‘‘**The folly of Korach and the wisdom of On’s wife ’’**

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We may not be surprised to learn that somewhere, well in the background of Korach’s rebellion against Moses, there was an *eishet chayyil*, a determined woman, who, although not referred to in the sidrah, is recognised and praised in our oral, Midrashic tradition for the constructive part she played in the episode.

The main supporters of Korach, enumerated at the beginning of the sidrah, were Datan and Aviram, two hundred and fifty princes of Israel, and another leader whose name is given as On ben Pelet, who hailed from the tribe of Reuven, not from Korach’s Levite tribe. At the end of the episode, when the rebels are defeated and about to meet their doom, God tells Moses to keep his distance from “the group led by Korach, Datan and Aviram.” Curiously, God omits mention of the other arch rebel, On ben Pelet!

The rabbis – ever anxious to fill in any biblical lacunae - explain this omission in their own inimitable way by telling us that, due to the astuteness of his wife, On was enabled to extricate himself from the impossible situation he found himself in as a supporter of a lost cause. He had been persuaded to lend his support to Korach’s rebellion, but it was his wife who opened his eyes to the no-win situation he was in. She told him that, whichever side won, he would end up the loser:

> ‘‘If Moses wins,’’ she told him, ‘‘you remain subject to his authority; and if Korach wins, all the authority will be shared out to the members of his own tribe of Levi! Either way, you end up with nothing.’’

The Talmud offers a tribute to the astuteness of On's wife by interpreting the verse: *The wisest of women builds her house, but folly tears it down with its own hands* (Proverbs 14:1) as a coded reference to her (Tal. *San*. 109b-110a).

Now, had the Talmud satisfied itself with this reference, it could be viewed as a typical example of Midrashic exegetical style, employing biblical verses to exemplify and amplify the positives qualities of its heroes or heroines and to exaggerate the negative aspects of its rogues. However, this Midrash is interesting because it goes further and seizes the opportunity to promote a particular moral standard in a most subtle way. To demonstrate this, let us continue the Midrashic dialogue where we left off:

> Her husband, On, answered her, saying, ''But what can I do? I have already joined their company and sworn allegiance to them.''
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> She replied, ''If, as Korach has asserted, they are truly '*a congregation that is equally holy*' (Nu. 6:3), then I know a way of extricating you safely from their clutches.''
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> She proceeded to serve him enough wine to make him drunk and fall asleep, and she then let her hair fall loose and seated herself in the doorway of her house. As soon as any member of Korach's cohort approached On's door [to discuss his role in the rebellion], and caught sight of her, they beat a quick retreat [not wishing to be exposed to the sight of a married woman's uncovered hair]. This bought her husband time until Korach and his supporters were swallowed up" and he [On] could live out his life in peace.

Thus, while the Talmudic imagination was able, at one level, to explain why On's name was missing from the reference to the leaders who received divine retribution, its story/ tradition/legend served, at the same time, to convey some other tangential messages. First, it

provided a convenient setting for the exemplification and idealisation of one of 'the wisest of women.' We recall that, in several places in *TaNaCh,* attention is drawn to women's superior intuition, the first example being when God told Abraham, ''Whatever Sarah tells you to do, listen to her advice!'' (Gen. 21:12), followed by the story of Isaac and Rebecca, and the way she contrived to secure the divinely-ordained blessing for Jacob in the face of her husband's misguided preference for Esau.The Midrashic sages built on such references and created a sacred folklore of supplementary material with a view to making the biblical episodes and dramatis personae more engaging, meaningful and colourful, and bringing into greater relief either their good or bad characteristics and the lessons to be learnt from them.

We must add that, whereas many view every statement of Midrash as authentic history, others view them rather as 'legends of the Jews,' to use the title of a major work on Midrash written by the distinguished Talmudic scholar, Louis Ginsburg (1895-1976). Adherents of the latter approach point to the Talmudic term for the Midrashic genre, namely *Aggadah.* This is derived from the basic Aramaic root *n-g-d,* meaning 'to draw out', and hence the Hebrew elucidation, *moshech libbo shel adam,* '[literature that] pulls at the hearts of people.' This suggests a creative genre whose purpose was to inspire, engage the imagination, and stir the emotions.

That a large percentage of Midrashim were created in order to promote moral, ethical and religious exhortations is without doubt. And the Midrash we have quoted regarding the wife of On is no exception. At the literal level it describes how, by a simple ruse, she was able to extricate her husband from a dangerous situation. But we cannot ignore the coded message of the subtext regarding the importance of women covering their hair! (Ironically, it may be seen to confirm Korach's assertion that 'the entire congregation is holy' – to the extent that the

assumption is made that no one at that time would dream of entering the home of a man whose wife's hair was loose!) In our Midrash, the wife of On rightly makes an exception to that rule in order to save the life of her husband.

The absurdity of Korach's argument that, '*The entire congregation is equally holy'* is apparent for various reasons. First and foremost, it flies in the face of logic and human nature. After all, they were a society of around three million people - 600,000 adult males of military age when they left Egypt (see Ex. 12: 37), plus an equal number of women, plus their children, plus those above military age, plus the 'mixed multitude' that accompanied them, and converted (see Rashi on v. 38). Even a conservative estimate brings us to about two million people - a number that would have at least doubled over the forty years in the desert. So, Korach's assertion, that 'they are all equally holy,' postulates an idealistic spiritual and moral homogeneity of cloned characters, rather than humans with all their flaws, frustrations, jealousies, and passions.

Furthermore, Korach was flying in the face of the nation's own ability to corroborate the reality of the divine choice of Moses and Aaron's rightful place at the helm of the nation's leadership. They were, after all, the closest observers of their track record of achievements: the 'signs and wonders' that they had performed in Egypt; the confidence and boldness which they displayed there in their dealings with Pharaoh; the manner in which they succeeded in securing the nation's liberation and the destruction of Pharoah's entire army in the Red Sea, and the visible signs of God's presence guiding the nation and its destiny. Moreover, the unique and awesome revelation at Mount Sinai was clearly the most obvious proof that the men who mediated it were His authorised representatives. And we cannot overlook the countless examples of those who had previously challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron – and, by association, God – receiving

peremptory punishment. Korach's rebellion was surely doomed, therefore, from the outset! And, according to our Midrash, no one appreciated that more clearly than the wife of On ben Pelet.

Her (Midrashic) message to all women was that one of their roles was to serve as moderating influences on their husbands' ambitions in situations where they knew – as had she – that they were lacking in moral strength, displaying impetuous or jealous tendencies, or seeking to secure positions for which they were clearly unsuited by temperament, lack of experience, or requisite knowledge and authority. Judaism has always recognised the 'wisdom of women,' and it calls on them to prize, nurture and employ that attribute to the very best of their ability, in their own, and their husbands' and families,' best interest, and in that of the entire community.

Shabbat shalom

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