



שררה או שירות To Serve, or to Be Served?

■ Why Do You Raise Yourself Up?

The Torah is not a history book. It is rather a book of prophecy that recounts the story of the Word of G-d as it accompanies mankind from its very first steps. This is why periods in which the world experienced no prophecy are simply skipped over in the Torah's record.

We encounter a perfect example of this when we read the consecutive Torah portions of Korach and Chukat. The former deals with the Children of Israel's second year in the desert, while Chukat jumps all the way to the 40th and last year. Quite blatantly, the intervening 38 years in which there was no prophecy are not recounted.

Even the entire Book of D'varim, which can be viewed as a summary of the previous 40 years, is actually only the story of Israel's final month in the desert – primarily Moshe's parting speech, delivered via prophecy.

Furthermore: Not even all the prophecies were written. The Gemara tells us that there were many more prophets than those known to us in the Bible:

There were many prophets for Israel – double the amount of those who left Egypt. But only prophecies that were needed for future generations were written down, while the others were not. (Megillah 14a)

Obviously, during the course of Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert, thousands of incidents occurred, of varying degrees of importance. Most of them were not written down for posterity. Only those with significance for future generations were eternalized in the Torah.

One of the most significant events was the rebellion of Korach and his gang, the account of which ends with the following words:

זָכְרוּן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִקְרַב אִישׁ זֶר אֲשֶׁר לֹא מִזְרַע אַהֲרֹן הוּא
לְהִקְטִיר קִטְרֹת לְפָנַי ה' וְלֹא יִהְיֶה כְּקֹרַח וְכַעֲדָתוֹ...

*A remembrance for the Children of Israel, so that a non-Cohen
should not approach and bring incense before G-d, and shall
not be like Korach and his congregation...* (Bamidbar 17,5)

What happened with Korach must be engraved on Israel's memory for future generations. This story joins other important negative incidents of this type that, paradoxically, are important precisely for the positive aspects that they bring out. Here are some examples.

We learn of Moshe's supremely high level as a result of the complaint against his behavior by his siblings Aharon and Miriam:

לֹא כֵן עֲבָדֵי מֹשֶׁה בְּכָל בֵּיתִי וְנֶאֱמַן הוּא. פֶּה אֶל פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ
וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בַחֲדִידֹת... וּמִדּוּעַ לֹא יִרְאֶתֶם לְדַבֵּר בְּעַבְדֵי בְּמֹשֶׁה.

*Not so My servant Moshe,
he is trusted throughout My house.
I speak to him mouth to mouth, in a vision and not in riddles...
and why were you not afraid to speak against
My servant Moshe?* (12,7-8)

The same is true with Aharon; we learn of his greatness as a consequence of the rebellion by Korach and his cronies:

וַהֲנִיחַ פָּרַח מִטֵּה אַהֲרֹן לְבַיִת לַיהוָה וַיֵּצֵא פְּרָח וַיִּצְעַן צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים.

*And behold, the staff of Aharon the Levite flowered,
it gave forth blossoms, sprouted buds, and produced almonds.* (17,23)

From this sad incident we also learn the true function and tasks of the Cohanim and Levites, on the backdrop of the distorted claims of Korach, a Levite himself and a cousin of Aharon HaCohen.

The question therefore begs to be asked: Why does the Torah not take the initiative in praising the righteous ones? Why do we hear their tributes only in the wake of the complaints of others?

Perhaps we can say, with appropriate caution, that the concept of humility is at play here, keeping hidden certain aspects of goodness until the Torah is "forced" to show them off. (See also below, page 157.)

In any event, the main complaint against Moshe and Aharon by Korach and his crew was this: “*Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of Hashem?*” (16,3) The same accusation was repeated by Datan and Aviram of the Tribe of Reuven: “*...that you take power and authority over us.*” (verse 13)

These accusations grant us great insight into those making them. Our Sages taught: “Whoever criticizes, criticizes that in which he himself is deficient” (Kiddushin 70a). This means that one who wishes to hide his own faults, does so by citing these same faults in someone else. This does not necessarily occur consciously, and he may be quite unaware of what he is doing.

Korach is a perfect example: He condemns Moshe for raising himself above and taking control – showing that this is exactly what he, Korach himself, seeks! We know what the Torah tells us about Moshe’s humility:

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

The man Moshe was very humble,

more than any other person on the face of the earth. (Bamidbar 12,3)

If Korach and his gang attack Moshe for, of all things, his so-called arrogance and drive for power, this is the clearest sign that they had better check *themselves* precisely in this area!

■ Moshe’s Reaction

When Moshe hears Korach’s accusation, he falls on his face. This is not a reaction of helplessness, but rather of great concern. He has suddenly realized that the way his fellow Levites see their function in Israel is totally opposed to what it is supposed to be.

Instead of viewing the special Levite functions as a vehicle by which to serve Israel and come closer to G-d, Korach’s complaint shows that he views them as a means of gaining prestige and honor among men. The rebels are concerned only that Moshe and Aharon have “grabbed the honor” that they expected would go to them!

Moshe, hearing Korach’s words, is totally shaken by the realization that what Korach has done until now in the framework of his Levite functions – carrying the Ark of the Covenant – was apparently disqualified and defiled by his thoughts of pride and prestige! Moshe cannot bear this thought, and he therefore falls on his face in horror.

■ Serving the Congregation

Moshe's response to Korach teaches us much about the true essence of the job of the Priests and Levites in Israel:

הַמַּעֲט מִמֶּם כִּי הִבְדִּיל אֱ-לֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְתּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם
אֵלָיו לְעַבְדָּתוֹ אֶת עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן ה', וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׁרְתָּם?

*Is it not enough for you that the G-d of Israel has separated you,
to bring you close to Him - to perform the service of G-d's
Sanctuary and to stand before Israel and serve them?* (Bamidbar 16,9)

Note that Moshe stresses three principles:

1. Hashem has chosen the Levites to *bring [them] close to Him*. The merit of “closeness to G-d” is truly a great privilege.
2. The Levites' work is not just any old work, but rather *the service of G-d's Sanctuary* - sacred service in G-d's own house!
3. The Levites are privileged *to stand before Israel and serve* the nation, by bringing the people's requests and tribulations before Hashem.

The manner in which Moshe presents his fellow Levites' job description conveys a message of humility, dedication, and self-sacrifice – quite the opposite of the way in which Korach views the functions of the Cohanim and the Levites.

The Torah tells us in Parashat Behaalot'cha that the Levites' authority and status stemmed from Bnei Yisrael themselves:

וְהִקְרַבְתָּ אֶת הַלְוִיִּם לִפְנֵי ה' וְסִמְכוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יָדֵיהֶם עַל הַלְוִיִּם.

*Bring the Levites before G-d,
and the Children of Israel will lay their hands on the Levites.* (8,10)

“Laying one's hands,” found often in the Bible, is an expression of granting “power of attorney.” The People of Israel authorize the Levites to act as their emissaries to perform the sacred service. Not everyone is on the requisite level for this work, and not everyone is able to meet the high standards necessary for the position of “serving G-d.” In fact, the Levites take upon themselves the very difficult mission of protecting the Nation of Israel, one that is even liable to cost them their lives.

The Levites can be compared to a fuse, designed to burn up in the event of a dangerous increase in the electricity load, thus protecting the entire house

from burning. The Levites ensure that Israel will not be consumed by the Divine fire. Hashem Himself says this:

וְאֶתְנֶה אֶת הַלְוִיִּם ... לְעַבֵּד אֶת עֲבֹדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד,
וּלְכַפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֹף בְּגִשְׁתּוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ.

*I have given the Levites ... to perform the service for
Bnei Yisrael in the Sanctuary and to atone for Bnei Yisrael,
so that Bnei Yisrael will not be plagued when
they approach the Sanctuary. (8,19)*

This actually clarifies for us the meaning of the concept of atonement, *kaparah*. It stems from the same root as *kaporet*, the cover of the Ark, and refers to “covering.” That is, the Levites enter the holy sanctuary as emissaries of Bnei Yisrael, serving as their defensive cover and shield. If they make just one mistake, it can cost them their lives, as happened to Aharon’s sons Nadav and Avihu in Parashat Sh’mini. The service of the Levites is a form of self-sacrifice, whose purpose is to guarantee the integrity and completeness of the Nation of Israel.

Let us take a look at the next step in the chain of “hands-laying” authorizations:¹

וְהַלְוִיִּם יִסְמְכוּ אֶת יְדֵיהֶם עַל רֹאשׁ הַפָּרִים וַעֲשִׂה אֶת הָאֶחָד חֲטָאתָא
וְאֶת הָאֶחָד עֹלָה לְהָ' לְכַפֵּר עַל הַלְוִיִּם.

*And the Levites will lay their hands on the heads of the bulls,
and make one a sin-offering and one a burnt-offering
for Hashem, to atone for the Levites. (verse 12)*

Thus, the Levites also lay their hands and authorize their emissaries – in this case, the animal sacrifices. The offerings are burnt on the altar before Hashem, protecting the Levites themselves from being consumed before G-d. In short: the Israelites empower the Levites, and the Levites pass this “power” on to the animals that are burnt as sacrifices before G-d, thus saving all of them.

Moshe Rabbeinu, of course, knew the true importance and significance of the job that he and the Levites were assigned. This is why he did not originally want to take it! When G-d approached him at the Burning Bush, Moshe said:

1. as we explained at length in “*Levites at the Nation’s Service*” on Parashat Behaalot’cha.

מי אנכי... שלח נא ביד תשלח.

Who am I to go to Pharaoh...

Give this mission to whomever else You wish. (Sh'mot 3,11; 4,13)

Similarly, when Moshe hears a complaint that “*Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp*” (Bamidbar 11,27), and Yehoshua advises him to stop them, Moshe responds:

המקנא אתה לי? ומי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים כי יתן ה' את רוחו עליהם.

Are you then jealous for me? Would it be that the entire nation of G-d should be prophets,

G-d placing His spirit upon them. (Bamidbar 11,29)

Far from desiring the sole top spot, Moshe is saying that he wishes that Israel would be filled with prophets and that Hashem would have no need to call upon him. This humility is precisely why Hashem chose Moshe to be His prophet, the emissary and agent between Him and His people.

In light of all this, the depth of Korach's perverted understanding becomes even more inexplicable. It is incredible to think that he can possibly accuse Moshe of “*raising [himself] above the congregation of Hashem.*” (16,3)

Korach's grave sin was rectified by his descendant Shmuel HaNavi, a leader of Israel who loyally served his people throughout his life:

וישפט שמואל את ישראל כל ימי חייו.
והלך מדי שנה בשנה וסבב בית אל והגלגל והמצפה...

Shmuel judged Israel his entire life.

He would go every year and make the rounds to Beit El, the Gilgal, and Mitzpah. (Shmuel I 7,15-16)

He would travel throughout Israel in order to teach Torah, and would never take anything for his efforts. His entire being was dedicated to the service of his nation - and this was why he was able, at the end of his life, to rebuke them:

ואני התהלכתי לפניכם מנערי עד היום הזה. הנני ענו כי נגד ה' ונגד משיחו, את שור מי לקחתי וחמור מי לקחתי?

I have walked before you from my boyhood until today.

Here I am, answer me before Hashem and His anointed one:

Whose ox have I ever taken? Whose donkey have I taken? (12,2-3)

■ They are All Holy

The Medrash Rabba on the first verse of Parashat Korach colorfully describes the dispute that took place between Korach and Moshe Rabbeinu. The Medrash links it with the immediately preceding passage of tzitzit:

Korach jumped and said to Moshe: “A cloak that is entirely blue – is it exempt from tzitzit?” Moshe said, “No, it must have tzitzit.”

Korach retorted with scorn: “An entirely blue garment is not exempt from tzitzit, yet four strands of blue [one on each corner] are enough to exempt it?!”

He then continued: “A house full of Torah scrolls, is it exempt from a mezuzah?” Moshe said, “No, it must have a mezuzah.”

Korach said mockingly: “A house full of Torah scrolls is not exempt from a mezuzah, yet one passage in the mezuzah is enough to exempt it?!”

Korach’s point seems to be this: Since the entire congregation is holy, why should there not be a direct link between Hashem and every individual in Israel? Why do we need an intermediary to represent the nation vis-à-vis G-d and vice-versa? The nation is, after all, like an entirely blue garment and like a house full of Torah scrolls! What need is there for a blue strand or a short Torah passage in a mezuzah? Why must there be an intermediary? *“Why do you raise yourselves up above the entire congregation?”*

This claim, of course, sounds quite ridiculous when we remember the fear and trembling that overtook Israel at Mt. Sinai when they heard G-d speak to them directly - apparently too much so. They turned to Moshe and begged:

דַּבֵּר אֵתָה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל יִדְבֹר עִמָּנוּ אֱ-לֹהִים כִּן נָמוּת.

*Speak to us yourself and we will hear,
and let not Hashem speak with us, lest we die.* (Sh’mot 20,16)

They pleadingly asked Moshe to stand between G-d and themselves and thus protect them from the searing flames of Mt. Sinai. Moshe takes upon himself to do so, standing close to the holiness and bodily protecting Israel from the Divine fire. This concept of a leader risking himself in order to protect the nation is something that Korach simply does not grasp.

In a most daring move, during the Sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe showed clearly his willingness to sacrifice himself for Israel. In praying for Israel, he places an ultimatum before G-d:

וְעַתָּה אִם תִּשָּׂא חַטָּאתָם וְאִם אֵין מְחַנֵּי נָא מִסְפָּרָה אֲשֶׁר כָּתַבְתָּ.

*If you forgive them, [good]. But if not,
please erase me from Your book that You have written. (32,32)*

This is the act of a true servant, and not of one who simply seeks honor and authority. The Prophet Yeshayahu alluded to Moshe's bold step, without mentioning his name:

... אֲשֶׁר הֵעִירָה לְמוֹת נַפְשׁוֹ וְאֵת פְּשָׁעִים נִמְנָה
וְהוּא חָטָא רַבִּים נִשָּׂא וְלִפְשָׁעִים יִפְגִּיעַ.

*... who poured out his soul to death, and was counted
with sinners; he bore the sin of many, and interceded
for the transgressors. (Yeshayahu 53,12)*

Let us return to the challenge presented by Korach to Moshe, according to the Medrash, regarding the all-blue garment and the house filled with Torah scrolls. Is there any validity to his argument?

On the face of it, Korach appears to be making a good point. Why should a house full of Torah scrolls require a few more lines from the Torah on the doorpost? And if a garment is already entirely blue, what good will a few more blue strands do?

Korach is apparently comparing Moshe Rabbeinu – a holy leader of an already holy nation – to an unnecessary blue strand on an all-blue garment, or to a superfluous Torah passage in a house full of Torah scrolls. But if we delve into this matter more deeply, we will understand it entirely differently.

■ The Door, Secondary and Subservient

A house full of Torah scrolls is one in which the books are physically inside it – but are not intrinsically connected to it. The true connection to a house takes place via something that truly represents it, its ambassador. What represents a house? The answer is: the door - because it is secondary to the house. It serves only for entering, leaving, and protection, and has no status of its own. It therefore stands for the house and not for itself.

By affixing the required Torah passage to the doorpost, Hashem's Name is "applied" to the house and fills it with its presence.

The house in this example represents the Nation of Israel, the mezuzah on the doorpost stands for Moshe Rabbeinu, and the Torah scrolls in the house as well as the Torah passage on the doorpost all represent Hashem.

Yes, “*the entire congregation is holy*,” as Korach says, referring to the home, and “*G-d is in their midst*” (16,3), referring to the Torah scrolls inside the house. But there is still no essential connection between Hashem and the congregation, just as there is no link between the scrolls and the home.

Even though the Mishkan (Tabernacle) is physically within the camp of Israel, the true, essential bonds between Israel and G-d are formed via the prophetic links, i.e., the Torah and the commandments. Hashem’s ties with Israel are formed via a prophet, one who considers himself null and void compared to Israel. When the prophet is as humble as Moshe, whose entire being is for the purpose of serving Israel, G-d’s ties with him are the same as His ties with all of Israel.

Moshe Rabbeinu is like the mezuzah of a home – secondary to the home, but with the word of G-d affixed to him.

The same is true with the all-blue garment. The association between the tzitzit strands and the garment is the same as that of the door to the house; the tzitzit strands of the garment are its “handle” – as we read in the Book of Yechezkel:

וַיִּשְׁלַח תְּבִנִית יָד וַיִּקְחֵנִי בְּצִיצַת רִאשֵׁי וַתֵּשֶׂא אוֹתִי רוּחַ
בֵּין הָאָרֶץ וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם...

*He put out the shape of a hand, and took me by a lock [tzitzit]
of my head, and a wind lifted me up between
the earth and the heaven...* (Yechezkel 8,3)

This is why there is no obligation that the garment be colored blue. Rather, the strands must be blue, because they are secondary to the garment; they represent the garment and not themselves.

In contrast, if G-d would have transmitted His word to Israel via Korach, who sees himself as raised above the nation, the Divine word would never have reached Israel! It would instead have stayed with Korach alone, for he did not see himself as a servant of the public and secondary to it, but rather as an important individual in his own right standing higher than the nation. This is why G-d did not choose him as a public servant.

■ “And Korach Took”

This insight will help us solve a famous difficulty. The story of Korach’s rebellion opens with the words ויקח קורח, “*And Korach took*” (Bamidbar 16,1) – but as all the commentators note, the Torah does not explain *what* he took!

A hint of an answer can be found at the end of Parashat Korach, when Hashem lays down the obligations and privileges of the Priests:

... עֲבַדְתָּ מִתְּנָה אֶתְּךָ אֶתְּךָ כְּהֵנִיחְתֶּם וְהָזַר הִקְרַב יוֹמָת.

*I have given you your priesthood as a gift service;
the non-priest who comes close will be killed.* (Bamidbar 18,7)

Hashem is saying that the position of Priesthood is something that G-d gives, and not something that is taken. But Korach failed to understand this, and tried to “take” it: ויקח קורח, “*And Korach took.*” He tried to grab it for himself, in total contrast with its very essence.

■ To Serve, or to Be Served?

The dispute between Moshe Rabbeinu and Korach brings to the fore the Torah viewpoint on positions of authority in Israel. What does the Torah say about the highest ranking leader, the king?

שׁוֹם תְּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ...

Place a king upon you who Hashem your G-d has chosen.

(D'varim 17,15)

The king must be G-d's choice, and afterwards, Israel can be consulted. The Torah here also emphasizes another very important point:

וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל סֵפֶר ...
וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו ... לְבִלְתִּי רוּם לְבָבוֹ מֵאֶחָיו ...

*He must write a copy of this Torah on a scroll...
and he will read it throughout his life...*

so that his heart not be raised over his brothers... (verses 18-20)

The trait of humility is one of the most fundamental requirements of a king. It means primarily that he must be perpetually conscious that his position is not for his own aggrandizement, but rather so that he may serve his people loyally.

The best example of a situation in which a king in Israel faced such a test is that of Rehavam, son of King Shlomo – and he failed miserably. Upon ascending to royalty, Rehavam was asked by his subjects to lighten their taxation load. He consulted with his advisors, and heard two opposing approaches:

וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֵלָיו הַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוּ אִתּוֹ ... כֹּה תֹאמַר לְעַם הַזֶּה ...
 אָבִי הָעַמִּיס עֲלֵיכֶם עַל כְּבֹד וְאֲנִי אוֹסִיף עַל עַלְכֶם ...

*The young ones who grew up with him [Rehavam] said...
 Tell the people: My father levied a heavy load upon you,
 and I will add to it... (Kings I 12,10-11)*

In contrast, the elder advisors advised Rehavam to show humility:

וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר, אִם הַיּוֹם תִּהְיֶה עֹבֵד לְעַם הַזֶּה, וְעַבְדְּתָם וְעַנִּיתָם
 וְדַבַּרְתָּ אֵלֵיהֶם דְּבָרִים טוֹבִים וְהָיוּ לְךָ עֹבְדִים כָּל הַיָּמִים.

*They said to him: If today you be a slave to this nation,
 serving and answering them, and speaking good things to them –
 they will be your servants forever. (verse 7)*

In the end, most unfortunately, Rehavam took the poor advice of his younger advisors – leading, that very day, to the division of the Jewish Kingdom into Judea and Israel. On the other hand, the sound advice given by the elders was utilized centuries later by Rabban Gamliel when he had to appoint Torah scholars to positions of authority. The Gemara (Horayot 10a) tells us the following story:

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua were sailing together on a ship. Rabban Gamliel had brought bread with him, and Rabbi Yehoshua brought both bread and flour. At one point, the captain mis-navigated and the ship was delayed – whereupon Rabban Gamliel's bread gave out, and he was forced to ask Rabbi Yehoshua to share his meal with him.

Rabban Gamliel asked, “How did you know to take along flour on this trip?” Rabbi Yehoshua answered, “There is a star that appears once every 70 years² and leads ships astray. I thought this might happen, so I brought along flour in case the bread would run out.”

Rabban Gamliel said, “You know all this and yet you must travel by ship to make a living?” Rabbi Yehoshua answered: “While you wonder about me, what about two of your students, R. Elazar Hisma and R. Yochanan ben Gudgeda? They know how to calculate exactly how many drops of water there are in the sea, yet they have no bread to eat and no clothing to wear!”

2. many believe this was Halley's comet

Upon hearing this, Rabban Gamliel decided to appoint them to high positions. When he returned home, he sent for them, but they did not come [out of humility]. He sent for them again, and they came, and he said to them, “Do you think I want to give you mastery? The opposite; I want to give you servitude!”

That is, Rabban Gamliel imbued in his students the sense that serving the community means not to be served, but to provide service.

In short: From the negative examples of Korach and Rehavam, and from the shining examples of Moshe, Shmuel, and Rabban Gamliel, we learn the importance of humility and total dedication as basic traits for a leader in Israel. Would it be that our leaders today would adopt these principles!

