Hasidic-Psychological Readings: Revelation and Korah

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After years of learning in conventional yeshivot, I discovered several Hasidic writers. They opened my eyes to reading the Torah in a manner fundamentally different from anything I ever had learned before. Their penetrating spiritual and psychological wisdom inspired me to study their works ever since. Below are two unrelated analyses of the Revelation at Sinai and of Korah's rebellion. I hope that these two studies offer a taste for the nuance and depth these writers have to offer the contemporary reader.

Revelation— Shame and the Law

One of the moments in history that many Jews would love to experience is the Revelation at Sinai. What really happened there? So much has been written about what Sinai was, literally or metaphorically. The idiom of every Jew having been present at Sinai implies that there was, or could be, a Sinaitic certainty. I hope to elaborate on this, and suggest what, paradoxically, this certainty is.

What interests me is the aftermath, what was born there. One may broadly and loosely define Sinai, or Revelation, as some religious peak experience, and assume that the period afterward cannot but be anticlimactic. Religious experiences are sought after worldwide, in various forms and means. There often is a disparity between the intensity of the experience and how unimpressive the person who experienced them is. Sometimes they seem to be in converse proportions.

The Talmud teaches that the aftermath of Sinai is shame: "Anyone who is shameless—it is known that his parents did not stand on Sinai" (*Nedarim* 20b). However uncomfortable shame is, being shameless is rarely considered worthy. In English or Hebrew we speak of being ashamed of *ourselves*. Our self shames us. This phenomenon reflects a belief that there's a self inhering in us that is "better" than we are to whom we compare ourselves, and who criticizes us incessantly. If we absolutely cannot do better—then we feel no shame. Sinai was seeing, experiencing, knowing, a self. After Sinai, that remnant becomes and is the self. These laws, even though they be but a shadow of the core Revelation "I am the Lord your God," still shame us, for we know how much 'more' we can be: our potential always shames us.

Immediately after the Ten Commandments we read: "And the whole people saw the voices and the torches and the voice of the Shofar and the mountain smoking and the people saw, and moved and stood afar. And they said to Moses: speak to us and we will hear, and let not God speak to us lest we die. And Moses said to the people: Do not fear, for in order to test/raise you has God come, and in order that be His awe on your faces that you not sin. And the people stood far away, and Moses approached the mist, where God was" (Exodus 20:15–18).

Sinai was a terrifying experience. The Talmud tells us that the people "died" again and again when hearing God's voice, and needed angels to revive them (*Shabbat* 88a). These were moments when the world stood still, "not a bird chirped nor did a cow bellow," moments when "God hung the mountain over them like a barrel, saying to them: If you accept my Torah—good, if not—here will be your burial." The Israelites felt forced to accept God. The Maharal of Prague (16th century) explains that their experience of closeness and love of God was so exquisite, and their love for God so great, that there was no way that they could ever have declined. "Everything God has spoken we will do," they said even before hearing His commands (Exodus 19:5). This is a deep human desire to be choice-less, for there to be no-two-ways, love-given clarity. We desire to be in love. This was Sinai, and whoever has been there can recognize others who have, and know who hasn't. That is the tone of the statement of the Talmud "Whoever is shameless—is not one of us." This is the way the Talmud expresses this:

Said Rabbi Elazar: when Israel said "We will do" before saying "We will hear" (Exodus 19:8, 24:3,7), a heavenly voice emitted saying: "Who revealed this secret to my children, a secret used by angels… who first do God's word, then hear God's word" … It is like an apple tree which brings forth its fruit before its leaves, alike to this was Israel's saying "We will do" before saying "We will hear."

There was once a Sadducee who saw Rava deeply immersed in learning, sitting upon his thumb which, from the pressure, squirted blood. He said to him: You hasty/careless nation who placed your mouths before your ears—you still are so careless/hasty! You should have first heard and seen if you are able (to keep it) then accept, and if not—not accept it. He replied: About us, who are very whole, it is written "The innocence of the upright will guide them," whereas about others, who are very crooked, it is written (the continuation of that verse in Proverbs) "and the distortion of traitors will rob them." (*Shabbat* 88b)

The Talmud is describing, amongst various nuances of love, the concept of *hineni*, here I am. For that is what love is, a "Here I am." Called by those we love, even in the middle of the night, our immediate

gut response will be: Yes, I come. Other people, if they call us, will elicit a more reserved response. We respond to those we love not because we should or because it's right. We respond because we are unable not to, for as soon as we heard their voice we already answered Yes. The Talmud describes this as a moment of "My soul went out when He spoke" (Song of Songs 5:6). Thus the Sadducee's question as to first calculating if one is able is irrelevant. Being in love is knowing that one can, because one will stop at no less than doing one's all. It is "innocent" as Rava says, and that innocence is a sure guide and one knows it.

The Talmud is describing the feeling that one can't wait, like the apple tree, which cannot wait to bring forth its fruit, even though there are no shady leaves yet, even though sufficient preparations have not been made. Rather than seeing a perfect moment of Rava's love, the Sadducee saw haste and carelessness. Rava retorts that his calculating leaves infidels and traitors like him with nothing. The feeling of "I can't wait" is so beautiful precisely because one knows that one can wait yet feels the not-wanting-to-wait as "can't," as inability. It is the most delicious inability, the inability to say no when one has no desire but to say Yes.

This clarity sometimes passes. One may be in love, but then starts doubting this God-given clarity and reduces it to terms easily provided by others and ourselves. Not a long time passed after the Revelation before Israel doubted their love and did not know if it was really true, so they felt shame. They now felt that they *could* wait; they felt that there was no hurry. This lack of desire—is shame.

Let us imagine a concert violinist for whom the audience who heard his playing are on their feet applauding. He may yet feel frustrated and ashamed of his oh-so-professional performance for *he* knows what it is like to play with passion, with inspiration, forgetting oneself and being nothing but an instrument for the music, and less than this, for he is nothing more than being an efficient machine. As the Magid of Mezeritch explained-rephrased the words of II Kings 3:15 "And when the player was like the instrument, then the hand-of-God was/is upon him." Playing, or doing anything, without passion is lifeless especially for those who have known the divine elevation of impassioned inspiration, and what is more shameful than death?

The extreme expression of this Sinai-born shameful split from oneself is the story, maybe a metaphor, of the Golden Calf, the embodiment of decay of desire. Thus the Torah starts with the words "Then the people saw that Moses delayed (*ki boshesh Moshe*) descending from the mountain" (Exodus 32:1). This word *boshesh*, akin to *bushah*, shame, is used also referring to Adam and Eve: "and they were naked, man and his wife, and waited not—*lo yitboshashu*." They were not ashamed, and did what was natural without any shame or shyness. The aftermath of their lacking desire is paradise lost. The Talmud narrates that at Sinai people returned to their Eden-like state and became whole. One Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 20:300) explains that at Sinai all were healed, there were no blind, deaf, lame, or foolish people. All were healed when hearing God's voice. Feeling passionate is healing.

Whereas *bushah* means shame, *boshesh* means to delay. This delay in satisfaction, in fulfilment of our desires, is the deep experience of shame. There is a difference between desire and desires. The being-kept-waiting by parents, then others, let alone their sighs of frustration at our infant needs, although inevitable, all instill in us a sense of shame, that we should not be desirous of …anything, that we should be satiable (compare the last words of the guard in Kafka's parable "In the Cathedral"). Hasidut teaches that desiring ever more is expression of man's being created *be-tzelem Elokim*, in God's image, having infinite desire. The way we satiate those desires may, as you say, shame us, for more often than not we supplant the specific objects of our desires for these desires themselves. We all know the sense of shame in being kept waiting, or even thinking that we are being delayed. We all knew that sense of shame having to wait, being needy, of waiting for the gratification provided by parents. Our good taste shames us, and when feeling detached and uninspired and lacking desire – we

may feel shame. Such is *bushah*—delay, the separation from a self, a soul, an ideal, a height, that was ours, that we believe still is ours in some way, still is attainable. If we don't expect ourselves to be able to do things that we could when younger we will feel no shame at inability to do so. But distanced from things we still dream of we feel shame.
Someone whose "parents' feet were on Sinai" is someone who, having known greatness, can recognize it and bow their heads to it, feel humbled and modest as Israel must have felt at Sinai. Having known grandeur one can recognize it, whereas someone who has never known anything better will lack this, will relate to everyone with casualness or familiarity simply because he is unable to recognize genius. One needs a certain education to be able to recognize inspiration. The closest we can come to knowing it, to wholeness and being, is our awareness of our lack. This desire *is* the fullness of our being. Dreaming is the closest most of us get to prophecy and Revelation. Sinai, as an event in history and as a metaphor for our soul's core, is the most sublime dream we ever dreamt. It is not by chance that we speak of aspirations as dreams. Hazal said "A person never dies even half fulfilled" – our dreams and aspirations can never be fulfilled (unless they are very limited ones!). And so our dreams shame us, because they express our highest aspirations, and so when we are reminded of our dreams and aspirations we cannot but be filled with shame at our inadequacy. But the alternative, having very low aspirations or not dreaming at all, is even worse, for it evidences a loss of our being made *be-Tzelem Elokim*, in the image of an infinite God, it evidences our having lost desire to grow infinitely. The residue of Sinai is remaining dreamers.

The Positive Dimensions of Korah

One of the qualities of good literature is complexity, and even in stories that seem to have clear "good guy—bad guy" delineations, the Bible sometimes hints that these lines are not intended to be clear-cut. The surface reading of Korah's rebellion seems to present Korah as the bad guy, jealous of Moses' power, wanting to usurp Moses' leadership and even prophecy, spotlighting what seems to be evident nepotism in Moses' choice of Aaron and his sons for priests.

The *Mei HaShiloah* (mid-19th century Hasidic commentary) argues that things are not necessarily what they may seem. He assumes that all biblical heroes demand understanding, even if they were mistaken or sinners. He relinquishes the need for a clear-cut and often trite moral. To this interpreter, the story of Korah presents two sides that battled, and one side losing does not imply its being entirely mistaken nor need its protagonist be entirely in the wrong.

Against a totalitarian regime, rebellion is inevitable, even if this rule is divinely ordained, and even when the law challenged is God's. The event was handled badly. Moses seems to have wanted a public confrontation. He initiates the contest by fire (Numbers 16:16–17), and suggests that the earth open its mouth to swallow the rebels and their families (16:29–30). The grand debacle is ineffective. Rather than being persuaded, the people afterward accuse Moses and Aaron saying, "You have killed the Lord's people" (17:6–8).

Moses' words to Korah's party, "You have enough sons of Levi" (16:7), are irrelevant to the issue. No rule, not even that of Moses, is above criticism merely by virtue of its being ordained by God. In the Talmud, Moses is censured for these words to Korah: "He [Moses] used the term 'You have enough'—and the same words were used by God when refusing him entry into the land 'You have enough' (Deuteronomy 3:26)" (*Sotah* 13b).

This rabbinic criticism of Moses is severe. It could be interpreted as saying: How can one say to someone seeking closeness to God "You have enough?" Notwithstanding his being hurt, Moses should have perceived that their yearning for closeness to God may have been authentic. Saying "You have enough" is not only saying that Korah is mistaken in his belief that all people can be greater and that they should aspire to more, but that there can be, in regard to closeness to God, "enough." Questioning others' motives for desiring holiness is a travesty, whereas the seeking itself is holy.

The Talmud's suggestion that Moses' setting boundaries to Korah is what ultimately denies his own entry to the Promised Land is portraying how, tragically, the boundaries with we protect ourselves will always limit our own expansion and growth.

The Seer of Lublin (early 19th century Hasidic master) said, "Were I alive at the time— I would have supported Korah." Korah's words were not a rabble-rousing slogan nor were they empty words. If when meeting Moses people could not but be awestruck (Exodus 33:10), when meeting Korah people saw their own sanctity, realized how God inhered in them, too. Korah had that rare ability to reflect to people their own holiness.

The eleven Psalms that are attributed to "The Sons of Korah" demonstrate that "Korah's son" was not a shameful name, but rather was a name used with pride by Temple singers. This was a judgment of history that the rebellion against Moses was not a simple power struggle. Even their end implies a non-ending: "And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them…they and all they had descended to Sheol alive" (Numbers 16:32–33). In language of myth their descent to Sheol is a continuation of living, but in another place.

Many legends narrate how Korah and his children continued their existence in Sheol and were not totally annihilated, even as the Torah tells us later, "Then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korah in the death of his community when the fire ate the 250 men, miraculously. *The sons of Korah did not die*" (Numbers 26:9–10).

A Midrash gives the Korah story an additional dimension that connects it to the preceding passage that commands wearing fringes with a blue thread on garments (Numbers 15:40). Korah brought his 250 men wearing entirely blue garments challenging Moses, “Do these need a blue thread?” and then ridiculed Moses’ affirmative response. The Midrash may be portraying Korah not as someone ridiculing ritual *per se*, but only the idea that ritual is not equally relevant in all cases and not fitting all people equally.

Thus *Mei HaShiloah* explains: Mitzvot are reminders and, as such, are perhaps needed by the masses, but why should individuals who really are not in need of them observe them? Korah, he says, would say: “Awe of God, awareness of His presence, is perpetual for me. What do I need reminders for?” Mitzvot are reminders of God’s presence, and this can be bliss, or oppressive when awareness of God’s omnipresence and omniscience is inescapable. Korah is saying, in pain, if only I *could* forget. *Mei HaShiloah* is portraying Korah not as one who wants to escape God but as one whose aspirations and awareness are so intense as to be unbearable. He imagines that fixed forms of worship, such as high priesthood, could create a limitation and contain his burning. Living forever is the most tragic of punishments, and Korah descends to the Sheol of his unquenchable passion for the divine.

Religions and laws act as equalizers, for better and for worse. Like the ashes of the Red Cow in the parashah that follows Korah, which “Purify the impure and defile the pure”—so rules and regulations refine those who otherwise would be degenerate, while lowering those whom they limit. Korah cannot accept this paradox of ritual. The Torah does seem to nod in Korah’s direction after his demise when God says to Moses: “Say to Elazar son of Aaron to lift the pans from amongst the fire for they have become sanctified. The pans of these sinners in their souls—make them a covering for the altar, for they were brought close to God and have become sanctified, let them be a sign for the Children of Israel” (Numbers 17:1–3). Even though the 250 people had rebelled, their pans become a memento to serve as a reminder of the immortality of their bearers’ claim, recognition that their aspirations were true. These pans would contain the Temple fire, and teach the need for containment of religious passion, too.

Rabbi Yitzhak Luria Ashkenazi, the Ar”i (16th century Safed) writes that, “In the future Korah will be shown to have been correct.” That Korah who insisted in his opening words, “All the whole community is holy and God amongst them”——every person is unique and divine—will be vindicated.

Moses' handling of the conflict seems faulty, allowing things to get out of hand, fearing that God may not back him, and initiating violence. Perhaps no one is free of the misuse of speech when attacked, and when being reactive. Moses who so faithfully and repeatedly protects his people from God's wrath, and even does so again when God wants to destroy his people, has difficulty protecting them from his own wrath. Although no one can speak to God as Moses does, dialogue with the people is not Moses' forte. Growing up an outsider without family or society, he remained an outsider vis-à-vis the people themselves, remaining "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exodus 4:10) and his original fears of being unable to converse with them (Exodus 4:1) and that they would not believe him came true.

There is no one path for everyone. More than seeing Korah as one who wanted to rule, we can see him as suggesting alternatives. Rebels are often as rigidly insistent on having *the* truth as those against whom they fight, as if admitting many options would weaken rather than strengthen any claim. So often justice becomes a single thing, as if there were but one justice rather than many, we forget that justice can be challenged in name of various other values— wisdom, charity, compassion—to name but a few. Fighting in the name of justice we make the conflicts into zero-sum games. When the Ar"i writes that in the future we will be following Korah's way this does not read as a contrast and a victory over Moses. Rather, it suggests that the structure of dispute and there being various options, as the Torah passes down this story— is the promise of the future.