

Moshe vs. the Rebels: A Challenge on Two Fronts

By Rav Elchanan Samet

a. TWO INTERWOVEN ACCOUNTS

The story of the rebellion by Korach and the other rebels, narrated at the beginning of our parasha, is one of the most complex stories in all of the Torah. It is quite clear that it is not a typical biblical account. One does not have to be a discerning critic in order to see that in fact two separate stories are being told.

I) One story concerns the test of the censers, which pitted Korach and the 250 princes against Aharon. This event takes place at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed and concludes with the burning of the 250 unworthy bearers of the incense.

II) The other story involves the refusal of Datan and Aviram to accept Moshe's leadership – a rebellion which emanated from their dwelling-place in the camp and ended with their being swallowed by the earth, in accordance with Moshe's announcement after he went to their tents.

These two stories are interwoven in such a way as to divide the narrative as a whole into different units:

(16:1-3) Opening: Coalition of the rebels and their common complaint against Moshe and Aharon.

(4-7) Moshe's first response "to Korach and to all his congregation" – proposal of the test of the censers.

(8-11) Moshe's second response to Korach and the Levites: "Do you also seek the priesthood?"

(12-15) Moshe's call to Datan and Aviram, their speech refusing him, and Moshe's response.

(16-19) Return to Korach and the proposal of the censers; the beginning of the test; Korach gathers the whole congregation.

(20-22) God says He will punish the congregation, and Moshe and Aharon pray to cancel the punishment.

(23-27) Moshe tells the congregation to move away from the tents of the rebels.

(27-34) Moshe announces the imminent punishment, and they are swallowed into the earth.

(35) The burning of the 250 unworthy bearers of incense.

(17:1-5) The melting of the censers into a covering for the altar, "a memorial for Bnei Yisrael."

Usually a biblical story concentrates on a single subject, a single plot, focusing on the place, time and personalities at the center of that plot. The narrative in our parasha describes two different subjects and two plots simultaneously, alternating between one and the other. It is true that both stories concerned rebellion, and both seem to have taken place simultaneously; but they could have been presented separately and juxtaposed. Does this interweaving necessarily indicate that an editor joined these two independent stories together?

b. FIGHTING ON TWO FRONTS

Sometimes the fact that "that's how it happened" is of such great significance that it must find expression in the literary description as well. When a number of events join to form a whole system of pressures, acting simultaneously on a number of fronts (and not coincidentally, rather with the intention of creating a comprehensive attack), then we would not be able to sense the gravity of the situation unless the literary description attempted a simultaneous report of all of these events.

For example, a number of the wars fought by the modern State of Israel have been conducted on several fronts concurrently. This was the result of coordination among the Arab states,

aimed at forcing Israel to spread her forces and her military effort over large areas and against superior armies. A professional military historian, seeking to clarify the military developments on a certain front, would obviously focus only on that front. But a historian who wished to describe the history of the State of Israel during the war would be unable to tell the story of the State fighting for her survival in anything but a "jumping" manner, illustrating the need to fight on several fronts at the same time. Only a description of the complications and difficulties involved in spreading forces, and having the top military command hurrying from one front to the next, debating how to divide resources among the fronts and battling with confused communications, could present an accurate picture of the reality. A description that was orderly, with a distinction drawn between the different subjects described, would end up providing a distorted picture of what it was really like.

A coalition of opponents chose to act together against Moshe, the leader of Israel, on several fronts, regarding different issues and even in different places. Their alliance did not arise from a general convergence of interests, but rather from one specific common interest: that the nation would be drawn after them, bringing about a collapse of Moshe's leadership in the face of this broad front of pressures, since he would be unable to deal with them all concurrently. In order to illustrate Moshe's situation, forced upon him by the alliance of his opponents, the story focuses on him and the way in which he tries to repel the attack launched against him from all sides. Such a story must of necessity be complex.

c. AN ATTEMPT TO BREAK UP THE REBEL COALITION

In trying to meet the challenge of the multi-faceted opposition to his leadership, Moshe first tries to find cracks in the wall of opposition of the 250 princes. He tries to reveal some opposing interests among them in order to break their apparently united attack. Both in Moshe's first response to Korach and his congregation and in his second response to Korach, Moshe appeals to the Levites. But Levites were not mentioned among the group of rebels listed as the scene is set in verses 1-2. How did they suddenly become part of the action?

What we shall propose here is a sort of compromise between the various interpretations. Korach, who headed the group of 250 princes, did not represent his tribe alone, but rather brought other Levites with him from his tribe and his family. Although the Ramban is correct in pointing out that not all these 250 princes were rebelling against the priesthood of Aharon and his sons, those who did oppose Aharon's priesthood did so based on a philosophy of equality – "for the whole congregation are all holy." The Levites, however, obviously did not hold this philosophy: they were complaining about the distinction between themselves and the sons of Aharon, from their own tribe, and sought equality within their chosen tribe alone. But since all were now united in their demand to be included in the service and the priesthood, Moshe proposed to all of them the test of the censers.

At the end of this speech by Moshe (verse 5-7), directed to all 250 of the princes, he covertly addresses the Levites among them: "It is too much for you, sons of Levi" – you have no place in this alliance, for you have been given many privileges and you should be satisfied with what you have.

Had the Levites accepted what Moshe was hinting to them, they would have separated themselves from the group of 250

princes, and thus this group would have begun to disintegrate. But this did not occur, and therefore Moshe now addresses them, and them alone, quite openly, clarifying quite clearly what previously had only been hinted at. But even this speech was met with no response, neither by Korach nor by his Levite brethren. The group of 250 princes remains united until the bitter end. Moshe's attempt to break up this group before they could act, thereby obviating the need for the offering of the incense, was unsuccessful.

d. AN ATTEMPT TO JOIN THE FRONTS

Having failed in his attempt to break up the large group of rebels, Moshe now attempts to limit the number of fronts, in the geographical sense (16:12): "And Moshe sent to call Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav." Moshe wished them to come to him, to the center of the camp, so that he could negotiate in one place simultaneously with Korach and the 250 princes as well as with Datan and Aviram. There was also another tactical reason for his calling them: Datan and Aviram, who were situated far away from Moshe, could draw the nation after them with Moshe's knowledge and without his making any effort to prevent this.

But this attempt, too, failed: "And they said, We shall not come up." They were not prepared to conduct a dialogue with Moshe, and used the opportunity to launch a scathing attack of him in front of their audience.

e. BUYING TIME

Moshe was therefore forced to go back to dealing with the 250 princes who were in his close proximity, and he reverts to his original plan (the test of the incense) which, it appears, there is now no choice but to execute:

(16-17) "And Moshe said to Korach: You and all your congregation, present yourselves before God, you and them and Aharon, tomorrow. And each man shall take his censer..."

The date, "tomorrow," had already been fixed in his first proposal to them in verses 5-7, and Rashi (16:5) explains the meaning of the delay until then as follows: "He intentionally postponed in case they would repent." Moshe tried to "buy time," hoping that the number of his opponents would have diminished by the next day, but again he was not successful. In fact, Rashi infers from verse 19, Korach used the intervening time to win over more people to his cause:

"All night long he walked about among the tribes and tempted them: 'Do you believe that I am acting only for my own benefit? I act only for all of you. These people have come and taken all the powerful positions – the kingship for himself and the priesthood for his brother...' – until they were all convinced."

All of Moshe's attempts had been aimed at neutralizing the opposition in humane ways, thereby obviating the need for Divine intervention. But his activities in all of these areas failed to achieve his aims. The opposition was powerful and stubborn, leaving no room for dialogue. On the one hand, the rebels confronted Moshe with a deafening silence; on the other hand, they slandered him behind his back. There was now no alternative; it was time for Divine intervention.

Until this point the story has examined the relations between Moshe and the various groups of rebels. But it should be remembered that the aim of the rebels was not to create any type of relations with Moshe. Quite the contrary – their aim was to convince the nation. The possibility that the nation would be drawn after them was the most urgent danger, and this process was indeed taking place at both centers of the rebellion. With regard to the internal center we are told (16:19), "And Korach gathered the whole congregation against them." Those who present themselves before the Ohel Mo'ed at Korach's calling thus express their support of his cause.

From the continuation of the story (verses 23-27) we see that other Israelites were involved even in the external center – at the tents of Datan and Aviram. The rebellion was gathering momentum, and many among the nation were drawn after its various leaders.

f. DIVINE REVELATION

Now comes the moment of revelation which, in the stories of the major sins narrated in our Sefer, indicates the imminent turning

point (16:19): "And God's glory appeared to the whole congregation." Indeed, God's words to Moshe and Aharon are (16:21), "Separate yourselves from amongst this congregation, and I will consume them in a moment." As was the case in the sin of the golden calf and in the sin of the spies, this is simply an opportunity for Moshe and Aharon to offer a prayer for Israel and to stand in their defense:

(22) "And they fell upon their faces and said, O God, God of the spirits of all flesh, if one man sins will You then be angry with the whole congregation?"

Ramban explains their prayer as follows:

"Moshe and Aharon were speaking in the people's defense, pointing out that only Korach was actually guilty; he had been the instigator and he had attracted them. It was therefore appropriate that he alone should die, in order that his punishment be well-known. This is the way of those who plead for mercy – to remove the sin from the nation as a whole and place it upon the individual who instigated, for he is guilty in any event."

How does God respond to their prayer? Does He accept it? If so, why does God not say, "I have forgiven as you have spoken," or some such phrase? Many commentators, both traditional and critical, see God's next words (v.24), "Speak to the congregation, saying, Get up from around the dwelling of Korach, Datan and Aviram," as His response to the prayer of Moshe and Aharon. In other words, they interpret God as saying, "I have accepted your prayer, on condition that the congregation expresses its disassociation with the rebels and moves away from them."

But in fact there is no continuity of plea and response, as these commentators would understand it. Firstly, let us look at the location of the "congregation," which seems to move from the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed to the tents of Datan and Aviram. Does the expression "the whole congregation" mean the same as "the whole nation"? Without any connection to the questions we are dealing with, the Ramban (16:21) answers this in the negative:

"And Korach gathered the whole congregation (kol ha-eda) against them' (verse 19) – this refers to the dignitaries of all the tribes, who are often called to the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed, or to the firstborn of the nation who were eligible for service. The text here does not mention 'the nation' as in the sin of the golden calf ([Shemot 32:9](#)) and of the spies ([Bamidbar 14:11](#)), for if all of Israel were there, God would have said, 'I will consume them in a moment, AND I WILL MAKE YOU INTO A GREAT NATION' [as He declared on those two occasions]."

Thus there is no difficulty in the fact that one congregation gathered at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed, while a different portion of the congregation surrounded the tents of Datan and Aviram. Both "congregations" represented groups within the nation rather than the nation as a whole. It is quite possible that the majority of the nation was not involved in the story at all. The prayer of Moshe and Aharon thus referred to those who had been gathered by Korach and brought to the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed.

God's next words (verse 23-24) move the story – and Moshe – to the tents of Datan and Aviram. Moshe is commanded to go to

them in order to prepare for the punishment that will come upon them and in order that the punishment will not harm that part of the congregation that is in their midst.

Why is Moshe not commanded to drive away those who are gathered around Korach and his cohorts, before going to the tents of Datan and Aviram? The answer is simple: these people were not really involved with the offering of the incense, but rather stood around watching. And besides, the fire that emanated from God would harm only the sinners, not those who had not sinned. After all, Aharon was standing with the sinners, and he was not harmed by the fire. But when the earth split open (at the tents of Datan and Aviram), all those who stood there would be swallowed alive, and therefore all those who were not involved had to move away.

But the answer to the question may be more of a matter of principle: God did not wish for the whole congregation to move away from the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed. On the contrary – He wished them to remain and to witness the results of the test of the incense, in order that they would learn their lesson. For this very purpose God commanded afterwards that the censers of the sinners be fashioned into a covering for the altar, "a memorial for Bnei Yisrael, that no stranger... offer incense before God."

For the same reason, it would seem, Moshe does not completely banish the crowd surrounding the tents of Datan and Aviram; rather, he tells them to move away from their tents and to stand back. Therefore when the punishment comes to Datan and Aviram we are told of those who stood back (16:34), "And all of Israel WHO WERE AROUND THEM fled at their voices, for they said, Lest the ground swallow us." This terrified flight was also

something of a lesson for Israel, and Moshe did not wish to miss the opportunity.

Thus we see that God's words in verse 24, "Speak to the congregation saying, Get up from around the dwell of Korach, Datan and Aviram" was not an in any way an answer or response to the prior prayer of Moshe and Aharon. A new subject begins in verses 23-24.

g. TWO MOTIVES, TWO PUNISHMENTS

Together with Moshe, we leave the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed and move over to the place where the tents of Datan and Aviram are situated. The text describes the events there in epic length and detail: Moshe's warning to the crowd to move away from the tents of the rebels – and their distancing themselves, the announcement of the expected punishment – and its immediate fulfillment, and the reaction of those present to the punishment. All of this is described over eleven verses. What was going on during this time at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed?

Again the story "jumps" to where we left off, eleven verses ago, and completes the picture (verse 35): "And a fire came out from before God and consumed the 250 men who offered the incense." The beginning of the verse is formulated in the simple past tense – "a fire came out," rather than with the conversive "vav," which is the usual biblical style for describing the past tense. One of the functions of the simple past tense in biblical style is to indicate the past perfect. It seems this is the intention here, too. The fire emanating from God did not take place AFTER what was described previously about the splitting of the earth, but rather during the same period of time. The two

punishments, so different in nature and in two completely different places, took place simultaneously.

These simultaneous punishments were "measure for measure." The various groups of rebels had chosen to unite in order that their various outbreaks would take place at two different centers concurrently, for the sole purpose of making it difficult for Moshe to deal with them. Therefore their punishment, too, took place at both centers simultaneously. Moshe, a mortal, could not be present in both places at the same time. But God had no trouble with performing two different actions in two different places concurrently.

Attention should be paid to the lack of quantitative equality in the two descriptions of punishment. In contrast to the long and detailed description of the earth splitting, only one single verse is devoted to the punishment of the fire. A possible explanation for this is the literary principle according to which our story operates: it follows Moshe in all his movements; we could almost say that the subject of the story is Moshe's way of dealing with the rebellion at its two centers.

The "compensation" for the brief description of what took place at the Ohel Mo'ed is found in the unit 17:1-5, which thematically is a direct continuation of verse 35 which concludes the previous chapter. While the lesson to be learned from the splitting open of the earth is a personal one, gained experientially by the people who were present at the event, the lesson learned from the punishment of the fire is a lesson for all generations, for God commands that it be eternalized and embodied in the covering for the altar.

By means of this command and its fulfillment, the punishment that took place at the entrance to the Ohel Mo'ed is also connected to Moshe. His name appears at the beginning of the unit – "And God spoke to Moshe saying" – as well as at its conclusion, which is the end of the whole story and the essence of its moral (17:5): "... And he shall not be like Korach and his company, AS GOD SPOKE BY MOSHE'S HAND TO HIM."

At the beginning of this study we noted the complexity of the story – a factor which would seem to make its unified comprehension more difficult. One of the details mentioned there is that the punishment that met the different rebels was not uniform. Indeed, this is true, although it should be noted that the two types of punishment were in fact connected to one another – they were opposites. One punishment was that "a fire emanated from before God" – it comes down to earth from heaven – "and consumed the 250 men who offered incense." The second punishment originated in the opposite direction: not downwards from above, from heaven to earth, but rather from beneath the earth upwards (31-32): "And the earth THAT WAS UNDER THEM split open, and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them." Thus at the very same moment a fire FROM HEAVEN "consumes" some sinners, and the depths of the earth FROM BELOW "swallow" the others. In this way, a juxtaposition of the two OPPOSITE punishments taking place simultaneously serves to unite the story as a whole.

This contrast in the punishment of the two groups of rebels is obviously related to the specific content of each rebellion. The 250 princes sought to be included in the priestly service – the offering of incense, and their sin therefore involved a wish to move upwards – towards God and His service. Those whose sin involved a forbidden attempt to reach God were punished with a fire that emanated from God. They wished to reach heaven – and so they were punished from heaven.

But Datan, Aviram and their supporters waged an earthly, political rebellion against Moshe's calling. They sought not the priesthood and Divine service, but rather an "inheritance of fields and vineyards." They praise Egypt as a "land flowing with milk and honey," and regret the fact that Moshe took them out. Their motives are lowly; they come from the earth. What drives them is jealousy of Moshe and earthly desires. They desire not to "ascend" – "We shall not come up;" and they express sorrow over having "come up" from Egypt. Therefore the punishment appropriate for them is a descent to the depths of the earth. The "earth" is the source of their sin, and so from the earth emanates their punishment. Hence the emphasis, in the description of their punishment, on the fact that not only their bodies were swallowed up but also "everything that was theirs" – "their houses... and all their property."

In this way the contrasting punishments also indicate the contrasting motives of the different groups of rebels. And a contrasting subject, as we have already mentioned, is always a unifying factor.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)