



## BAMIDBAR

Korach/Gimmel Tammuz

Are You A Rebel or a Conformist?

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## ARE YOU A REBEL OR A CONFORMIST?

### ABSTRACT

How should we react to a rebellious teenager? Or anyone that doesn't fit the "mold?" And what about our own mischievous voices and even insubordinate histories. Should we bury these memories and experiences, that we are often ashamed of?

Why does the Torah elaborate about the rebellion of Korach against Moses when the episode ends in tragedy? Why do we need to know about this mutiny today?

One of the greatest contributions of the Rebbe to our lives today is the need to be a rebel, a non-conformist and challenge the status quo.

This sermon presents an analysis of the Korach episode as given by the Rebbe, whose 24th *yahrzeit* we honor this Shabbos, *Gimmel Tammuz*. In a powerful talk delivered on the Shabbos of *Parshas Korach* in 5750/1990, the Rebbe identified Korach's positive contribution to our understanding of what leadership is all about and demonstrated how best to relate to the rebellion in our souls, and especially of idealistic youth.

Further, this sermon examines the contribution of the Rebbe as a true leader and goes on to propose what each one of us can and must do when enlightened leadership is lacking in the world.

The Rebbe teaches us how every person, even ones with insubordinate and seemingly negative traits, can make a difference.

Sometimes (especially in unusual times) it takes unusual people to get the job done. People who don't walk the straight and narrow – people who are thieves, or rebels, or non-conformists.

### 1. Chassidic Story (Humor)

A young widow once came crying to the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement that her only child was gravely ill. "The doctors have given up hope," she wept, "Please, please do something to save my child."

The Baal Shem Tov, whose heart was always open to those in need and especially to widows and orphans, reassured her and sent her home promising to do everything in his power. He then proceeded to gather together a *minyan* of ten holy *tzaddikim* to pray for the child's immediate healing.

But to no avail. As much as they tried opening the gates of heaven, they sadly were unsuccessful. The Baal Shem Tov sensed that the decree was sealed and could not be reversed by their prayers.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, was not one to give up. He fell upon an idea. He asked his driver to prepare his horse-drawn wagon. And they took off for the forest. There, he directed the driver to a particular spot, a dangerous area where thieves lurked.

When they arrived, the Baal Shem Tov climbed off the wagon, and within a few moment he was surrounded by a band of thieves. But when their leader recognized the Baal Shem Tov, he put down his weapon and with astonishment asked: “What are *you* doing here in the wild?”

The Baal Shem Tov replied: “I am here because I need your help ... I need ten thieves to pray for a sick child.” The thieves didn’t understand, but out of respect for the Baal Shem Tov, they complied. And so a *minyán* of thieves was assembled, and they prayed with the Baal Shem Tov.

The child miraculously recovered.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his surprised students, “How were you able to accomplish with ten thieves what you could not accomplish with ten holy men?” the Baal Shem Tov famously replied: “I saw that all the gates in heaven were locked, and I needed someone to break in...”

## 2. Thieves and Rebels

This story teaches us a vital lesson: sometimes it takes unusual people to get the job done. People who don’t walk the straight and narrow – people who are thieves, or rebels, or non-conformists.

Indeed, in unusual times often the best solution to problems are unusual people and unusual methods.

And that thought brings us to this week’s Torah reading, which is devoted to the rebel Korach – a curious thing in and of itself considering that Korach incited a group of mutineers to challenge Moses and that their rebellion ended in tragedy.

Why is it important for the Torah to tell us the story? And what can we take away from it today?

## 3. The Disgrace of Korach

The Torah is extremely careful not to speak in negative terms even about an impure animal.<sup>1</sup> So why are we being told about the disgrace of Korach and his men? Why the need to remember the entire uprising ... and in such detail?

Even if there was a good reason to demonstrate that G-d confirmed His choice of Moses and Aaron, the Torah could have briefly stated that there was a challenge to their status – not naming names or getting into particulars – and that their leadership was upheld. Why the need to get into all the nitty-gritty of the ignominious behavior of Korach and his henchmen?

These questions are compounded by the fact that the renowned Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ha-Levi Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lublin – who was a descendant of Korach – would refer to him as our *Holy* Zeide Korach. (Some say that this was also expressed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk.)

#### 4. How Can a Rebel be Holy?

How can a rebel against Moses be called *holy*? And aren't we commanded<sup>2</sup> that we “should not be like Korach and his party”?

One of the most powerful analyses of this episode is given to us by the Rebbe – whose 24th *yahrzeit* we honor this Shabbos, *Gimmel Tammuz*. In a powerful talk delivered on the Shabbos of *Parshas Korach* in 5750/1990, the Rebbe told the story of Korach with a fascinating statement by the Rambam (Maimonides):

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before G-d to serve Him and minister to Him and to know G-d, proceeding justly as G-d made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. G-d will be his portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared [Psalms 16:5]: “G-d is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot.”<sup>3</sup>

We see from this that every human being should aspire to be on the spiritual level of a High Priest! Indeed, in making his case, the Rambam actually uses the expression from this week's

<sup>1</sup> Talmud, *Pesachim* 3a.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 17:5; *Sanhedrin* 110a. This, according to one opinion, is a lav – a Torah prohibition. (See *Sefer HaMitzvos* of the Rambam, *Shoresh* 8 and the Ramban there.)

<sup>3</sup> Rambam, at the end of his laws of *Shemittah* and *Yovel*.

Torah reading, “I, Myself, shall be your portion and heritage.”<sup>4</sup>

Now this seems odd, because after Korach rebelled against Aaron’s priesthood claiming that *all* Jews are holy, this very verse was used to emphasize that Korach was wrong and only Aaron and his descendants, at the exclusion of *all others*, merited to be priests whose portion and heritage is G-d Himself.

Why then does Rambam quote this verse to explain how every person, “not only the tribe of Levi ... whose spirit generously motivates him ... is sanctified as holy of holies. And G-d will be his portion and heritage”?!<sup>5</sup>

## 5. The Explanation

The explanation:

The actual desire of Korach to be a High Priest was on its own a positive thing. In his words: “The entire nation is holy.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, at Sinai G-d directs that all the Jews “shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>6</sup>

Every person should aspire to reach this level, as Rambam states. But Korach’s mistake was his additional desire to actually physically serve as the High Priest; his error was in the *way* he pursued the priesthood: the way to achieve this holy state is through *bittul*, suspending and subjugating oneself to G-d and G-d’s will and chosen leaders. Through this connection the holiness of the priesthood is channeled into each one of us. Korach, however, did the opposite: instead of recognizing Aaron as the High Priest appointed by G-d, he rebelled, in effect severing his connection to the holiness that extended from the High Priest.

Korach erred in his understanding of the nature of a true leader. In his mind, a leader meant a powerful person who serves as a human intermediary between G-d and the people, between the Torah’s truth and its students. He thought that a leader is defined by his strengths – his wisdom, his charisma, his wealth, all the qualities necessary to lead a large group of individuals.

But that is not what a true leader is.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 18:20.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 16:3.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:6.

## 6. A True Leader

A true leader is precisely the opposite. He is defined not by what he is, but by what he is not.

The single most important quality of a true leader is humility. (As the Torah states: “Moses was the most humble among all people on earth.”<sup>7</sup>)

The leader is a transparent channel, and therefore he becomes a vehicle for G-dliness. He is a living example and the epitome of how G-d wants a person to be.

“Deifying” individuals is anathema to Judaism for it is idolatry, pure and simple. We only worship G-d and G-d alone.

The greatness of a *tzaddik*, a Rebbe, a great leader like Moses lies not in the power of the individual, but in the power of G-d that is working through that person. Indeed, there cannot be even the slightest tinge of individual ego or personality that gets in the way and does not allow the inherent G-dliness to shine through.

## 7. Moses In Each Generation

This also explains why we need a Moses figure in each generation,<sup>8</sup> because we, as individuals, are consumed and overwhelmed by material life – our egos and personalities get in the way of accessing G-d and His truth. We need a selfless leader, a humble teacher, to guide us and show us the way to access our souls and G-d.

The true leader, in other words, is not an intermediary that stands in the way between us and G-d – he is an invisible aid in helping us connect to G-d in our own unique way. The true teacher does not teach his own truth, he teaches a higher truth, and he makes it clear that it belongs to his students as much as it belongs to him. The true teacher has no ego. He recognizes at all times that he is merely a messenger passing on a truth from a greater place.

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<sup>7</sup> Numbers 12:3.

<sup>8</sup> See Zohar III 273a; Tikkunei Zohar 69.

## 8. Korach's Mistake

Korach's mistake was not in his desire to attain the state of the High Priest – that is a healthy and necessary aspiration. His mistake was doing so for his self-fulfillment; too much focus on the self, a form of arrogance.

To attain the state of the High Priest one needs humility to subjugate oneself to Divine will and to the will of the humble leaders that G-d chooses. Korach did not understand (or chose not to understand) this fact – that true leadership is not about power and ambition; it is about humility and selflessness. And that is the reason that we can trust a true leader, and the reason G-d trusted Moses.

When G-d chose Moses to be the leader of the Jewish people, Moses strongly resisted.

“I am a man of no words”<sup>9</sup> was one of the many arguments that Moses offered. G-d replied: “Who gives a man the mouth to speak if not I?”<sup>10</sup> G-d chose Moses precisely because he did not want the job, and because he would not speak his own words, only the words of G-d.

This type of leader was completely unknown to Korach and his men. They had never met a leader like that. So they challenged the very concept based on their limited experience. But, as a result of their argument, we gain a new understanding of the nature of a true leader.

And thus we owe Korach, the rebel, a great debt for serving as a vehicle for this Torah lesson, firstly – the need to aspire to the spiritual state of priesthood, and secondly – it teaches us how and how not to reach this state, by clarifying the meaning of false vs. true leadership.

## 9. The Lesson of Korach

Now we can understand why the story of Korach is told in full detail, and why the name of the portion carries his name – because from Korach's aspiration we learn how each of us *ought* to aspire to rise to the spiritual level of the High Priest. How each of us must “rebel” against the status quo of life and seek to reach the greatest heights. And also we learn from him how not to do so.

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<sup>9</sup> Exodus 4:10.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 4:11.

This is why the Rambam quotes the verse, “I, Myself, shall be your portion and heritage,” because this verse teaches us 1) that we can attain this level. But 2) only by avoiding Korach’s mistake. Korach wanted to acquire the priesthood, not through humility but through self-fulfillment. Had he been humble, he would have earned the right to be “sanctified as holy of holies.” And G-d would have been “his portion and heritage.”

To repeat the words of the Rambam:

[One reaches this level of priesthood and holy of holies through having a spirit which] generously motivates him, and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before G-d to serve Him and minister to Him and to know G-d, proceeding justly as G-d made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek [i.e. the many mundane and petty details of material life].

The lesson to each of us is profound and far reaching: We can reach the highest levels. Nothing is impossible. But to do that we need to suspend our egos and self-interest, and dedicate ourselves to our higher calling.

## 10. The Formula

The formula goes like this:

When you are dedicated to your own self and own needs you may reach great heights, but only as far as you – a mortal – can reach.

When you dedicate your life to an eternal cause greater than yourself, then you become an extension of that eternity.

It is very simple: If you dedicate yourself to something mortal and finite, then you become mortal and finite. If you dedicate yourself to the immortal then you become immortal.

## 11. Message for Today

Korach’s story, as illuminated by the Rebbe’s talk in 1990, offers us a very relevant message for today – how to relate to our youth, and how to relate in general to anomalies, which today have become quite “regular.” Each of us has (as we know in our hearts) our own unique, and often,



bizarre life circumstances. We may even want to forget and bury some of insubordinate natures and experiences. How should we react to the irregular – the rebel within.

During the rebellious 1960s, while the youthful population was rising up all across America, the Rebbe had a most unexpected response. While some saw the rebellion as unhealthy, and they tried to fight it at all costs, in order to stem resistance to authority, establishment and the rules of normal society. The Rebbe saw the opposite. The Rebbe saw the revolution of the young as due to the fire in their bellies, the passion of their souls, and their desperate frustration with the status quo. Thus their refusal to conform and their quest for change was so that the world would be a better place.

Citing the Talmud, which describes the times before Moshiach – “Youths will put the elderly to shame, and the old will rise in the presence of the young”<sup>11</sup> – the Rebbe turned the criticism of the youth revolution on its head. Just as he had dissected and explained Korach’s mutiny in a positive light – that Korach’s intention was holy, just his way of doing it was wrong – so, too, did the Rebbe, as a true leader, see beyond the symptoms and identify the rebellion in young people (and, for that matter, in all of us) as a powerful force for good, which when harnessed can and will improve the world. In the words of the Rebbe: “The rebellion of youth must be directed against the status quo and toward the sublime, toward G-d, and toward a higher meaning.”

When the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe visited Chicago in 1930, one of his followers asked the Rebbe for a blessing for his rebellious son, who refuses to listen to his parents and educators and is acting out in all types of destructive ways. The Rebbe asked to see the young man, but he refused to come to the Rebbe. So the Rebbe went with his father to the young man’s office. As they entered the fellow defiantly lifted his feet on the table, to the utter horror of his father. “Put down your feet and stand up in respect of the Rebbe,” his father yelled out at him. The Rebbe smiled and said to the father and the young man: “This defiance is a sign of great energy and passion, which when properly harnessed, can defy and change the world.”

The Rebbe took this approach to a new level, making it a cornerstone in addressing the rebellious energies in all of us, even the seemingly non-traditional ones.

## 12. Rebellious Forces (Inspirational Story)

Like in the opening story about the Baal Shem Tov and the thieves, the rebellious forces in our spirits have the power to break down the gates that block us from reaching great heights.

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<sup>11</sup> *Sotah* 49b.

The Rebbe taught us that we do not need to suppress or hide even those insubordinate voices and experiences that we may feel embarrassed about. On the contrary, harness and channel them to shatter resistance; use them to propel you to unprecedented places.

A very bright young man was constantly falling behind in school, and no one understood why. Finally, his parents took him to see the Rebbe. “I hear you are very gifted at science,” the Rebbe said, “so tell me, what is the difference between a very bright electric light and a laser beam?”

“That’s simple,” the teenager answered. “The laser amplifies and focuses light rays to make the beam more intense; the other light just disperses its rays every which way.”

“But doesn’t it take more energy to produce the laser beam?” the Rebbe asked.

“Not really,” the teenager said, smiling, for he realized where the Rebbe was leading him. “It is just a matter of concentration and focus.”

### 13. Igniting the Fires of Revolution

This, my friends, captures one of the Rebbe’s great lessons to us all – how to ignite the fires of revolution inside each one of us. As we grow into adults, we all know that our youthful enthusiasms and idealism – the fires that burn within us so wildly as teenagers – usually wane and weaken. Some attribute this to our so-called maturity and seasoning. But is that true? Do we not simply abandon the ideal of changing the world and fighting the status quo?

The Rebbe, from the day he assumed leadership, till his very last talk, when he was in his 90s (!) maintained – and showed by personal example – that this attitude is unequivocally wrong. The fire of the soul continues to furiously burn within us even as we age and lose our drive. The Rebbe would stand for hours on end every Sunday, even when he was in his late 80s and early 90s, giving out dollars to each individual coming by. When asked how he had the energy and didn’t tire, he famously replied: “When counting diamonds one does not get tired.”

An Israeli journalist once visited 770 [the Rebbe’s synagogue] during the High Holidays. There were more than 10,000 people present, and the journalist was amazed to see that, unlike in many synagogues, most were in their teens. “Seventy percent, eighty percent of the people in that room were young people,” he later wrote. “That a man of 80 years old should be able to command so many young people coming from different backgrounds, and bring them to such a height of energy – I saw then that there is a future.”

A journalist recently asked one of my colleagues: How is it that 24 years since the Rebbe's passing, 26 years since his debilitating stroke, Chabad continues to thrive and grow like never before? No company could survive, let alone thrive, without a CEO. He replied: "You need to know that the Rebbe struck the shluchim when they were young and in the heart..." The journalist immediately got it, and was just awestruck. "How did he do that?" he wondered...

The Rebbe touched the very core of every soul he came in contact with. When it came to young people – those yet unshaped and undamaged by the trials and tribulations of life – his message struck a chord in their hearts and stoked the fires in their bellies. Thousands of young people responded to his call to change the world for the better. They rose to the occasion and mobilized themselves to become the Rebbe's emissaries in every part of the world, to illuminate their corner with light of Torah and mitzvahs, virtue and kindness.

I, and my dear wife, would not be here today, we would not have ever come to this wonderful community and met all you special people and built all this together, were it not for the spiritual revolution the Rebbe ignited within us.

## 14. Total Dedication

Why did we follow him with total dedication?

I submit those who wonder about that have never met a true leader. The so-called "leaders" around us – political, business, sports, entertainment – are essentially nothing more than good administrators, or people driven by aggressive ambition that led them to climb the leadership ladder. (And I am not even addressing the rampant corruption surrounding leaders that we are all aware of and reminded of continuously.).

However, I, and many others, have had the distinct privilege and honor to meet a true leader. A G-dly man, a humble man, a man entirely dedicated to a higher cause.

## 15. The Rebbe as a Child (Inspirational Story)

Let me tell you a story about the Rebbe as a child.

One sweltering stifling, unbearably hot, summer day when the Rebbe was a child, but five year old,

he was walking in the street of the Russian town where he was born. He was wearing a wool kasket covering his head, when he met one of the non-religious Jewish intellectuals who populated Russia in those days, who himself went with his head uncovered.

The scholar asked him: “Why don’t you take off that thick hat from your head in this heat?” The Rebbe replied, M’tor doch nisht (“We are not allowed [to go with an uncovered head]”). The man cynically continued: Ich vel dos oinesh nemen oif zich (“I assume that otherwise you will be punished”).

How would you respond to that?

The Rebbe, as a little child, replied: Vos is der undersheid tzi du oder ich (“What difference does it make whether you or I will be punished”).

Many of us are busy with taking care of ourselves. Often we can be perfectly fine if we can get away with something and someone else will carry out burden. As Churchill said about appeasing tyrants: “It’s like feeding the crocodiles in the hope that you will be eaten last.”

But the answer of a leader is: I am in the same boat with you. We are in it together. If something is wrong, it’s wrong, regardless who will be punished for it.

## 16. Like Moses

Like Moses, the Rebbe displayed a combination of humility and confidence. Like Moses, the Rebbe was the caring shepherd. He worked tireless to imbue us all with these same qualities, so that we ourselves would humbly recognize and accept our G-d-given mission and forge ahead with confidence and pride regardless of the challenges that may confront us.

I, for one, learned how to access my own soul from the Rebbe. I learned how to access the Torah and thousands of years of Jewish history and scholarship, in order to understand the forces reshaping our geo-political as well as our psycho-spiritual landscapes.

I learned from him how to love every Jew unconditionally, even those I may not agree with all the time. I learned how to teach values without being judgmental or condescending. I learned to respect the true dignity of every soul on earth, because each one is absolutely necessary and indispensable in the scheme of things. I learned that we do not know – nor is it our role to define – which soul is greater than another.

Were it not for the Rebbe I would not be standing here today. Nor would I know what to say to you. And because of this, I want to honor this date in a special way.

On Motzei Shabbos, Parshas Korach, Saturday night of Gimmel Tammuz 5754 (June 12, 1994), Korach's challenge to Moses manifested itself. The Rebbe passed away. And since then, we have all been challenged to understand the role of a Rebbe/leader in our lives. Since then, the world has changed dramatically, with many more changes to come.

## 17. Leadership of Today

Today, we are desperately in need of true leadership.

The Rebbe taught us all to become leaders in our own right. We all must become revolutionaries and visionaries. We all must aspire to reach the level of priesthood and the holy of holies. Through our dedication and bittul to the cause we can indeed attain this level.

We all are challenged today to rise up in a powerful spiritual revolution, fully armed with the strength, blessings, teachings and guidance of the Rebbe and the Torah. His legacy empowers us to forge ahead and actualize the unique potential each of us has in illuminating our sphere of influence.

With the Torah as our guide, we can give free rein to our revolutionary spirits. We can see through the haze and create the revolution so needed today – a revolution not of rebellion but of goodness and kindness that will ultimately sweep across the world, and bathe this earth in the light of G-dliness and holiness. Amen.

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