

“Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the wilderness?” (16:13)

Korach was not a fool. Yet, everything that he asserted could not be the words of a smart man. To attempt to usurp Klal Yisrael’s leadership – is audacious and foolish. To malign Moshe and Aharon – constitutes brazen disrespect. To refer to a land that was the source of so much suffering, persecution and death as a land flowing with milk and honey – is downright insane! Korach was neither foolish nor insane. He was mistaken. He misled himself. Where did he go wrong? What led him to act in a way so inconsistent with his own character? Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, z.l., explains that the stimulus for his behavior was negios, personal, vested interests. When someone is subject to negios, he neither perceives accurately nor acts normally. Indeed, as Horav Aharon Kotler, z.l., observes, Korach was an enigma, his behavior paradoxical. On the one hand, he sought to ascend to a loftier spiritual plateau, to become closer to Hashem. On the other hand, he did not care how he achieved his goal. He did not care whom he stepped on, whom he destroyed – even himself – so great was his obsession to perform a greater spiritual service for the Almighty.

Horav Dessler cites a powerful, penetrating analogy which is related by Rav Hai Gaon that clearly demonstrates this idea. It once happened that a lion who was hunting for food came upon a fox. As the lion was about to eat the fox for dinner, the fox spoke up, “Why would you want to eat me? I am nothing more than skin and bones. Let me show you a hefty man whose flesh is more than sufficient to provide a satisfying meal for you.” The lion listened and proceeded to follow the fox to a place where there was a man sitting in a clearing, right next to a hole in the ground, which was covered with branches and leaves.

This trap was there to protect the man from any harmful animals that might strike him – like the lion. When the lion saw the man, he turned to the fox and said, “I am afraid to attack the man because of his ability to pray. His prayers will prevent my successful attack and will probably harm me.” “Do not worry,” said the fox. “His prayers will have no immediate effect on you. They will, however, affect your descendants two generations in the future.”

The lion listened to the fox and made a running leap for the unsuspecting man sitting peacefully in front of him. As expected, the lion fell into the trap and was severely injured. He looked at the fox and exclaimed, “You told me that the man’s prayers would have no effect on me. They would only affect my grandchildren, but look what happened. Apparently, you were wrong.”

The fox, using his natural guile, responded, “It appears to me, my dear lion, that you are being punished for your grandfather’s sin. You forget that you are someone’s grandson.” The lion looked at the fox with questioning eyes and exclaimed, “Why should I be held responsible for the sins of my ancestors?” The fox turned to the lion and with a dead-pan look said to him, “Why did you not care about your descendants?”

This narrative's message is clear and simple: when the lion was not personally involved, when he had no negios, he did not care if others would pay for his sins. Now that he is the one that is paying, the entire perspective is altered. Korach was a wise, erudite man until it affected him personally. He then became a fool. When someone wears blue glasses, everything he sees is blue. The spectacles of vested interests distort a person's vision – regardless of the individual's stature. A truly great person is able to transcend his personal negios in order to avoid becoming a victim of the resulting myopia.

Horav A. A. Mishkovsky, z.l., Rosh HaYeshiva of Knesses Chizkiyahu, was such a unique individual. He distinguished himself in his ability to see beyond himself and maintain the lucidity needed to advise others, even if the decision would have an adverse effect upon him personally. There was once a student in the yeshivah whom the administration had decided was not living up to the standard of the institution. They decided that it would be best to ask him to leave. They elected to allow him to complete the zman, term, before notifying him of their decision. Meanwhile, unknowingly, this student made an appointment with the Rosh HaYeshivah to determine if it was best for him to remain in the yeshivah, suggesting that perhaps it would be better for him to pursue other areas of endeavor. The Rosh HaYeshivah, being a man of uncompromising integrity, told him that it was best for him to remain within the yeshivah environment.

When his colleagues in the administration heard of this incident, they were taken aback. "Why didn't you tell him to leave? It would have saved us a big headache if he had left on his own," they remarked. "He asked me what was best for him – not what was best for the yeshivah," said Horav Mishkovsky, "and I gave him the correct advice." This is an example of why he was a gadol – a Torah giant. It is the small people who are restrained as a result of their vested interests. Greatness is determined by one's ability to rise over one's pettiness.