



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Korach: Not a Single Donkey

Korach assails the leadership of Moses and Aharon with the accusation: “*rav lachem* - too much for you!” To much what? Too much power? Too much honor? In one understanding, which is inferred but not explicit, Moses is accused of taking “too much” wealth for himself, libeled with allegations of financial violation.

How do we know Korach implicated Moses with the crime of financial indiscretion? Because Moses cries out in response to the personal insult leveled at him:

Moses was deeply upset. He said to the Lord, Pay no regard to their appeals. I have not taken anyone’s donkey, nor have I harmed any of them. (16:15)

Moses has not merely been condemned for leadership failure, not only attacked for the nepotism of appointing his brother. He is subject to accusations of corruption and fraud. This is an allegation that infuriates and upsets Moses. He responds by professing his absolute innocence; as expressed by Ramban:

He said: How have I acted in an imperious manner? I never took even a donkey for my personal use, as is the norm amongst kings and governors, nor have I harmed any of them, placing them in my service or in my charity, as would be fitting for a king.

This is clearly a significant theme because it is echoed in our Haftara. The Haftara depicts the coronation of Israel’s first king, Saul. The prophet Samuel, whose own sons, in their judicial role, had succumbed to bribery, stands before the nation as he hands the leadership to Saul. He begins his speech by speaking of his personal integrity in monetary affairs:

I have been your leader from my youth to this day. Here I am! Testify against me, in the presence of the Lord and in the presence of His anointed one: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you. They responded, You have not defrauded

us, and you have not robbed us, and you have taken nothing from anyone. (I Samuel 12:2-4)

The stories of Moses and Korach, and the Samuel-Saul episode have more in common than meets the eye. Certainly both Moses and Samuel profess their integrity; but what is the source of that integrity?

Korach criticizes Moses leadership. He says:

... You shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising. (16:28)

Moses does not benefit from his leadership post, not because one may not draw a good salary for a position of national administration. The issue at hand is that he sees himself as performing God's work, holy work. As such, he is not to benefit from it.

Samuel is in a similar position. Samuel was called upon by God to lead the nation. This he does loyally. His proclamation of his personal honesty, his lack of corruption is a product of the attitude and mindset in which he functions. If this is God's work, then Samuel doesn't get fringe benefits; "Testify against me, in the presence of the Lord."

Please discuss:

- Why did Korach accuse Moses of taking personal gifts?
- Is this something that leaders are prone to do?
- Why is it so important for leaders to withhold from taking gifts and exchanging favours?
- People in government live in beautiful homes, need to wear nice clothes and look presentable, and are driven in nice cars and so on. What is legitimate and illegitimate when it comes to gift-taking and the material trappings of national leadership?
- How should governments ensure that leaders achieve "clean government"?

Shabbat Shalom!