



Parashat Korach

We read in Parashat Korach of the audacious campaign launched by Korach to undermine Moshe's authority and challenge his leadership. Moshe, somewhat surprisingly, responds to this attack by invoking supernatural divine intervention. He tells one faction, which sought the privileges of the priesthood, to bring an incense offering together with Aharon to determine the chosen candidate for the high priesthood, knowing that an unwarranted *ketoret* offering brings death in its wake. Responding to the other group of rebels, Moshe goes to their tent and declares that the ground will open and devour the insurrectionists. Indeed, a heavenly fire consumes the two hundred and fifty men who brought incense, and the ground devours the other rebels and their families.

Maimonides, in articulating the eighth of his famous thirteen principles of faith (in his commentary to the Mishna, Sanhedrin), the belief in *Torah min ha-Shamayim* (the divine origin of the Torah), cites Moshe's declaration before the ground split to devour Korach's followers: "Through this shall you know that the Lord had sent me to perform all these actions, that it was not of my own volition" (16:28). According to Maimonides, this verse establishes that the law transmitted to *Benei Yisrael* by Moshe originated from God. Moshe did not invent the Torah with his own mind; rather, "the Lord had sent me to perform all these actions."

Maimonides' citation of this verse in the context of the doctrine of *Torah min ha-Shamayim* perhaps sheds light on his understanding of this entire narrative. It appears that Korach and his followers not only protested the appointment of Aharon as high priest, or other of Moshe's "policy decisions," but challenged the divine origin of everything Moshe had instructed the people. They accused Moshe of concocting laws and falsely attributing them to God, purely for the sake of self-aggrandizement and nepotism. The Yerushalmi (Sanhedrin 10:1) indeed comments that Korach denied the divine origin of the Torah and Moshe's role as prophet. This perhaps explains why Moshe resorted to supernatural means of persuasion. It had to be made perfectly clear that God Himself chose and appointed Moshe as lawgiver, that everything he had done and taught originated from the Almighty, and not from his own selfish heart.

Some scholars raised an interesting question regarding this narrative from Maimonides' famous, bold assertion in his *Epistle to Yemen* that "whoever deviates from the path [= belief] of the law transmitted at that event [the Revelation at Sinai] is not from the offspring of those people [who were present at the Revelation]." As part of his efforts to strengthen the Yemenite Jews in the face of immense theological pressure, Maimonides writes that God promised that all descendants of all Jews who stood at Sinai and experienced the Revelation would not entertain doubts concerning the divine origin of the Torah. As such, anyone who denies the divine origin of the Torah may be presumed to have descended from other stock, and is not a descendant of the generation that received the Torah at Sinai. Now Korach himself stood at Sinai and heard the word of God, and yet, as we have seen, he ultimately challenged the doctrine of *Torah min ha-Shamayim*. How can we sustain Maimonides' theory in light of Korach's heresy?

One answer, recorded in the name of Rabbi Yaakov Kanievsky (the "Steipler Gaon"), suggests qualifying Maimonides' theory to those who deny *Torah min ha-Shamayim* for purely theological reasons. Maimonides does not claim that no descendant

of the generation that stood at Sinai would ever resort to heresy. All types of external factors, including temptation to sin and ignorance, can lead a person along the road of apostasy. Many Jews have advanced or embraced heretical theories in order to absolve themselves of the responsibilities associated with the Torah, or because they were not properly educated in Jewish belief; they are not included under Maimonides' theory. Maimonides speaks only of those who deny *Torah min ha-Shamayim* from the perspective of pure philosophical objectivity, not as a convenient means of excusing oneself from the Torah's mandates, or due to ignorance.

Korach was driven by jealousy and a lust for power. His denial of the divine origin of the law transmitted by Moshe was not the product of objective, philosophical inquiry, but rather the result of his craving for authority. Therefore, he is not included in Maimonides' theory concerning the guaranteed belief in the divine origin of the Torah among those who stood at Sinai and their heirs, a guarantee that refers only to objective, philosophical inquiry, and not to the various other factors that can lead a person to deny this belief.