

RECIPROCATION FOR TORAH SUPPORT

Parshas KORACH

by Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

One of the vexing dilemmas in the world of Torah is the often encountered difficulty among scholars to maintain dignity, self-respect, and independent thought in the face of pressures sometimes exerted by the financial supporters. The dependence upon others for financial survival often results in danger of bending to prejudices of patrons who may seek to inject their particular ideas and attitudes upon their monetary recipients.

On the collective level, the problem is further exacerbated in some Yeshiva Day Schools, which have begun with the sweat and toil of its original founders on the solid foundation of Torah principles, but which is shaken as a result of pressures from less committed and less observant benefactors.

According to Rashi (Sanhedrin 52b), Korach succeeded in attracting two hundred fifty leaders, scholars, men of renown (Bamidbar 16:2) to his side in the revolt against Moshe only because they had been supported by Korach and his wealth. The psychological impact of their dependence weakened them in their judgment. Such benefit is equal to a bribe which corrupts the mind. "Do not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise..." (Devorim 16:19).

In the phenomenal punishment, Korach being swallowed up by the earth, the Torah emphasizes that even his wealth vanished. When a tragedy of human death is reported, wealth plays no role. However, here it is given emphasis: "And the entire wealth" (Bamidbar 16:33). One conjectures it is because this wealth was a factor in Korach's attracting followers.

Moshe declares: "if Hashem will create a phenomenon and the ground will open its mouth and swallow..." This statement contradicts a teaching in Avoth (5:9) that ten items were created at twilight Friday before Shabbos, one of them "Pi Haaretz" the opening of the earth (to swallow Korach). (See Rashi from Sanhedrin 110a). Accordingly there was no need for a new creation; this phenomenon has already been created at Genesis.

The answer may be that at Genesis the "Pi Haaretz" was not enough to swallow all of Korach's wealth. Moshe, however, asked that all the fabulous wealth should be swallowed, since it was used to bribe people in the rebellion.

The Talmud (ibid.) thus declares that "the Torah scholar is regarded by the unlearned as a golden vessel... but as soon as this scholar has benefited from him financially he is regarded by him as an earthen vessel." The Maharsha gives the source of this comparison of a scholar to a golden vessel the passage in Tehilim (19:11) that the Torah "is desirable more than gold and much fine gold." Thus the same applies to the Torah scholar.

The ZOHAR in the beginning of KORACH elaborates on the above passage from Tehilim, leaving no trace as to the connection. One may suggest the ZOHAR alludes to the two hundred fifty men who lost their golden value once they benefited financially from Korach.

The ideal situation, then, for scholars to preserve their principles and high standards of idealism is to refuse any financial assistance, and to be monetarily independent. Though this is not realistic in our time, it may remain an ideal to look up to. At least Moshe made this a strong case for himself in his criticism of his opponents: "I have not taken one donkey from them (Bamidbar 16:15)." The Midrash Tanchuma adds (Korach 19, ed. Buber) that Shmuel emulated Moshe in this respect, when he said (Shmuel I 12:3) "whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I defrauded?" Indeed one commentator suggests that this common trait of Moshe and of Shmuel is the reason for selecting this chapter for the Haftorah reading.

[This Shabbos is an exception: Since it is Shabbos Rosh Chodesh the selected Haftorah is from Isaiah 66 which speaks about Shabbos Rosh Chodesh.]

This concept of independence, accordingly, is a paramount highlight of the Parsha. Also in the Yalkut (Jeremia 15:1) this quality of Moshe and Shmuel is given emphasis as a prerequisite to enable one to preach and to reprimand.

The Talmud (Nedarim 38a) states that both Moshe and Shmuel were wealthy, and as seen from the above-quoted passages they were certainly independent of anyone's economic assistance. What shall be done, however, in our times, when this seems unattainable? One wishes to suggest that independence may be maintained when the scholar and supporter develop a give and take relationship, sharing with each other in their respective attainments. The scholar, then, is not on the receiving end, but rather is engaged in a deal between honest partners, paying back his benefactor directly by studying Torah with him.

It is known that Issachar and Zevulun made a covenant, Issachar devoting time to Torah study, and Zevulun busying in commerce and supporting Issachar (Rashi Devorim 33:18). This resulted in the fact that Zevulun, too, produced scholars. This is seen in the passage "and out of Zevulun they that handle the pen of the writer" (Judges 5:14). How did this come about? It may be assumed that the tribe of Issachar reciprocated the tribe of Zevulun for its economic support by studying Torah with them in their leisure hours. Also the youth of Zevulun was given close attention by Issachar, raising them to scholarship. (Cf. Midrash Korach 18:5, and Rashi Bamidbar 3:38 on scholarship of Zevulun).

Reb Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz, z.l., the great educator and Menahel of Torah Vodaath, and founder of Torah Umsorah, has been most cognizant of his obligation to the financial supporters of Torah. He reciprocated spiritually for the economic efforts of the Board of Directors. He sent the best Beth Hamedrosh students to their homes to study Torah with them. He also made every effort, with a great measure of success, to attract their children to study at the Mesivta.

In their appreciation the Baalei Batim (lay leaders) felt that they were on the receiving end of the bargain. Here, then is a proposition to promote and intensify Torah study while simultaneously reaping the benefit of maintaining dignity and independent thought.

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