Jewish Tribune – Korach

**Cognitive Dissonance**

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, the revered mashgiach and Ba’al Mussar was once riding in a cab and the Israeli driver related the following story:

*“Rebbi, when my friends and I completed our army service, we decided to go on a world tour. We found ourselves in the jungles of Africa one night when all of a sudden one of my friends woke up screaming. a boa constrictor wrapped around his neck.  We tried as much as we could to pull the snake off, but with no success. He was turning blue; close to death.  We didn’t know what to do.  At that point, one of us shouted to him, ‘Yigal, you’re going to die, at least say*Shema*.’  Yigal started saying*Shema*.  As soon as he finished the first*passuk*, the snake released himself and slithered away.”*

*The cab driver continued, “Rebbi, do you know that as a result of that incident my friend Yigal became a*baal teshuva*! Today, he is*frum*with a beautiful religious family. They keep kosher, his wife covers her hair and his kid*s all go to cheder.”

*Rav Levenstein responded, “That’s amazing.” He paused for a minute and then suddenly asked, “and what about you?”*

*“Me?  Oh no,” said the cab driver, glancing away from the road. “It didn’t happen to me.  It happened to him.”*

A man has a life-threatening experience.  He prays, and the situation resolves.  He is safe.  To his credit, his life and behavior is changed dramatically going forward.  But those who witnessed the event?  Those who saw the miracle?  They acknowledge the wisdom of their friend becoming *baal teshuva*but what lesson do they take from the incident?  What do they incorporate into their own lives?

Nothing.

A life-altering event is reduced to little more than a story a taxi driver tells to pass the time when he has an observant passenger.

It is fitting that this well-known story was related by Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein as it answers a question that he himself poses on this week’s parsha.

We are familiar with the story. [Korach](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/246641/jewish/Korah-The-Rebel-of-the-Bible.htm) incites a mutiny challenging Moshe Rabbeinu’s leadership and the granting of the [*kehunah*](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/762109/jewish/Raise-Your-Hand-If-Youre-A-Kohen.htm) (priesthood) to [Aharon](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4033914/jewish/Aaron-the-High-Priest.htm).

Korach is soon joined by Moshe’s familiar foes, [Dosson and Aviram](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4423161/jewish/Who-Were-Dathan-and-Abiram.htm" \o "Who Were Dathan and Abiram?), as well as 250 rebels.

A short while later, HKBH ends the mutiny. The earth opens up and swallows Korach and his family, and a heavenly fire consumes the rest of the 250 rebels. Moshe instructs Aharon's son Elozor to retrieve the frying pans which were used for the incense offering, to flatten them and plate the mizbeach with them - a visible deterrent for any individual who ever wishes to challenge Aharon's priesthood.

The next day, the community complains that Moshe and Aharon are to be blamed for the deaths. Hashem instructs Moshe and Aharon to separate themselves from the community and a plague strikes with many thousands dying. Moshe tells Aharon to quickly take a firepan with incense and very quickly the plague is halted.

One would have thought that Moshe Rabbeinu’s leadership and Aharon’s role as Kohen Godol is beyond dispute. Surely no-one needs any more convincing. The earth has opened up, the mizbeach is plated with a permanent reminder, Moshe and Aharon stopped a plague.

Apparently not.

The parsha continues to tell of the "test of the mattos” – the test of the staffs. Hashem tells Moshe to take a staff from each of the twelve tribes, with the name of each tribe's prince written on their staff. Another staff was taken to represent the shevet Levi, and Aharon's name was written on that staff.

All staffs were placed overnight in the Kodesh Kedoshim in the Mishkan and the next morning they were removed, and miraculously Aharon's staff had budded with almond blossoms and almonds. Further proof that Aharon was Hashem's choice to be Kohen Godol.

Rav Yechezkel Levenstein asks the obvious question. Why was it necessary for this further test of the mattos. Surely everyone was fully convinced?

Says Rav Chetzkel, you see from here, the irrational power of deep-rooted viewpoints. A person can see a friend recite the Shema with his dying breath and yet be spared and it has no effect on the observer.

The ground can open and swallow alive the rebel, Moshe and Aharon can stop plagues, but your opinion is so entrenched that that is not enough.

Like the moshol Rashi gives with Amalek, you can witness a scoundrel jump into a boiling hot bath and get burnt, but you are not put off. He just served to cool it off for the next person. You can witness Amalek be defeated badly by Klal Yisroel as they emerge from Mitzrayim but that does not stop you from interfering.

Psychologists call this cognitive dissonance. We may fail to relate to the perplexing behaviour of those who rebelled against Moshe but there are other examples of cognitive dissonance that may be more familiar: You want to be healthy, but you don't exercise regularly or eat a nutritious diet. You know that smoking or drinking too much is harmful to your health, but you do it anyway. And then there are matters of a more spiritual nature. Lashon Hora and our talk generally, conduct in shul; the list continues.

The lesson says Rav Chatzkel is to be vigilant of negative influences entering our minds. Foreign and dangerous viewpoints are sometimes as hard to shake off as a boa constrictor around your neck.

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