

## 70 Perspectives But Only One Torah

by Dr. Meir Tamari

### KORACH & HIS CONGREGATION

The name Korach immediately conjures up quarrel and divisiveness, yet at the same time in P'shys'cha he was known as "my uncle Korach". In the Torah he is the rebel against Moshe over a number of issues which recur in Jewish spiritual life throughout the ages down to our own. In the Midrashim and in the literature, he appears as a social reformer or a non-halakhicist or simply a troublemaker, but throughout he has followers who form congregations. Sometimes they simmer down and rejoin mainstream Judaism, at other times they form sects or join other faiths while at others they simply fade out. Throughout they seem to repeat the same arguments.

"There was a widow who sowed her field and was ready to harvest it. Aharon came to claim trumah and ma'aser. Rather than agree, she sold the field and bought a cow who calved and Aharon came for the first born. The next one she slaughtered and Aharon came to claim parts of the body. In her anger she declared it "hefker", ownerless, so Aharon claimed everything." In this Midrash, Korach is the fighter against the property claims of the Kohanim.

"Korach dressed all his disciples in t'cheilet, and questioned whether they required tzitzit; had a room full of sefarim and questioned the need for a mezuzah. Here he questioned the need for the additional kedusha; this is

Korach questioning additional k'dusha." In another Midrash Korach's disciples were prophesying and he said "all the people are holy"; here is the democrat arguing that prophecy is not a monopoly of Moshe. Superficially, he was justified; however, in everything the distinction had to be halakhic and not his own.

Chazal tell us that Korach objected to Shabbat while supporting the Mo'adim. "He argued that Man has no role in Shabbat but is central to the Mo'adim. Shabbat celebrates only Hashem the Creator while they also celebrate Man who experienced them" (Shem Mi-Shmuel). Korach insisted on the centrality of Man and may be regarded as the spokesman for humanism. However, this centrality flows from his creation in the image [like] of Hashem; whenever he denies or neglects this, he becomes reduced in his special status or perhaps even loses it.

There is another reason behind Korach's argument in favor of the Mo'adim while objecting to the Shabbat. On the Mo'adim there is simcha while on Shabbat there is only oneg. Oneg is an intellectual pleasure or pursuit whereas simcha involves the whole personality. So the Shabbat represents our intellectual involvement or the logical and scientific approach to Torah observance. "It is a positive mitzva to know Hashem" (Yesodei Hatorah). The Rambam sees the mitzva as acknowledging Hashem rather than just believing in Him. So religion becomes intellectual rather than faith whereas Korach wanted an emotional one; the heart rather than the mind. Furthermore, this is an action orientated religion

rather than one devoted to spiritual thought. One does tzedaka not merely gives charity, there are charitable actions in addition to gifts to the poor which are done for people who need them even though they are not poor. The greatest example is the interest free loan which is made to rich and poor alike. These loans made immigrants lives viable even though the normal banking system was not available to them for legitimate financial reasons.

It has been suggested that Korach simply represents all those who, throughout the ages, have argued and preached for a non-halakhic religion. However, the 250 people who participated in his revolt had a different agenda. They wanted an egalitarian religion, no differences between the sexes, no hierarchy of Kohanim, Leviyim and Yisrael each with different religious roles. In our day this would translate into no hierarchy of scholars, rabbinic authorities and layman; all the people are holy! They could not have a religion wherein different people have different needs, abilities and even differences that flow from historic sources. Their demands took the form of wanting to offer the incense like the kohanim since this is the most spiritual of all avoda. These demands are actually a form of spiritual arrogance. They were punished by death but since their motives were purely religious and spiritual, their incense pans were used to cover the mizbei'ach. "Spiritual arrogance has a legitimate religious role when it is used to cover the mizbei'ach" (Admor Menachem Mendel of Kotzk). 