

The Honor Trap

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Among the many tragic episodes recorded in the Torah, few are as perplexing as the story of Korach. Korach was no ordinary man. Chazal tell us that he was exceptionally wealthy, exceptionally wise, and among the distinguished leaders of Klal Yisroel. He witnessed the greatest revelations in history. He stood at Har Sinai, accepting the Torah and hearing Hashem's voice call out. He experienced Yetzias Mitzrayim. He lived among a generation that saw open miracles daily.

We learn the parsha and wonder how a person such as he could fall so low.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos teaches that any dispute conducted *lesheim Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, will endure, while one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. The Mishnah then presents the ultimate example of a dispute not for the sake of Heaven: "The dispute of Korach and his congregation."

What was the root of Korach's rebellion?

The Torah hints at the answer. Korach could not accept the position that had been given to others. Moshe Rabbeinu was chosen as the leader of Klal Yisroel. Aharon had been selected for the *kehunah*. Elitzofon ben Uziel was appointed *nasi*. Korach looked around and saw honor bestowed upon others, and he was sickened.

People possess many different types of *taavos* and desires. Some are relatively harmless, while others can be profoundly destructive. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos teaches, in the name of Rav Elazar Hakappar, that "*hakinah v'hataavah v'hakavod*, jealousy, lust, and the pursuit of honor, remove a person from the world."

Of the three, the pursuit of honor is often the most destructive. A person recognizes physical temptations and understands the dangers they pose, but the desire for honor is so blinding that it often disguises itself as virtue. People convince themselves that they seek leadership for the sake of a worthy cause, to enable them to influence for the public good, or recognition to advance an important goal. In reality, it is the craving for honor that becomes all-consuming, blinding a person to reason and driving him to sacrifice everything in its pursuit.

Korach is a perfect illustration. He possessed virtually everything a person could desire, yet he could not accept that the honor he coveted was instead bestowed upon others. His obsession with attaining a position that was not his clouded his judgment and led him to challenge Moshe Rabbeinu. The honor he sought became the cause of his destruction, dragging him down along with his followers and leaving Korach as the Torah's enduring symbol of how the lust for power can consume even the greatest of men.

Korach convinced himself that his rebellion was noble. He spoke in the language of equality and justice. "For the entire congregation is holy," he declared. Yet, beneath the lofty rhetoric was a personal grievance. He wanted the position that had been given to someone else.

The Torah demonstrates how destructive this impulse can become. Korach did not merely challenge Moshe. He turned people against one another. Ultimately, the earth itself opened and swallowed him and his followers.

Chazal ask, “Korach, who was wise, what did he see to pursue this foolish endeavor?” The question itself is telling. His downfall was not due to ignorance. It was due to desire. Once a person’s ambitions take control, wisdom becomes powerless, and the desire becomes all-consuming.

The Mesillas Yeshorim addresses this taavah in the eleventh chapter, where he discusses the trait of nekiyus, the obligation to cleanse ourselves of subtle character flaws that ensnare people without them realizing it. Among the most dangerous of these flaws, he writes, is the pursuit of honor.

At first glance, honor seems harmless. Unlike wealth or physical pleasures, it appears noble and refined. A person may convince himself that he seeks a position of influence only to help others, leadership only to serve a worthy cause, or prominence only to advance a noble goal. Yet, the Mesillas Yeshorim warns that the desire for honor possesses extraordinary power to distort judgment and destroy people.

He writes that countless people have been destroyed by their quest for authority and recognition. The craving for honor can be so overwhelming that a person will sacrifice wisdom, relationships, principles, and even his spiritual wellbeing in order to satisfy it.

The Mesillas Yeshorim states that the desire for honor can never be satisfied. No matter how much a person possesses, he focuses on what remains beyond his reach. Instead of appreciating his blessings, he becomes consumed by the success of others. Instead of serving Hashem with joy, he becomes preoccupied with status and recognition. He says that a person can overcome his yeitzer hora for money or other enjoyments, but someone who desires honor can never overcome the awful feeling he experiences when he sees someone else possessing more than he does.

To illustrate the point, the Mesillas Yeshorim cites Korach. He had everything a person could want, yet it wasn’t enough. There was someone with a higher position than his, and that drove him past the breaking point.

The Mesillas Yeshorim’s words are as relevant today as they were when they were written centuries ago. Careers, families, communities, and institutions have been fractured because individuals became more concerned with prominence than purpose. The desire to be important becomes more important than doing what is right—or anything else.

Moshe fled from honor. Korach pursued it. Moshe became the greatest leader our nation has ever known. Korach became a symbol of the destruction that results when ambition is allowed to eclipse humility.

The person who seeks honor rarely finds satisfaction, while the person who seeks to serve Hashem discovers a greatness far beyond anything honor can provide.

There is a well-known, oft-repeated story about the Chofetz Chaim that captures the Torah's perspective on leadership and greatness.

A visitor once came to Radin and entered the humble home of the Chofetz Chaim. Looking around, he was astonished. The furnishings were sparse. There was little evidence that one of the most revered Jews in the world lived there.

"Rebbe," the visitor asked, "where is your furniture?"

The Chofetz Chaim responded with a question of his own.

"And where is yours?"

The man explained that he was merely traveling and had only temporary accommodations.

The Chofetz Chaim smiled and replied, "I, too, am only traveling."

The Chofetz Chaim understood something that Korach had forgotten. This world is temporary. Positions are temporary. Titles are temporary. Influence is temporary. A person can spend his life fighting for honor and authority only to discover that both disappear with the passage of time. The only lasting achievements are the Torah, mitzvos, and maasim tovim that accompany a person into eternity.

The Chofetz Chaim fled from honor, viewing it as a poison that must be avoided. So many of our gedolim were exceedingly humble, and many stories are told of their remarkable humility.

Nations have been plunged into war because leaders could not relinquish authority. Families have been torn apart over questions of status and inheritance. Communities have been divided because individuals sought positions of prominence.

The pursuit of honor has toppled countless people who otherwise possessed remarkable talents and virtues.

Chazal teach that honor pursues those who flee from it and flees from those who pursue it. The more desperately a person seeks recognition, the more elusive it becomes. The less he thinks about himself, the more genuinely respected he becomes.

Moshe Rabbeinu embodied this principle. No one ever sought leadership less than Moshe. When Hashem appeared to him at the sneh, he repeatedly resisted accepting the role. He viewed himself as unworthy and begged Hashem to send someone else. Yet, no leader in history attained greater stature than Moshe. Because he did not seek greatness for himself, Hashem entrusted him with the greatest responsibility imaginable.

Korach was the exact opposite. He pursued greatness relentlessly, subjecting all of Klal Yisroel to a bitter machlokes in his bid for honor. In the end, not only did he fail to attain honor, but he lost everything.

Every person has a unique mission in this world that only he can fulfill. Hashem provides each individual with the talents, strengths, and abilities necessary to accomplish that mission.

Rav Yisroel Bunim Schreiber, whom we featured in these pages several weeks ago, is currently visiting the United States on behalf of Keren Olam HaTorah. Wherever he goes, he captivates bnei Torah with his remarkable shiurim, delivered with astonishing mastery and clarity, seemingly without preparation and often without opening a single sefer.

Following one such shiur last week, Rav Schreiber shared a powerful message of chizuk. He said that if every person would focus on becoming the best version of himself, everyone would succeed. The problem, however, is that people spend their lives trying to become someone else. Since they can never truly be that other person, they end up frustrated and disappointed.

To illustrate the point, Rav Schreiber related a story about the Chazon Ish.

Someone once approached the Chazon Ish and remarked that it was well-known that the Vilna Gaon slept only two hours a day, taking a series of brief naps of fifteen minutes each over the course of twenty-four hours. The man then asked, "If that was the case, how much did the great Amoraim Abaye and Rava sleep?"

To most of us, that sounds like a reasonable question.

The Chazon Ish's response, however, was profound.

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe they slept eight hours a day."

The point is that every person is given the particular strengths, abilities, and circumstances he needs in order to fulfill his unique purpose in life. One person's path is not another's. One person's strengths are not another's. Success comes not from imitating someone else, not from trying to be someone else, but from developing the gifts Hashem has given us and using them to accomplish our own mission.

Korach's mistake was that he stopped focusing on his own mission and became consumed with Aharon's mission. Instead of appreciating the extraordinary role that Hashem had given him, he obsessed over the role that had been given to someone else.

A person receives Hashem's brachos but cannot enjoy them because he is focused on what someone else has. He is blessed with wealth, but it's not enough, because the person down the block has more than he does. The person down the block isn't happy with his wealth because further down the block is someone with even more money, a bigger house, and a nicer car. And it never ends, because that person also isn't happy. He can't get over the fact that Elon Musk is worth a trillion dollars and he only has fifty million.

Hashem blessed each of them with more success than they ever dreamed they could achieve, but they aren't happy because they covet someone else's prominence. A person has unique gifts, but fixates on talents that belong to someone else.

Comparison is too often the thief of contentment.

Perhaps this is why the Torah places such emphasis on humility. Humility does not mean that a person denies his talents. It means recognizing that every gift, every position, and every opportunity comes from Hashem. A humble person is able to celebrate another person's success because he understands that every individual has a unique mission. He does not view life as a competition, but rather as a lifelong mission to maximize the strengths Hashem gave him in pursuit of the proper purpose.

Korach could not accept that lesson. He saw another person's appointment as his own demotion. He measured his worth by comparing himself to others. Once he adopted that perspective, resentment became inevitable.

This challenge is not limited to leaders or public figures. It exists within everyone who doesn't study mussar and whose life doesn't revolve around Torah. People seek recognition, honor, and respect. People compare themselves to neighbors, colleagues, relatives, and friends.

The story of Korach reminds us that such thinking is spiritually dangerous. Happiness begins when a person embraces the role Hashem has assigned him rather than coveting the role assigned to someone else.

The greatest people in Jewish history were not those who sought power. They were those who sought purpose. They were willing to lead when necessary, but they never confused leadership with personal honor and glory.

The gedolei hador throughout the generations have demonstrated this. Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach became the gadol hador after spending decades cocooned in the bais medrash, struggling over sugyas of Shas. Similarly, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv spent his days and nights learning in a small locked bais medrash in Meah Shearim. The furthest thing from their minds was assuming power and control or seeking kavod and recognition for their Torah greatness.

As we learn Parshas Korach, we are reminded that the desire for power can blind even the wisest of men. It can transform talent into destruction and potential into tragedy. The antidote is humility, gratitude, and the recognition that every person has a place uniquely designed for him.

Korach wanted someone else's position and lost his own. Moshe accepted his mission with humility and became Moshe Rabbeinu.

The earth swallowed Korach, but his message remains buried beneath the surface of every human heart. Whenever we feel jealousy at another's success, resentment at another's prominence, or frustration that we have not received the recognition we think we deserve, the challenge of Korach reappears.

And whenever we respond with humility, gratitude, and faith that Hashem has given us what we need for the role we are meant to play, we achieve what Korach never could.

May we all be zoche to fulfill our missions in life, to help others pursue theirs, and thereby find success and happiness in our lives while helping prepare the world for the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our day.