

A Daily Bread

Date: 29 Sivan, 5785 (June 25, 2025)

Torah Portion: Korach

Topic: Why Oil Is King

It is written (Num. 16:1), “Korach took.” The Scripture does not say, “Korach contended” or “assembled” or “spoke” or “commanded.” Rather it says that “Korach took.” What did he take? After all, he himself took nothing. Rather, his heart took him away, like that which the Scripture states (Job 15:12), “How does your heart take you, and what do your eyes intimate?” The Midrash teaches elsewhere (Bereishis Rabbah 34 §10): “The wicked – they are under the dominion of their hearts ... But the righteous – their hearts are under their dominion.” By applying the Yyov verse (How does your heart take you?) to Korach, the Midrash conveys that Korach conducted himself in the manner of the wicked, who slavishly gave in to their emotions and desires.

The Midrash offers another look into the mind of Korach: R' Levi said: Why did Korach contend against Moshe? Because he said to himself, “I am a son of oil, being a son of Izhar,” for it states, “He will bless ... your “*tirosh*” and your “*izhar*,” the offspring of your cattle and the flocks of your sheep and goats, on the Land that He swore to your forefathers to give you” (Deut. 7:13). Now, “*tirosh*” – this is wine; and your “*izhar*” – this is oil. Korach calls himself “a son of oil,” since the name of his father, Izhar, means oil. And in all liquids where you put oil, the oil is found on top. Thus Korach reasoned, “My grandfather (Kohath) named my father ‘Izhar’ (which means oil) because he saw with *ruach hakodesh* that Izhar’s progeny (namely myself, Korach) would rise above his siblings’ progeny in wealth, wisdom, and accomplishment.” But his reasoning was flawed: Kohath named his son (Korach’s father) “Izhar” not because of Korach’s accomplishments but because of the prophet Shmuel; Kohath foresaw that the prophet Shmuel was destined to emerge from Izhar, and Shmuel would use oil to anoint the first kings of Yisrael, Saul and David.

It is also written (Zech. 4:14), “These are the two sons of “*izhar*” who are standing by the Adon of all the land.” Now, does oil (*izhar*) have sons? Of course not! Rather, this verse speaks of Aharon and David, who were anointed with the set-apart Anointment Oil, and, thus consecrated, Aharon took the priesthood and David the kingship. Korach stated further: If these two, Aharon and David, who were merely anointed with a superficial application of the Anointment Oil, took the priesthood and kingship, then I who am the very son of oil, do not need to be anointed, and I should be made Kohen and king even without being anointed.

Such was one of the arguments that persuaded Korach to rebel against Moshe. What is the proper response to his argument? Is it not true that oil always rises to the top, and that it therefore symbolize eminence and leadership?

Yes, it is true. But Korach’s mistake here was that he took a superficial view of the symbolism and misconstrued its message about the essence of leadership. Korach thought that oil’s propensity to rise to the top shows that a leader is to hold himself aloof from the common folk and conduct his public activities in a lordly, condescending way – contrary to the Biblical rule that a king is to read from the Torah regularly *so that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren...* (Deut. 17:20).

To be sure, it is important for a leader to cultivate a noble bearing, maintain a certain distance from his subjects, and cast some measure of fear upon them – so that he may guard the prestige of his office and command the people’s respect and obedience. R’ Yehudah HaNasi made this point to his son and successor while lying on his deathbed: “Conduct your princehood among the exalted ones. Cast fear upon the students, so that they will be in awe of you” (Kesubos 103b).

But that is only for show. Inwardly, a leader – even a king – must be humble and deferential toward others of moral worth. The Talmud cites the example of Yehoshaphat, a member of the Davidic dynasty and king of Yehudah. When Yehoshaphat would see a Torah scholar, he would rise from his seat, embrace and kiss him, and call him, “My teacher, my teacher! My master, my master!”

Does this royal precedent contradict R’ HaNasi’s call for an assertive and intimidating style of leadership? No, says the Talmud. Yehoshaphat was careful to humble himself before Torah scholars only in private meetings with them. In public, he would exude majesty and strength, surrounding himself with all the trappings of royalty so as to inspire awe and admiration in his subjects.

It might be said that a leader can adopt both of these attitudes at the same time. Even in public, when he is attending to matters of state and must assert his authority, he should privately fill his heart with feelings of humility.

Why, then, is oil held up as a symbol of kingship? Not, as Korach thought, because it rises to the top and represents high status and personal distinction, but for the opposite reason – because it represents humility. Oil comes from the olive, but only after the fruit is squeezed, ground, and crushed – in short, beaten down and reduced to a pulp. In a similar way, a person will develop into a worthy king or leader only after he has labored to subdue his prideful nature and learned to be mindful of the diminutive, deficient human being underneath the splendid robes of the office he occupies.

Korach thought that, as the “son of oil,” he was born to greatness and had no need to be raised up artificially by the formality of anointment. How wrong he was! On the contrary, his arrogant sense of entitlement showed that he needed more than anyone to be put into his place by a humbling application of the anointing oil.

Shalom.