Emphasizing the Details: Thoughts for Parashat Korah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Korah

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Every year, when we read parashat Korah, one of the most glaring questions is what was Korah's problem? What caused him to start a rebellion against Moshe and Aharon? I believe that based on some answers, we can take a big lesson to see where Korah is in our everyday lives.

Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, the Arizal, was one of the master kabbalists of Tzfat in the 1500s. He pointed out that the Gematria of Korah is the gematria of Moshe minus the Gematria of Hevel. Rabbi Moshe Tendler offered an explanation that this suggests that Korah had all the attributes of Moshe, but was just missing the character trait of Hevel. What was the quality of Hevel that Korah was missing that caused his downfall?

In the tragic story of Kayin and Hevel, both of them offered a sacrifice to Hashem. Hevel gave an animal offering, and Kayin brought produce. Rabbi Tendler says that both of them knew that they needed to bring offerings to Hashem. Kayin thought that since Hashem doesn't gain any actual benefit from an animal sacrifice, and the main aspect of an offering is our intentions, there would be no harm in bringing something other than an animal, and his intentions would be enough. Hevel, however, understood that the proper way to bring an offering is with an animal, so he brought an animal.

So what did Hevel have that Korah didn't? The Midrash Tanhuma says that Korah brought two questions to Moshe to question his Halakhic authority. The first question was if a garment that is fully made of tekhelet would need tzitzit at it's corners, and Moshe said yes. Korah and his followers mocked Moshe. If a regular garment only needs one strand of tekhelet to exempt it, why should a fully blue garment still need tzitzit to make itself exempt? The other question was very similar. He asked if a room full of Torah scrolls would need a Mezuzah, to which

Moshe once again affirmed that it would. If a little scroll with only two paragraphs of the Torah exempts a room of its obligation, surely a room full of Torah scrolls with thousands of paragraphs should exempt itself!

Korah had the same fatal flaw as Kayin. He rationalized about religious performance. On the other hand, Hevel had the quality of performing a mitzvah with the fulness of heart and fulness of intention.

There is a Midrash that says that Korah started his rebellion after he heard about the Mitzvah of the Red Heifer. What do the two of them have to do with each other?

Next week’s Parsha is Hukat. It starts by saying “These are the statutes of the Torah.” The next Pasuk immediately goes on to explain the Halakhot of a Para Adumah. Rashi on that Pasuk says that naysayers will come to ask us “what is this commandment and what reason is there to it?” The answer is simply, some commandments are not meant for us to understand.

Korah’s problem was that he couldn’t grapple with the idea that there could be something Hashem commands us that we cannot comprehend. There are some details that we will never be able to figure out. While his questions to Moshe make logical sense, they are wrong when it comes to the ruling system of halakha.

In his famous essay “The Common Sense Rebellion,” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains the mindset of someone who only cares for Mitzvot that he or she can understand.

He says:

“The Mitzvah Does not depend on the emotion; rather, it induces the emotion. One's religious inspiration and fervor are generated and guided by the mitzvah, not the reverse. The goal is proper kavvanah and genuine devekut, but these can be religiously authentic only if they follow the properly performed mitzvah.The emotion generated by the mitzvah is circumscribed and disciplined by the Halakhah and its character is not left open to possible distortion by human desires and fantasies. The halakhically defined mitzvah has quantitative dimensions and precise perimeters, and these establish the authenticity of the genuinely Jewish religious experience.”

The Rav does not discount the factor of feeling in Mitzvot, rather he says that the main part of the Mitzvah is the performance.

In this essay, the Rav also speaks about “Religious Subjectivism,” that posits that religion is based on how it makes the individual feel. An example of this would be saying “I don't understand this Mitzvah, so I won't do it,” or “I don’t personally connect to that Halakha, so I’ll leave it aside.” This is obviously a mindset which is antithetical to our tradition, and it is the mindset that caused the downfall of Korah.

May we all merit to have the strength to perform all the Mitzvot, and to feel a strong connection to Hashem through them.

Angel for Shabbat