

A Daily Bread

Date: 28 Sivan, 5785 (June 24, 2025)

Torah Portion: Korach

Topic: A Revelation at Risk

It is written (Num. 16:30), "But if YHWH creates what is unheard of, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you shall know that these men have scorned YHWH." This week's Torah portion reveals a conflict between Moshe, Korach and his company. The Midrash questions why was it necessary to punish Korach and his followers with an unprecedented phenomenon. He could have asked Elohim to strike them down in an ordinary plague, for example, the same kind that had brought justice to the Spies.

Malbim points out that Moshe himself anticipated this question, and he provided the answer before it could be asked. When he announced the miracle that would suck Korach and his henchmen into the bowels of the earth, he said to the people (v. 28), "By this you know that YHWH has sent me to do all these works, that they are not from my own heart."

In other words, Moshe clarified that his object in punishing Korach was not to defend his own position and honor, or those of his brother Aharon. His concern was to preserve the nation's faith in the Torah – in its Divine origin and eternal relevance, for all generations.

How did the Torah's Divine origin suddenly become a burning issue? It was Korach who had made it so by raising new doubts about the matter. Yisrael's faith in the Torah's authenticity has always been founded on the Revelation at Sinai, in which Elohim came forth and spoke, not merely to one prophet or to a select elite, but to millions of people, the entire nation. It was an experience with no parallel in the annals of history, as it is written (Deut. 4:33), "Has a people heard the voice of Elohim speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live?"

It was an experience designed to convince not only those present, but also their descendants and all fellow human beings in search of the Divine truth, that Moshe's prophecy was genuine. If Moshe had claimed that he received the Torah in private communion with Elohim, his story, like the claims of so many other "religious innovators," could be dismissed for lack of independent corroboration. But here was a conspicuously open and public revelation, complete with miraculous background effects; striking images of fire, smoke, and lightning; sounds of thunder and heavenly shofar blasts; and a precisely worded message of Divine instruction – all seen and heard by a great multitude of people so moved by the experience that they accepted, without question or dissent, not only the Ten Commandments but the entire system of Torah law and practice as an eternally binding expression of His will.

This was an event of unique power and credibility. For who could persuade an entire nation that they had personally witnessed such an earth-shaking spectacle if they had not lived through the experience or committed themselves to Elohim exactly as described? Who could induce such a large number of people to tell their children and grandchildren that they sensed His Presence and heard His voice if they did not fully believe it to be true?

This was to be the basis of Yisrael's faith in the Torah, the conviction that Moshe was merely an intermediary who did nothing but convey His word to Yisrael. And this was the memory that the first-generation Yisraelites were to pass down to their children and grandchildren, so that they and all future generations would continue to believe in the Torah's Divine origin.

But now Korah was threatening to undermine this mainstay of Yisrael's faith. By questioning the appointments Moshe had made in Elohim's name for the Priestly and Levitical orders, Korah was threatening to break the national consensus on Moshe's integrity as an impartial and incorruptible bearer of Elohim's word. To Moshe it was clear that if he were to allow this challenge to stand, without refuting it in the strongest possible manner, doubts would linger not only about who should lead the nation or serve in the Tabernacle, but also, and more fundamentally about Moshe's role as Elohim's prophet and the Torah's status as the revelation of Elohim's Will. For here was a prominent member of the generation who was present at Mount Sinai, who witnessed the event on which Moshe's standing and the Torah's validity invariably rests, and yet he was prepared to accuse Moshe of exceeding his authority and conducting the nation's affairs according to his own lights.

Did Korach have a point? Was there truly room to question the great lessons of Munt Sinai? As long as there was no clear answer to this question, there would be no Moshe of any consequence, no Torah. A dramatic rebuttal was therefore in order. Just as it was necessary to provide a miraculous backdrop for the Revelation at Sinai in order to establish the Torah for all time, so, too, now that a group of cynics had arisen to weaken the luster of that historic event, it would be necessary to defeat their claims and restore the Torah's reputation by means of another striking miracle, another undeniable act of YHWH.

Shalom.