

And Korach separated himself. (16:1)

Korach was no fool. Yet, he acted in a manner unbecoming a person who possesses even a modicum of common sense. He had it all. Why did he throw it all away for a chance at a moment of glory? Did he not realize that he had no prospects of succeeding in this ill-fated endeavor? *Rashi* explains that his “eye” threw him off. He saw a succession of distinguished offspring descending from him. The illustrious Shmuel *HaNavi*, who was to succeed Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen* as the nation’s spiritual leader, stood at the helm of this revered lineage. How could he be wrong? His descendants would save him.

Korach was dead wrong. His sons repented at the very last moment, resulting in their being spared the gruesome death of the other mutineers. *Rashi* refers to Korach as a *pikeach*, a clever, shrewd person. Why is he referred to as clever – as opposed to *chacham*, wise? **Horav Naphtali, zl, m’Ropshitz** distinguishes between a *pikeach* and a *chacham*, in that a *pikeach* is not only astute, but he also knows how to “play the game.” A *pikeach* never officially takes sides. In fact, when two people are in dispute with one another, the clever person knows exactly what to do and what to say, in such a manner that each side thinks he is supportive of his individual cause/opinion, etc. This is alluded to by the *gimatriya*, numerical equivalent, of *pikeach*, which is 188, double the *gimatriya* of *tzad*, side. The *pikeach* takes “both” sides.

This is what *Rashi* means when he says, *Vayikach Korach, Lakach atzmo l’tzad echad*, “He took /separated himself to one side.” Then *Rashi* asks, “Korach was a *pikeach*; what did he see that provoked him to do this foolishness, to take himself to one side?” *Rashi* intimates that a clever person never takes sides. What made Korach lose perspective of what he was about to do? He explains that he saw his future descendants. He thought that he could not possibly go wrong. This time he would not hedge his bets. He would take sides.

This might explain why Korach acted foolishly, but what motivated his two-hundred and fifty henchmen? These were learned men, scholars who were heads of the *Sanhedrin*. Clearly, one does not achieve such distinction unless he is blessed with an astute mind and possesses amazing diligence. They had no chance of becoming leaders. It was going to be a toss-up between Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Korach. They were completely out of the picture. Furthermore, they did not have Korach’s excuse, looking into the future and seeing an illustrious lineage originating from them. Why did they act so foolishly?

Horav Meir Chodosh, zl, cites the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 52b, where *Chazal* present an analogy concerning the way in which an *am ha’aretz*, unschooled, ignorant Jew, views a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar. At first, the scholar is unapproachable, similar to a jug made of pure gold. He is regarded as precious and highly revered. Once the scholar converses idly with the *am ha’aretz*, his standing in the eyes of the ignorant man plummets to that of a silver jug. His value has decreased considerably, but he is still considered to be precious. Once the *talmid chacham* accepts gifts from the *am ha’aretz*, it is all over. The scholar now appears as nothing more than an earthenware jug

which, once broken, can never be repaired. In his commentary, *Rashi* states that this analogy applies to Korach and the way he was able to ensnare the heads of the *Sanhedrin* in his web of deceit. Interestingly, these men were not ignorant. They were the primary scholars of the nation. Once they were the beneficiaries of Korach's wealth, however, he neither respected them, nor did they have any self-respect. A *talmid chacham* must maintain an aura of respectability. Taking money from an *am ha'aretz* – or even a scholar, but a despot such as Korach – diminishes one's standing.

The *Mashgiach* explains that once the two-hundred fifty heads of the *Sanhedrin* benefitted from Korach's wealth, they had been bribed. It was a done deal; they were in Korach's pocket. Korach, on the other hand, knew the score; he had not been bribed. *Chazal* wonder how such an astute person could act so foolishly.