

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXXVIII: Korach (Num. 16:1–18:32)

Essay 4. Why did Moses tell Korach to wait until morning?

Korach, of the tribe of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram from the tribe of Reuven, gathered 250 men and challenged Moses's position as leader and Aaron's position as priest. They said that all Israel were holy, and asked why Moses and Aaron should be set apart.

מִדְרָשׁ "בִּקְרַח וַיֵּדַע ה' אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ", אָמַר לוֹ מֹשֶׁה גְבוּלוֹת חֶלֶק הַקֶּב"ה בְּעוֹלָמוֹ. שְׂמָא יְכוּלִים אֲתָם לְעָרֵב יוֹם וְלַיְלָה עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash** on the verse, “Then [Moses] spoke to Korach and all his company, saying, **In the morning, the L-rd will make known who is His** and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen’ (Num. 16:5).”

The Midrash considers why Moses referenced “the morning.” A first suggestion of the Midrash is that the confrontation between Moses and Korach occurred at night, and that Moses said, “Perhaps they said this thing because they had been excessively eating and drinking.” He therefore said, “In the morning,” hoping that by then the alcohol would have worn off and they would repent.

A second suggestion of the Midrash is that there was more to the conversation, and that after Moses referred to “the morning,” as related in Scripture, he continued by discussing day versus night: **“Moses said, ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, has divided boundaries in His world. Perhaps you can mix day and night?’”**¹ The Midrash explains that Moses meant that G-d created the boundary between light and darkness, the boundary between Israel and the other nations, and the boundary between Aaron and the other Levites. Moses concluded, according to the Midrash: “If you can mix this distinction in which He made a separation between light and darkness, you may be able to nullify this [selection of Aaron].” In other words, Moses explained that there was no nepotism involved in the selection of Aaron, but rather the selection was made by G-d. As Korach could not defeat G-d, he could not hope to overturn G-d’s decision to select Aaron and his sons for the priesthood.

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¹ Num. Rabbah 18:7, and Midrash Tanchuma, Korach, 5:1.

קשה דלפי זה באותה שעה שהיה יום כמו שכתב רש"י עתה עת שכרות הוא לנו וכו'. כך היה יכול לומר ערב וידוע ה' וכו', שהינו שומעים ממנו שאם יכולים לערב יום בלילה וכו'. ואמאי נקט דוקא בקר?

Rabbi Nachmani reviews the two suggestions of the Midrash, 1) that the confrontation between Moses and Korach occurred at night, with a concern of drunkenness, and 2) that the wording “the morning” was to evoke G-d’s distinction between day and night, between Israel and the nations, and between Aaron and the other Levites.

There is a difficulty, though, for according to this statement of Moses, ‘Can you mix day with night?’, **at that time it was still daytime.** In other words, the fact that Moses first mentioned “day” meant that the confrontation occurred during the day. Rabbi Nachmani quotes Rashi on Num. 16:5 (derived from this Midrash). **As Rashi wrote,** “[Moses wanted the people to think he meant], **‘Now is a time of excessive drinking for us,** and it’s improper to appear before Him.’ But he was intending to postpone, as perhaps they might repent [from their opposition].”

If so, reasons Rabbi Nachmani, then **[Moses] could have said, “In the evening, the Lord will make known who is His and who is holy,” for then** it would make sense that **we would hear from [Moses], “Can you mix day into night?”** I.e., if it was daytime, and Moses wanted a delay in the hope of Korach repenting, he could have presented a warning regarding that evening. By doing that, the same point could have been made that G-d distinguished between morning and night, just as he distinguished between Aaron and the other Levites. **But** that’s not what Moses said. **Why did [Moses] specifically choose “morning,”** as reported by Scripture?

ועוד מה ענין זה לזה, וכי תיסק אדעתיהו דקרח ועתו לערב יום ולילה, ואי משום שהיו שכורים ממש או משום ספק שכרות המתין עד הבקר, אם כן מה היתה מועלת התראתו ומה היו מועילים דבריו אם לא היו בדעת נכונה?

Further, how are these [suggestions] related? If, as in the first suggestion, Korach and his congregation would have thought to mix day with night, whether because they were literally drunk or because of a doubt that they might be drunk, then it would make sense that **[Moses] would wait until morning. If so, what was the reason for his warning as presented in the Midrash’s second suggestion? What would his words accomplish if [Korach and his congregation] were not thinking correctly,** owing to their being drunk?

ואיתא במדרש בפסוק "ואת הכוכבים", אמר הקב"ה הואיל ולבנה זו מעטה עצמה להיות שולטת בלילה, גוזר אני עליה בשעה שהיא יוצאה שיהיו הכוכבים יוצאין עמה וכשהיא נכנסת נכנסין עמה, ודכנתה "ושם אחיו יקטן" וכו' עכ"ל. דמשמע שבזכות שהלבנה מעטה עצמה יש לה אוכלוסא של כוכבים לכבודה ולא פן השמש אף על פי שהיא גדולה ממנה, וכן יקטן אף על פי שהיה קטן זכה להעמיד משפחות גדולות בשביל שמעט את עצמו.

It’s brought in a Midrash on the verse, “G-d made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, **and the stars.**” (Gen. 1:16). The Midrash says:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said, “Since this moon shrank itself to rule over the night [i.e., thus becoming subservient to the sun],² I decreed for her that at the hour she goes out [at night] that the stars will go out with her, and when she enters [i.e., becomes invisible or less visible during the day] they enter with her.” [This is] **as in** the verse, “Two sons were born to Eber: the name of the first was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided; **and the name of his brother was Joktan**” (Gen. 10:25).

- Gen. Midrash Rabbah 6:4

The meaning is that in the merit of the moon shrinking itself so as to allow the sun to rule the day, **she has been given by G-d a population of stars to honor her, and this is not the case for the sun, even though it is larger than [the moon]. This is similar to Joktan, for even though he was small, i.e., with a lower status than his older brother, Peleg, he merited to found [thirteen] great families, because he humbled himself.**³

וְעָקַר מִחֲלוּקַת קֶרַח הַיְתָה מִפְּנֵי שְׁנֵתְקַנָּא עַל נְשִׂיאֹתוֹ וְשָׁל אֱלִיָּצֶפֶן בֶּן עֲזִיָּאֵל שְׁנֵתְמַנָּה נְשִׂיאָ וְהָיָה קָטָן מִמֶּנּוּ. לְכַד אָמַר לוֹ מַלְשָׁה לְדַבְרֵיהּ שֶׁהַגְּדוֹלוֹת הַיּוֹלְכוֹת אַחֲרַי הַגְּדוֹל אִם בֶּן הָיָה לָהֶם לְכוֹכְבִּים לְצֵאתָ עִם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ.

Commenting on Num. 16:1, Rashi explained that **the principal of the dispute of Korach was because he became envious of his cousin, Elzaphan the son of Uzziel, whom had been appointed prince over the sons of Kohath,⁴ even though he was lesser [i.e., younger] than [Korach].⁵ Therefore, Moses said to [Korach], “According to your words, that the great ones follow the greatest one, if so, then the stars should have gone out with the sun.”** In other words, Korach complained that he was a greater man than Elzaphan, and should have ruled in his stead. Moses replied that leader was not always selected on the basis of his importance or reputation, and as an example pointed out that the stars accompany the moon, instead of accompanying the sun, which is more prominent.

² Chullin 60b: “Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raises a contradiction [between two verses]. It is written: ‘And G-d made the two great lights’ (Gen. 1:16), and it is also written [in the same verse]: ‘The greater light [to rule the day], and the lesser light [to rule the night],’ [indicating that only one was great]. [Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi explains: When G-d first created the sun and the moon, they were equally bright]. Then, the moon said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown? [One of us must be subservient to the other. G-d therefore] said to her, [i.e., to the moon]: If so, go and diminish yourself.”

³ Rashi, based upon Gen. Rabbah 37:7, comments on Gen. 10:25, “[Joktan] was so called ‘the little one’ [יְקָטָן] because he was so humble and thought little (ימקטין) of himself; therefore he merited the privilege of rearing all these families.”

⁴ Num. 3:30, “The chieftain of the ancestral house of the Kohathite clans was Elzaphan son of Uzziel.”

⁵ Rashi’s comments are based on Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 1.

ואם הפוכבים, שִׁיזָאוּ בְּלַיְלָה עִם הַיָּרֵחַ, תּוּכַל לְהַעֲמִידֵם לְמִקְרָא עִם הַחֶמֶה, מִטַּעַם שֶׁהַחֶמֶה יוֹתֵר גְּדוּלָה וְרֵאוּיִים לָהּ, אַף אֵת זֹאת תּוּכַל לְבַטֵּל. אֲבָל אִם הַפּוֹכְבִּים לֹא יִצְאוּ בַּיּוֹם, אִם כֵּן הַגְּדוּלָה הוֹלֶכֶת אַחֵר מִי שֶׁמְקַטִּין עֲצָמוֹ. וְאֵלֵיזָפָן מַעֲטָ עֲצָמוֹ וְאַתָּה אֲדַרְבָּא רוֹדֵף אַחֵר הַגְּדוּלוֹת, וְלָכֵן לְאֵלֵיזָפָן נְאוֹת הַגְּדוּלָה וְלֹא לָךְ.

Moses continued, **“If the stars, which go out at night with the moon—if you can have [the stars] present themselves tomorrow with the sun, according to [your] opinion that the sun is bigger and more fitting to be accompanied by [the stars], then you will be able to nullify this [decision regarding Elzaphan]. But if the stars do not come out during the day [and stars are visible during the day only during a total eclipse], then if so, [that shows that] the grandeur goes after the one who diminishes himself, which would be your younger cousin, Elzaphan, who is humble. Elzaphan diminished himself, while you, [Korach], to the contrary, chase after the wonderful things, and therefore it is proper for Elzaphan to have the grandeur and not you.”**

וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמְרוּ בְּגִמְרָא (סְנֵהֲדָרִין דָּף ק"י ע"א) שֶׁעָלוּ שָׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ בְּזָבוּל וְאָמְרוּ לְהַקְב"ה אִם אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה דִין לָכֵן עִמָּרָם יִצְאָ, וְאִם לֹא, לֹא יִצְאָ. מִפְּנֵי שֶׁלְפִי דְבָרֵי קִרַח הָיָה לוֹ לְשָׁמֶשׁ לִישׁוּל הַפּוֹכְבִּים לְחַלְקוֹ שֶׁהוּא יוֹתֵר גְּדוּל, וְאִם אִין לוֹ פּוֹכְבִּים מוֹכַח שֶׁהָיָה עִם מִשְׁחָה, וְכֵן הִלְבְּנָה מִעֲטָה עֲצָמָה מִשׁוּם שֶׁאֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְשִׁנֵּי מְלָכִים שֶׁיִּשְׁתַּמְּשׁוּ בְּכֶתֶר אֶחָד. וְכֵאֵן הָיוּ מְאִתִּים נְחֻמְשִׁים אִישׁ מְבַקְשִׁים פְּהוּנָה גְּדוּלָה כְּמוֹ שֶׁפִּירֵשׁ רַש"י וְלְפִי דְבָרֵיהֶם יְכוּלִים לְהִיּוֹת שְׁנֵי מְלָכִים שְׁוִים. וְהִלְבְּנָה נְחֻמְעֲטָה בְּכַדִּי, וְהָיָה לָהֶם חֲרָפָה לְצֵאת מַעֲתָה שְׁנֵישׁ בְּעוֹלָם סְבֵרַת קִרַח, וְלָכֵן עָלוּ שָׁמֶשׁ וְיָרֵחַ וְכו'.

This is what it says in the Gemara (Sanhedrin page 110a): “The sun and moon ascended to *zevul* [one of the seven firmaments, in which the upper Temple stands]. They said to the Holy One, Blessed be He, ‘If You perform justice for [Moses], the son of Amram [and prove his position against Korach], we will emerge [and illuminate the world]. But if not, we will not emerge.’ ” Because according to the words of Korach, the sun could have taken the stars as its portion, as it was greater [than the moon]. Since it, in fact, has no stars appearing with it, that proves that the law is with Moses. Thus, the moon shrank itself because it’s impossible for two kings to wear one crown. Here, there were two hundred and fifty men seeking the high priesthood, as Rashi interpreted,⁶ and according to them there could be two equal kings. The moon was reduced, and they felt a disgrace to appear now that the opinion of Korach existed in the world. That is, the moon must have felt, “Did I err, in thinking that there could not be two kings sharing one crown, and did I therefore reduce myself in size for nothing?” Similarly, the sun must have thought, “If Korach was right, then the moon erred, but what is done is done, and at this point I am larger and deserve the stars.” **Therefore, “The sun and moon ascended” etc.,** saying that if G-d punished Korach, it would vindicate the moon’s actions and also explain why the moon deserved the stars’ accompaniment, and then the sun and moon would not be embarrassed to appear. On the other hand, if G-d did not act against Korach, they would remain embarrassed, and would not appear.

Thus, Rabbi Nachmani has discounted the first suggestion of the Midrash. Moses did not think that Korach and his congregation were drunk. He agrees with the reasoning of the second

⁶ Rashi on Num. 16:6.

suggestion of the Midrash, that Moses was arguing that G-d had distinguished between day and night, between Israel and the nations, and between Aaron and the other Levites, and that just as Korach was powerless to affect the natural distinctions between day and night, he could not hope to change G-d's selection of Aaron.

Rabbi Nachmani's question on the Scripture and Midrash was why it specifically mentioned "the morning." I.e., if the confrontation occurred in daytime, and Moses wanted to give Korach time to repent, why not mention "the evening"? Moses could have done so, and it would have still evoked the Midrash's explanation that G-d had distinguished between day and night, etc. Rabbi Nachmani's answer is a supplement to the Midrash, that Moses was telling Korach, "Let's wait through the entire night until morning, and we'll see if you can arrange for the stars to accompany the sun, instead of accompanying the moon."

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