

Parsha Ponders

Pinchas | July 26, 2019 | 23 Tammuz 5779

Two forms of scholarship¹

ובני קרח לא מתו

The sons of Korach didn't die²

This week's *parsha* contains yet another census. The Torah lists all the different families by tribe, and states their total numbers. While detailing the families in the tribe of Levi, the family of Korach, who started a failed rebellion against Moshe³, is mentioned. The Torah wanted to emphasize that although Korach's children were part of his rebellion, they did not perish like their father did. Rather, they repented at the last moment, saving their lives⁴. The *gemarra* relates⁵ that when their lives were spared, the children of Korach sang a song of praise to Hashem. What song did they choose to sing?

It's understood that a number of the Psalms were originally composed by the children of Korach. Those that were, start by mentioning that they composed it. Perhaps the song they sang at that moment of salvation was Psalm 45⁶. It starts with the verse: "For the conductor on roses, of the children of Korach, a *maskil*, a song of dearness". What does the reference to roses signify? Rashi explains⁷ that it's simile for a Torah scholar. A Torah scholar is like a rose, in that they are meant to be soft and pleasant. The children of Korach specifically composed this Psalm at the time of their repentance as a way to rectify their sin. Their whole dispute with Moshe and Aharon, the greatest scholars of their time. By singing the praises of a Torah scholar, it was the completion of their repentance.

A problem with comparing a Torah scholar to a rose, suggesting that they are both soft and pleasant, is that it contradicts a teaching of our Sages. They inform us⁸ that any Torah scholar that is not as hard as steel is not a Torah scholar. This is learned from a verse which says⁹ that the word of Hashem is like a hammer that smashes a rock. Rashi explains¹⁰ that this means that Torah scholars should be strict and unwavering. This is seemingly the exact opposite of a rose.

A possible resolution is to differentiate between different types of Torah scholars. A Torah scholar who is in a position of leadership or is a judge, where they are supposed to guide and influence the masses, they are the ones that shouldn't be too soft. Otherwise, everyone will walk all over them and no one will listen. Rather, they should be as hard and unwavering as steel. They should maintain their principles, and not bend to the whims of their community.

¹ Based on *Be'er Yosef* to *Numbers* 26:11

² *Numbers loc. cit.*

³ *Ibid* Chapter 16

⁴ Rashi to *ibid* 26:11, based on *Sanhedrin* 110a, *Midrash Tanchuma Korach* § 11, *Tanchuma Yashan Korach* § 27, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 18:20

⁵ *Ibid*. The other sources in the previous note don't mention that they sang a song

⁶ This is implied by *Midrash Tehillim* 45:3, brought by *Yalkut Shimoni Nach* § 749. *Maharsha* to *Sanhedrin loc. cit.* says it was *Psalms* Chapter 48, which they sang as a form of prayer that they not be swallowed up by the Earth, like their father was. The son of the *Be'er Yosef* wants to suggest that they said both Psalms. First they prayed that they be saved, then when they were inspired to fix their ways they sang about repentance

⁷ *Ad. loc.*

⁸ *Ta'anis* 4a

⁹ *Jeremiah* 23:29

¹⁰ *Ta'anis ad. loc.*

However, those Torah scholars that are behind the scenes, and are not directly involved in leading the community, they should be as soft and pleasant as a rose. Since they have no position of leadership, they don't need to be as firm. It is about these latter Torah scholars that the children of Korach composed their song of repentance¹¹. However, even the first group of Torah scholars, who have a position of leadership, need to be as soft and pleasant as a rose. It is only with matters that pertain to their position that they have to be as hard as steel.

However, when the Sages describe the firmness of a Torah scholar, it's right after discussing how a Torah scholar gets angry. Seemingly, the firmness is intended to be referring to anger. How could a Torah scholar be required to be someone who gets angry¹²? Someone who gets angry forgets their learning, and if they are a prophet, they lose their power of prophecy¹³! We learn this from Moshe, that when he got angry, he forgot the law that Hashem taught him¹⁴. We also learn this from Elisha, that when he got angry, he lost his power of prophecy¹⁵. The answer is that the *gemarra* is dealing with a situation where no other mode of conduct will suffice. If a Torah scholar who is in a position of leadership can guide his community without using anger, then they are forbidden from using that trait. However, if it's the only possible way to maintain order, then they must use it¹⁶.

With this idea we have a new understanding of the words of praise which were used¹⁷ to describe one of the Jews' greatest leaders, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. He was known as נר ישראל, the flame of Israel, עמוד הימיני, the right pillar, and פטיש החזק, the hard hammer. He was the *nasi* of the Jewish people, a prominent position of leadership. With this position he guided that people as a פטיש החזק, a hard hammer. However, opposite this, he was also a right pillar. The right is always associated with *chessed*, loving kindness¹⁸. Meaning, even though he was hard as steel, he was also as soft as a rose¹⁹. Each trait has its time and place. The fact that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had both allowed him to be the great leader that he was.

Good Shabbos

¹¹ Although, if this song was composed to repent for their rebellion against Moshe and Aharon, who were community leaders, it would seem incongruent for them to describe non community leaders. Perhaps this is why the Be'er Yosef continues to say that even community leaders need to sometimes be soft

¹² The son of the Be'er Yosef brings the following question and answer from the Gevuros Ari to Ta'anis loc. cit., as a support for the above resolution

¹³ Pesachim 66b

¹⁴ See Numbers 31:14, 21

¹⁵ See II Kings 3:14, 15

¹⁶ See Mishneh Torah Hilchos Deos 2:3

¹⁷ Berachos 28b

¹⁸ See Vayikra Rabbah 4:1 and Derech Chaim 2:3 fn. 351 and Netzach Yisroel Chapter 10 fn. 159 (Machon Yerushalayim ed.)

¹⁹ Cf. Rashi to Berachos loc. cit. who understands עמוד הימיני to be a reference to Yachin, the pillar Shlomo erected (I Kings 7:21)