"Korach, Macbeth, and Freudian displacement"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The desire of Korach to supplant Moses as leader demonstrates more than anything his egocentricity and unsuitability for just such a position. Had he been a rational person he would have long concluded that leadership of the fractious Israelites – goaded on by 'the mixed multitude' and other factions among the people, and totally reliant on God's grace for the solution of both the day-to-day problems of desert life and the far greater challenges of the conquest that lay ahead – was nothing other than a poisoned chalice!

This term, first coined by Shakespeare to describe just such a situation in Macbeth's soliloquy of Act 1 Scene 7, is most appropriate. Shakespeare depicts the Scottish general as pacing up and down and equivocating over whether to assassinate and supplant Duncan, his king. Macbeth's uncertainty was occasioned by his fear that, because of 'the divine right of kings,' he was likely to incur the punishment of 'deep damnation,' namely, forfeiture of the World to Come, earthly judgment, and the torment of guilt. And it is that triple retribution that he perceives as the 'poisoned chalice' from which he has chosen to drink as he makes his way, in the next scene, dagger in hand, to the King's bedchamber.

Korach, similarly, could not have been under any illusions as to Moses' credentials as God's chosen leader and his 'divine right' as king (See ibn Ezra on 'And he was king in Yeshurun': Deut. 33:5). Indeed, during the course of Moses' bitter exchange between him and his supporters, it becomes clear that the dispute was not primarily about leadership or about Moses' diplomatic and military skills. Korach seems to have accepted the fact that Moses had done an effective job in this regard. He had gone to Pharaoh, courageously demanded that he free the Israelites, threatened, and announced, each plague, overseen all the arrangements for the exodus, convinced his fearful people to jump into the swirling waves of the Red Sea, and

secured the Manna and the quails to feed the entire nation in the desert. The people had also witnessed the plague that took the lives of the ten spies who brought back a false report of Israel (14:36-37).

So, Korach – much like Macbeth – must have been aware of the enormity of the gamble he was taking in challenging 'the divine right of kings,' of the poisoned chalice presented by leadership of the nation, and of the consequences of 'deep damnation' if he persisted with his challenge. Whether such considerations troubled his conscience we are not told, though we may assume *e silentio* that they did not, and that he remained totally brazen.

Another point of contact is that both Korach and Macbeth started out as good and honourable men, a view enunciated by the great mystic of Safed, R. Isaac Luria, who found an exegetical basis for this within the psalm verse: *tzaddi**k** ka-tama**r** yifra**ch***, ('the righteous man will flourish like the palm tree': Ps. 92:12), whose final letters yield the name 'Korach!' Macbeth is led astray by the witches, agents of the power of evil, who dangle before him the assurance that he is destined to become king. Korach is similarly represented as having been carried along by two main agitators and rabble-rousers, Datan and Aviram, at the head of 250 influential leaders supporting, if not initiating, his rebellion (16:1-2). Inevitably, if enough powerful and persuasive people tell an ambitious person that he is destined to lead, he or she will come to believe it! And with that, the thirst for power becomes personality changing.

Korach knew, however, that he could hardly make a convincing case to the nation if he were to embark on a political challenge to Moses' leadership, for the people's attitude would most likely have been, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it!' In other words, as Moses' leadership was indubitably backed by God, it was safer to leave things as they were. They would also not have forgotten the fierce retribution that followed the earlier challenge to Moses' leadership with the making of the Golden Calf.

So, Korach deftly camouflaged his political ambition by dressing it up as a religious issue – "You have assumed too much! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst" (v.3) – and directing his attack at Aaron, the High Priest. In private, he may have accepted grudgingly the reality of the fact that Moses was protected by 'the divine right of kings,' but his brother Aaron certainly was not! It would have been common knowledge that the original appointment of Aaron as Moses' spokesman had arisen as a result of the latter's expressed doubts regarding his ability to address Pharaoh by reason of his speech impediment (Exod. 4:15). It wasn't difficult, therefore, for Korach to make the case that the Egyptian situation had long-since passed, and that, since the Exodus, Moses had demonstrated his ability to address the nation directly, passionately, and eloquently, on a regular basis. So, by continuing to act as Moses' unelected right-hand man, Aaron had far-exceeded his remit!

Korach would have built up in his mind an unreasonably envious and inflated picture of Aaron enjoying the limelight at Pharaoh's palace, denouncing and threatening the king, strutting around at Moses' side at all times, and receiving the kudos of the Israelites on returning from the palace after having inflicted each of the plagues. Hence, by what we know as 'Freudian displacement,'* it was Aaron who, instead of Moses whom he could not vanquish, became the prime focus of Korach's envy and repressed ambition.

As justification for his attack on Aaron, Korach could allege that he had done nothing to justify his appointment to the holy office of *Kohein Gadol*, the chief minister at the Sanctuary, by reason of which office he and his family were accumulating not merely status, but also much substance as recipients of the nation's tithes and sacrifices. But, the fact that Moses, rather than Aaron, was Korach's real target is hinted at by the fact that, when describing the rebels' initial condemnation, it first states, 'And they *rose up* (*vayyakumu*) against Moses' (16:2); and only in the following verse do they *assemble* (*vayyikkahalu*) around Moses and Aaron (v.3).

Korach's mindset is not too difficult to read, however. Knowing that he could not win on the leadership issue, he attacks the spiritual leadership that Moses put in place: "You take too much upon yourselves, seeing that all the congregation are all [equally] holy, with the Lord among them." And, secondly, through his conjoint denunciation, *madu'a titnass'u al k'hal Adonai* – "why do you elevate yourselv*es* over the congregation of the Lord?" (*ibid*.)

Though it is the suitability and necessity for that High Priestly office that is being challenged, Moses knows full well that behind that challenge lies the charge of cronyism and elitism that could well bring them both down. He is also under no illusions that both charges flowed from the single fact of Korach's envy, so that, unlike a case involving a practical dispute, here there would be no possibility of any negotiation or resolution. Hence – *va-yishma Mosheh* – 'Moses hears and falls on his face' (v.4). He fully comprehends the dire and intractable situation, while Aaron remains rooted to the spot, uncomprehending and unable to react.

Significantly, however, while Moses knew full well that he was the real object of Korach's jealousy, he played along with Korach's pretence that it was exclusively a spiritual challenge related to the assumption of the priesthood by Aaron. Moses, accordingly, made the divine choice of leader the result of a contest between Korach and his supporters on the one hand, and Aaron on the other (See vv. 16-20), without giving the slightest hint that it was, in fact, a personal vendetta against himself.

Aside from the main plot against Aaron and the concealed sub-plot against Moses, there is also a strand of the latter relating to Moses' attempt to enter dialogue with Datan and Aviram (vv. 12-14). He sends a message to them to come to meet him, which they reject. But, notwithstanding that they were leaders of Korach's rebellion (v.1), their message of rejection of Moses' overture makes no mention of Aaron, the rebellion's putative target, thereby providing further confirmation of Moses' view that, from the outset, he had been the real

target of the rebellion. Indeed, if those two rebels had anything to commend them it was that, unlike Korach, they were up-front regarding the identity of their target. Hence their retort:

> "Is it not enough that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?" (vv. 12-13).

That was the give-away as to what the entire rebellion was essentially about: the leadership of Moses. And this also explains why, in the face of Datan and Aviram's denunciation, Moses feels constrained to defend his leadership against any suggestion that he had benefited personally from it:

> 'This distressed Moses greatly, and he said to God, "Pay no regard to their gift-offering, for I have not taken even a single donkey of theirs, nor have I wronged even one of them"' (v.15).

That Moses was the intended target is also supported by the fact that Korach was able to enlist the support of 'two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute' (v.2). Midrashic tradition has it that they were drawn primarily from the tribe of Reuben (See Rashi *ad loc*.). Had they been priests – perhaps jealous of Aaron's position – the Torah would certainly have added that fact to the three other marks of distinction it attributes to them. As non-priests, on the other hand, they would have had no reason to stage a coup against Aaron. But, as Reubenites – members of the firstborn of the tribes of Israel – they would certainly have had good cause to resent the leadership of Moses!

All this points indubitably to the fact that the denunciation of Aaron was clearly a ruse to destroy Moses. Given the strong bond between the brothers, they may well have calculated that, by bringing Aaron down, they would destroy the confidence of Moses and his ability to lead.

Moses pointedly condemns Korach for coveting the priesthood (v.10) and for his attack on Aaron (See v.11). And, finally, when he comes to organise the incense contest to prove, by a heavenly sign, who was God's chosen leader (See vv.16-19), it is staged as the rebels on one side and Aaron on the other. There then follow the two trials: In the first, Moses and Aaron and the 250 rebels take their firepans and incense, with the former vindicated by the fire which consumes the rebels. In the second, it is a contest between the representatives of each of the twelve tribes, on the one hand, and Aaron on the other (17:16-26). Aaron is vindicated as the one with the unique claim to spiritual leadership above that of any of the other tribes, disproving thereby the premise that 'all the congregation is equally holy'.

Only at the denouement of the episode, after announcing the imminent punishment of the rebels, and instructing the rest of the people to keep their distance from them in order to avoid suffering collateral damage (vv.21, 24-26), does Moses approach the tent of Datan and Aviram to announce to them that their deaths would provide confirmation to all that his appointment of Aaron and his family was "not from my heart, but at the direction of God" (See Rashi on v. 28).

---

* According to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, displacement is when a person redirects his or her impulses away from an unacceptable or unassailable target to a more acceptable, accessible, or less threatening, one.