar 16: 23)

Wait a minute! The congregation was just described as assembled before the entrance to the Sanctuary. How did they suddenly get to be around the tents of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram?

I think there were two separate congregations: the first that gathered around the Sanctuary were people who were supporters of Korach. They came to witness the bringing of the incense by the 250 men. Hashem is angry at them and threatens to destroy them. Moshe pleads for them. The Torah doesn’t give Hashem’s response, but the ensuing narrative does. A fire goes forth and consumes the 250 men. As Rabeinu Chananel says, that refers to Korach’s immediate followers; the 250 bringers of the incense. The other lesser adherents were spared as Moshe had prayed. Perhaps Moshe wanted all of the 250 to be spared as well as all of the other onlookers. But as it turned out, the 250 were in fact guilty and were punished as Hashem had said, but the less guilty were spared as Moshe had requested.

The congregation around the tents of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram’s tents were not Korach supporters but rather curious bystanders. G-d never threatened them. They merely had to distance themselves from the tents as Moshe told them, and they were spared.

Let’s conclude with a reading from the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabah 18:12)

There are four types of people who are called “wicked:” One who even attempts to strike his fellow, as it says, “He said to the wicked one, ‘Why do you strike your fellow?’” (Shmos 2:13)

The second is one who owes money and does not repay it, as it says, “The wicked person borrows but does not repay; the righteous is generous and giving.” (Tehillim 37: 2)

The third type is the impudent person who has no respect for people greater than he, as it says, “The wicked man is brazen-faced; the upright man knows his way.” (Mishlei 21: 29)

The fourth one is the fomenter of strife as it says, “Move away from the tents of these evil men.”

Dasan and Aviram met the “wicked” criteria in two areas: They were disrespectful and arrogant, and they caused bitter argument and strife.

Now I’m sure everyone I’m talking to is neither impudent nor a seeker of strife. But we must ask ourselves if we are not semi-followers of the Dasan and Avirams of the world if we stand by at their impudence and strife-fomenting. There is no such thing as a passive onlooker. If we don’t take a stand, we are part of the congregation of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram.

When we encounter disrespect for Torah or Torah scholars, we must speak up against it. When we see people engendering hate and strife against individuals or groups, we must speak up and declare that this is wrong. We cannot remain silent.

We must be active followers of the humble Moshe and the lover of Israel, Aharon, and not be silent partners with Korach, Dasan, and Aviram.

1. Some say Korach himself was burned, some say he was swallowed by the earth, and some say he was burned and then swallowed by the earth. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)