

Parshat Korach

Ant Psychology

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Those who reviewed the Parsha may have felt a surprising sympathy for Dasan and Aviram. I found their gripe - that in Egypt, Moshe promised them a beautiful homeland, but Hashem has since decreed death in the desert - quite moving. One dares question the appropriateness of their deaths.

The events in Parshat Shelach provide a backdrop that makes Dasan and Aviram's frustration understandable. In Parshat Shelach, adult Jews are informed they will never make it to Israel. Hashem himself harshly tells them: "Your corpses - yours, shall fall in this desert." (Bamidbar 14:32) Some Jews, deeply distressed, refuse to accept their fate. Desperate, they wake up early the next morning, proclaim they sinned, and express eagerness to enter Israel. The Torah describes: "They awoke early in the morning and went up to the peak of the mountain, saying: "we are ready to go up to the place of which Hashem spoke (promised), for we have sinned." (14:40) Moshe reports to them that this decree will not be overturned. Choosing to ignore Moshe, they try to enter Israel, but are crushed by the Amalekim and Cana'ani. On the heels of these events, Dasan and Aviram's feelings seem reasonable - "Is it but a pittance that you have brought us up ... to kill us in the desert ... Even into a land flowing with milk and honey you have not brought us, and [not] given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards." (16:13-14)

But didn't the Jews have only themselves to blame? Well, consider this: Throughout the generations, most Jews have devotedly anticipated Messianic redemption. Present-day assimilation testifies that many Jews do not share that hope. Certainly, if today there were a Divine declaration that due to our disbelief G-d has chosen others, we would feel crushed. Dasan and Aviram's generation underwent a somewhat comparable experience.

What then is so disgusting about Dasan and Aviram's attitude? Seemingly, their failing was in not realizing that a Jew's good deeds are rungs in the ladder of the Jewish Nations' destiny. Without this perspective, Dasan and Aviram could only foresee more years of desert wandering. Religious observance, after all, seemed meaningless, as it would never culminate in receiving a sacred homeland. With this perspective, though, Dasan and Aviram would have continued to feel satisfaction with religious observance, even in the desert. They would have been comforted by the knowledge that all good deeds are immortalized, helping the Jewish Nation to realize their destiny.

Anthill building is a perfect example of communal mission. The anthill building process has always mesmerized me. Hundreds of ants scurrying, some holding loads equal to their own body weight. More than anything, these ants' sense of community is touching. KBY ants, for example, could be run over by a tractor, bicycle, or shoe. Nonetheless, these ants press on. I imagine that these ants desire that their children be able to live comfortably - places to curl up at night and spots to store food. Anthill building teaches that one must seek the public's good. Pirkei Avos, arguably, has a statement that expresses this principle well. "It is not up to you to finish the work, but you are not free to avoid it entirely." (2:16) This means that one cannot, and is not, expected to single-handedly realize the Jewish nations' destiny, But one is obligated to play a part.

As we leave Yeshiva, this lesson is particularly important. Often a talmid returning from Yeshiva, especially an Israeli Yeshiva, returns with a sense of mission. He is going to influence everyone back at home to be more religious. Dasan and Aviram's philosophy lends itself towards one-man crusades. The communal mission philosophy, on the other hand, naturally manifests in group-efforts. Indeed, together we can create a more realistic scenario. One in which our neighbors and family's' pride and identification with Judaism instinctively increases as they perceive that there are many religiously sincere people, whom are also respectable. And so, rather than running lecture series, take a hint from the ants, and simply "Give, Live, and Learn."