

Parashat Korach 5781, 2021:

The 250 Men from the Jewish People

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The namesake of our *parasha* is Korach. It is not surprising, therefore, that most *meforshim* focus the majority of their exegetical efforts on this rabble rouser and his sycophants, Datan, Aviram and On ben Pelet. In contrast, these same commentators are nearly silent regarding the identity of the additional “two hundred and fifty men *m’bnai Yisrael*, chieftains of the congregation, representatives of the assembly, men of repute” who joined Korach’s rebellion. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:2, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) While in a passing gloss, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests these were the 250 heads of the *Sanhedrot*, the majority of whom were from the tribe of Reuven (16:1), and Rabbeinu Chananel ben Chushiel (965-1050) asserts they were all *Levi'im* from Korach’s tribe (16:2), very little other identifying information is available in standard sources. Moreover, the true nature (*mahut*) of these individuals remains equally obscure. *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 110a teaches us that they were men of universal renown who knew when and how to add an extra month to the calendar and establish Rosh Chodesh in its proper time. Why, then, would such accomplished and respected individuals have joined

Korach's insurrection?

The Netziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893) answers this question in his Torah commentary, *Ha'amek Davar*, on our *pasukim*:

One must know that the 250 men were *gedolei Yisrael* in every way, including their awe of Hashem. Their exclusion from the *Kahunah* — which, itself, brings cleaving to and love of Hashem — burned like a fire within them. This was not borne of a desire for power and honor, but rather the thorough-going longing to become holy and to approach this level [of spiritual heights reached by the *Kohanim*] through performance of the *Avodah* (service in the *Mishkan*). Moreover, they knew that what Hashem had spoken through Moshe was absolutely true, and they did not, G-d forbid, question the veracity of his [Moshe's] words. The only matter which they doubted was their comprehension of the proper way to understand Hashem's authentic will. Therefore, they engaged in these deeds of manifest martyrdom [that is, the rebellion and the prohibited act of bringing the incense] because of the unlimited amount of love they had for Hashem...and because of this, they felt forced to undertake the rebellion against Moshe and Aharon and break the bonds of acceptable behavior (*lifrotz geder*) ... (This and the following translations and brackets my own)

Rav Herschel Schechter *shlita* has said that the Netziv was so creative, and his commentary so incisive, that he rivaled the Rishonim (Rabbinic masters of the 11th-15th centuries) in his analyses. This is surely the case in this trenchant presentation. In relatively few words, the Netziv has rescued the two hundred and fifty men *m'bnai Yisrael* from virtual obscurity and has revealed their true nature to us. In his view, these were spiritual giants who recognized the authenticity of Moshe's prophecy, loved and honored Hashem and held Him in awe. As such, they sought to draw closer to Him through the incense service, even if it meant their imminent demise. Given the purity of their intentions, the Netziv maintains that, rather than being swallowed in the earthquake that engulfed Korach and his ilk, these *gedolei Yisrael* were punished by fire that went forth from the inner sanctum of the *Kodesh Kedoshim* (Holy of Holies). Though they were misguided in their approach, these 250 great men had, nonetheless, acted *l'shame shamayim* (in order to serve the Almighty).

If, as the Netziv notes, the two hundred and fifty men *m'bnai Yisrael* were the *chasidei hador* (the righteous ones of the generation), how could they have so easily been duped by the likes of Datan and Aviram, and the Machiavellian machinations of Korach? He suggests the following answer:

Regarding these men the text states: “A man who strays from the way of understanding will rest in the congregation of Gehenom.” (*Sefer Mishle* 21:16) ...And the verse comes to teach us that even one who honestly holds Hashem in awe, yet errs and departs from all manner of logical thinking, will ultimately “rest in the congregation of Gehenom,” become an *apikores* and reject the Sages...and this is what happened to these 250 men, they erred and left the path of logic (*she'ta'u m'derech hasechel*) and were drawn into the breaches [of rebellion] of Datan and Aviram and thereby embarrassed and repudiated Moshe and Aharon.

According to this deep analysis, these righteous individuals failed because they permitted their desire to attain the spiritual heights reserved for *Kohanim* to overtake their logical understanding and commitment to Hashem's *mitzvot*. Here, the Netziv teaches us a profound lesson: Even *talmidei chachamim* who are counted among the *chasidei hador*, who love and respect the Torah and hold Hashem in awe, may fall short in their service to the Almighty, if *she'ta'u m'derech hasechel*.

May the lessons and insights of our *parasha* help us to ensure our *avodat Hashem* is a product of both our hearts, and our minds. In this way, may we ever strive to serve Him in purity, and in truth. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*'s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdb718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.