

Parshat Korach

The Rebellion

Parshat Korach tells the story of the rebellion of Korach against Moshe and Aharon. The Torah states that though the Israelites rebelled Moshe prayed that they should be spared. This Sicha analyzes a curious Rashi and sheds new light onto Moshe’s defense of the Jewish People.

This week’s Torah portion tells the story of Korach and his contention on the status of Moshe and Aharon in that they were raised above the rest of the nation. They claimed that Moshe and Aharon were guilty of taking the kingship and the priesthood for themselves instead of giving it to others.

After the debacle of this rebellion G-d wished to destroy all those that participated in this uprising against Moshe, yet Moshe and Aharon prayed for them that they should be spared.

The Torah expresses the defense that they uttered as follows:

Text 1

They fell on their faces and said, "O G-d, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, if one man sins, shall You be angry with the whole congregation?"

Bamidbar 16:22

With these words Moshe defended those who had sinned in this mutiny from being wiped out by G-d.

Rashi explains that with the words, “O G-d, the G-d of the spirits,” Moshe and Aharon were arguing the case as to why the entire congregation did not deserve to be destroyed.

He provides the following elucidation:

Text 2

[G-d who] knows the thoughts [of every man]. Your attributes are not like those of earthly beings. A mortal king against whom part of his country transgresses does not know who the sinner is, and, therefore, when he is angry, he metes out punishment upon them all. But as for You, all thoughts are revealed before You, and You know who the sinner is.

Rashi, ibid

Because G-d knows who the sinner is and who is not guilty, there is therefore no reason to annihilate everyone.

G-d of the spirits

The words from the verse that Rashi focuses on in his explanation is the expression, “G-d, the G-d of the spirits.”

It is understood therefore, that if Rashi’s commentary revolves around these words it is because there can possibly be some misunderstanding with this specific expression. Rashi thus chooses to give further clarification.

A simple understanding of the above Rashi indicates that the misunderstanding which Rashi finds necessary to explain is the definition of the word “spirits.”

Rashi is negating that the word “spirits” (Heb. *ruchos*) in this circumstance means the G-d of *souls*, and instead explains that it means the G-d who is the knower of *thoughts*. Rashi therefore defines the meaning of “O G-d, the G-d of the spirits,” as “[G-d who] knows the thoughts [of every man].”

When Rashi selects one explanation on a verse at the expense of another, it is because the interpretation that Rashi chose is clearer according to the rudimentary understanding of the verse. It is understood therefore, that the reason that Rashi chose to define the meaning of the word “spirits” in this instance as thoughts and not souls, is because this interpretation fits best with the verse’s basic meaning.

The evidence for Rashi’s interpretation that this is indeed the intent of the word “spirits” in this verse is the continuation of the verse itself. Only by means of employing Rashi’s understanding of the word spirits to mean thoughts, does the rest of the verse, “if one man sins, shall You be angry with the whole congregation,” make sense.

It is because G-d knows the thoughts of man that He does not punish the innocent—not because He knows the souls of man.

Conversely, interpreting the words “G-d of the spirits” to mean “G-d of the souls” has absolutely no connection to the content of the verse of not punishing many for the sins of one person.

It is because G-d is the G-d of the spirit, i.e. that He knows the thoughts of man, that He can thus punish justly.

Questions

While Rashi’s general point seems to be clear, the specifics of his explanation seem to be superfluous and not understood.

After Rashi explains that the meaning of “G-d of the spirit” is that He knows man’s thoughts, Rashi says: “Your attributes are not like those of earthly beings. A mortal king against whom part of his country transgresses does not know who the sinner is, and, therefore, when he is angry, he metes out punishment upon them all. But as for You, all thoughts are revealed before You, and You know who the sinner is.” The general analogy and the specifics of it are not understood for the following reasons:

- A) Why does Rashi need to add the allegory of a mortal king at all? How is the explanation of G-d knowing who the sinner is enhanced through presenting the comparison between a mortal king and G-d?
- B) If it is indeed pertinent for Rashi to bring this allegory to explain how G-d differs in the way that he punishes from a mortal king, why did he not bring it earlier in the Torah, in the story of Avraham and the destruction of the city of Sodom (where Avraham challenges G-d with punishing the righteous together with the wicked¹)? If the allegory is pertinent to the story of Moshe and Korach, it should have added insight to the story of Avraham and Sodom as well.
- C) The allegory itself does not seem to make sense, as it implies that a mortal king need not be discerning in the manner in which he gives retribution and that he can punish indiscriminately. A mortal king as well,

¹ See Rashi, Bereishis 18:23.

if ruling with uprightness, would not mete out punishment on the entire kingdom if only one man transgressed. He would appoint a judge to determine who the sinner was, so as not to wrongly penalize the innocent. Even if he could not ascertain who sinned, it would not be a rational excuse to punish everyone. What then, can possibly be the intent of this allegory?

- D) In his presentation of the allegory Rashi states, that a king against whom “part of his country transgresses does not know who the sinner is.” He begins with the term “*sarcha*” (transgresses) and finishes with the word “*choteh*” (sinner). Why the change of terms?
- E) He begins the allegory in the plural, “*part of the country transgresses,*” and finishes in the singular, “*who the sinner is.*” This does not seem consistent. Why does Rashi transition from the plural to the singular?

The next Rashi

In the same verse, on the continuing words, “if one man sins,” Rashi comments with the following:

Text 3

[One man] is the sinner, shall You be angry with the whole congregation? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, “You have spoken well. I know and will make known who sinned and who did not sin.”

Rashi, *ibid*

Rashi’s commentary on these words as well are not understood, and leads one to question various points:

- A) What is Rashi trying to explain with his explanatory words, “[one man] is the sinner,” that is not already clear in the verse’s statement, “if one man sins?” He does not seem to add anything.
- B) (As mentioned,) Rashi is meticulous in the words from the verse that he chooses to base his commentary on, as those are the particular words that he is explaining. Here, Rashi based his explanation on the phrase, “if one man,” yet his interpretation seems to focus on the rest of the verse as well, i.e., “shall You be angry with the whole congregation.” If Rashi’s intent is to explain the rest of the verse, he should have made that known in his choice of words that he highlighted.
- C) What does Rashi add in his explanation with the words, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘You have spoken well. I know and will make known who sinned and who did not sin?’” It does not seem connected with the main point that he is explaining.
- D) In G-d’s response to this challenge of Moshe and Aharon, he makes it known that the punishment will be received by three people (Korach, Dasan and Aviram). In their question though, they only seemed to have expressed that *one* individual sinned (“if one man sins”). If so, why does Rashi say in his commentary that G-d declared, “you have spoken well,” as if agreeing with Moshe and Aharon’s words, when it seems that they were mistaken in their identification of the sinners?
- E) The words in Rashi “I know,” seem superfluous, as the main idea that

Rashi is conveying is that G-d will *make known* who the sinners are through his punishment, not that He Himself knows. This is especially curious being that he is quoting from the Medrash², which does not include this initial term in its commentary.

In addition to all of the above, another general difficulty arises:

While this verse seems to imply that only one individual sinned—as stated by Moshe and Aharon—previous verses clearly state that there were others involved in the rebellion.

Text 4

They confronted Moshe together with two hundred and fifty men from the children of Israel, chieftains of the congregation, representatives of the assembly, men of repute.

Bamidbar 16:2

This incident was not a transgression of one man, but of many. Why then, does Moshe seem to later imply that only one man sinned?

Rebels and followers

The resolution to all of the above difficulties can be understood through prefacing with the following background of how the story of Korach unfolded:

On the verse³, “Korach assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord appeared before the entire congregation,” Rashi makes the following comment:

Text 5

All that night, he went to the tribes and enticed them [saying,] “Do you think I care only for myself? I care for all of you. These [people] come and take all the high positions: the kingship for himself and the *kehunah* (priesthood) for his brother,” until they were all enticed.

Rashi, Bamidbar 16:19

Korach went around to all the various tribes to convince them to join his rebellion, by claiming that he had their own good in mind as well.

The multitudes that joined Korach’s camp did not do so because they had any particular complaint against Moshe or Aharon, but because they were convinced to do so by Korach. Understood therefore is, that although responsible for their actions, they were not the ringleaders and were not deserving of punishment in the same way.

While one cannot excuse themselves by saying that they are not at fault because they were convinced by another individual—as a person should both distance themselves from people that have abhorrent ideas and should be strong in their own moral compass—nevertheless, the degree of their fault is mitigated.

It is this diminishment of blame that Moshe was expressing in his statement that G-d is the knower of man’s thoughts. Moshe was essentially saying, that because G-d knows who was truly responsible for the rebellion and who were merely followers, G-d should only destroy the ringleader and spare the followers.

Accordingly, we can understand Rashi’s allegory of the difference between the way that a mortal

² Bamidbar Rabba 11.

³ Bamidbar 16:19.

king operates and the manner in which G-d ought to operate.

Rashi brings the allegory of “a mortal king against whom part of his country *transgresses (sarcha),*” and points out that a mortal king “does not know who the *sinner (choteh) is.*”

With these words, Rashi is pointing out that there is a focal difference between *transgressing* that was done by the many, and *sinning*, which Moshe assumed was done only by Korach himself.

The Hebrew term that is employed for the act of transgressing, “*sirchon,*” means rotten and expresses disgust. It is the difference between “*sarcha,*” the group that acted abhorrently and “*choteh,*” he who sinned, that Rashi wishes to highlight.

Rashi is expressing, that though part of the king’s empire “*sarcha,*” which indicates that they acted negatively, they did not display a wonton act of rebellion in which the individuals would each be considered a “*choteh*” — a sinner.

This essentially expresses, that while their actions were indeed repulsive, their intention, however, was not to rebel, and therefore they are not deserving of death. While many people indeed transgressed, Moshe was articulating that there was in all probability, only one instigator who led the uprising.

It is for this reason that although Rashi begins his statement in the *plural* form, with the expression “*part of his country transgresses (sarcha),*” he finishes his sentence saying that there was one sinner.

It is concerning this point that it is pertinent to point out the allegory underlining the difference between a mortal king and G-d, who knows man’s thoughts.

A mortal king, who cannot know who the instigator and the one that fueled the rebellion is, must punish them all equally, as they all transgressed. However, G-d, who knows the thoughts of man, is able to determine who the truly rebellious one is and who the followers are.

It is therefore understood why this allegory is not brought with the incident of Avraham in his plea to G-d not to destroy the city of Sodom.

There, Avraham’s argument was⁴, “Will You even destroy the *righteous* with the *wicked?*” Avraham was essentially requesting for G-d not to destroy those who are *completely* righteous.

Concerning the episode of Korach however, Moshe was arguing that even those that *indeed* transgressed should not be destroyed as well, as there is a focal difference in the severity of the sin of those who are rebellious and those who are merely followers.

It is this point that is expressed in the allegory, which is not pertinent to Avraham’s argument with the Almighty.

One man sinned

As a continuation to this idea Rashi writes, “[one man] is the sinner, shall You be angry with the whole congregation?”

All the above-mentioned questions on this second commentary are predicated on the assumption that this is a *separate* commentary from the first. The difficulties posed regarding Rashi’s explanation here concerned the fact that not only did this next commentary seem superfluous, but that it did not at all focus on the words of the verse.

However, in the first print of Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, these two explanations are not

⁴ Bereishis 18:23.

disconnected, but are actually appear as one long comment and should read as follows:

Text 6

[G-d who] knows the thoughts [of every man]. Your attributes are not like those of earthly beings. A mortal king against whom part of his country transgresses does not know who the sinner is, and, therefore, when he is angry, he metes out punishment upon them all. But as for You, all thoughts are revealed before You, and You know who the sinner is: one man is the sinner, shall You be angry with the whole congregation? The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "You have spoken well. I know and will make known who sinned and who did not sin."

Rashi, Bamidbar 16:22, First Edition

Based on this simple correction, all of the questions fall away, as instead of this commentary of Rashi being a separate explanation of the words "if one man sins," as previously assumed, it is instead the conclusion of Moshe's argument against G-d and G-d's response.

The bottom line of Moshe's argument was, that being that there is only *one* individual who was rebellious, there is no reason to equally punish *everyone*.

G-d answered Moshe's claim saying, "You have spoken well. I know and will make known who sinned and who did not sin."

While G-d did agree to Moshe's *general* claim, that because He knows who was rebellious and who were followers not everyone should be punished, G-d however *disagreed* with *part* of Moshe's claim.

For, while Moshe thought that only *one* individual was rebellious, G-d knew that there were more. So whereas in Moshe's statement he declared, "one man is the sinner," in G-d's statement He replied, "I *know* (differently) and I will make known who *sinned*," in the plural.

This response articulated the mistake in Moshe's assumption. While Moshe stated that only one individual—Korach—rebelled, G-d's statement, "I *know*...who *sinned*," conveyed that there were additional individuals at fault. G-d made it clear that not only did Korach rebel, but Dasan and Aviram rebelled as well.

This is expressed in the following verse:

Text 7

The Lord spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to the congregation saying: 'Withdraw from the dwelling of Korach, Dasan and Aviram.'"

Bamidbar 16:23-24

As an answer to Moshe's argument with G-d, G-d responded that He would indeed destroy the perpetrators and not the followers. But, whereas Moshe believed that there was only one instigator, G-d expressed that there were three.

The lesson

The lesson that we are to learn in our service of G-d is as follows: Though we may observe people in whom it is difficult to find any merit for them, we should do our utmost to see their good.

This is expressed in the fact that although Moshe saw the manner in which Dasan and Aviram acted, he nevertheless believed them to be followers and not rabble-rousers themselves.

When Moshe called Dasan and Aviram to come to him, they replied with tremendous audacity:

Text 8

Moshe sent to call Dasan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said, "We will not go up. Is it not enough that you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert, that you should also exercise authority over us? You have not even brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Even if you gouge out the eyes of those men, we will not go up."

Bamidbar 16:12-14

Notwithstanding their tremendous impudence, Moshe nevertheless judged them positively, and assumed that they were not instigators of the rebellion against him but followers.

From this virtue of Moshe's we should take a lesson as to the extent that we should judge our fellow positively. Although it may seem that our fellow's actions are such that no merit can be found for them, we should nevertheless try to see them in a positive light and as a result thereof, return them to a proper path.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 13, Korach 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)