Blue Heaven

“And Korach took...” (16:1)

othing is more desired or desirable in this world than peace. And yet nothing seems more elusive. All people want peace. Everyone wants to sit under his fig tree, secure that no one will come and take away his family, his house or his possessions. And yet almost since the beginning of time, peace has been the most elusive dream of mankind. Why is world peace such a difficult, seemingly impossible, thing to achieve?

If there’s one Hebrew word that everyone knows, it’s shalom — peace. However, shalom has another function in Hebrew: It is also the Jewish (and Arab) form of greeting. The Talmud tells us that Shalom is one of G-d’s names, and thus it is forbidden to wish someone “Shalom” in a bathhouse. Why should we greet each other with “Shalom,” which is one of G-d’s names? Why don’t we just say “Hi!”

Shalom means “perfection,” “completion.” This world is a creation which is inherently lacking. That’s the way it’s meant to be. The whole purpose of this world is to be a place which strives to arrive beyond itself.

The word for “earth” in Hebrew is aretz which comes from the root rutz — “to run.” This world is always running, moving towards its completion — but it can never complete itself. Its completion can only come from outside itself. It can only come from Above. The word for “Heaven” in Hebrew is shamayim. This can also be pronounced shamim — the plural of the word “there.” This world is always “running” to “there” — outside and beyond itself.

This world contains many wonderful things — truth, kindness, love, mercy — but perfection isn’t one of them. And that is why Hashem’s name is Shalom, Perfection. Hashem is the Perfection of all the lacking of this world. Only Hashem can bring this world to its ultimate “there.”

It should be clear then that those wish to bring the world to perfection from within themselves make a grave and fundamental error. History is littered with the victims of those millennial and utopian movements that seek to replace G-d with Man.

What does this all have to do with this week’s Torah portion?

The Midrash tells of a bizarre encounter between Moshe and Korach:

Korach took 250 Jewish leaders and dressed them in four-cornered garments colored all in techelet blue. They stood in front of Moshe and asked: “Does a four-cornered garment all of techelet require tzitzit-fringes, or is it exempt?” Moshe replied “It requires tzitzit.” They began to laugh at him. “If one thread of techelet can exempt a four-cornered garment of any other color, surely a garment which is totally techelet blue should be able to exempt itself!

What does this strange sartorial encounter teach us?

Take a look out the window. If the sky is clear, look as far as you can into the distance. What do you see when you look to the farthest “there” that can be? Endless blue.

In Hebrew, that color is called Techelet. Techelet is the...
PARSHA OVERVIEW

Korach, Datan and Aviram, and 250 leaders of Israel rebel against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. The rebellion results in their being swallowed by the earth. Many resent their death and blame Moshe. Hashem’s “anger” is manifest by a plague which besets the nation, and many thousands perish. Moshe intercedes once again for the people: He instructs Aharon to avenge for them and the plague stops. Then Hashem commands that staffs, each inscribed with the name of one of the tribes, be placed in the Mishkan. In the morning the staff of Levi, bearing Aharon’s name, sprouts, buds, blossoms and yields ripe almonds. This provides Divine confirmation that Levi’s Tribe is chosen for Priesthood and verifies Aharon’s position as kohen gadol, High Priest. The specific duties of the levi’im and kohanim are stated. The kohanim were not to be landowners, but were to receive their sustenance from the tithes and other mandated gifts brought by the people. Also taught in this week’s Parsha are laws of the first fruits, redemption of the firstborn, and other offerings.

HAFTARA

This haftara contains Shmuel’s chastisement, “Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken...” (12:3-4), echoing Moshe’s words in this week’s parsha, “Not one donkey have I taken from them.” (16:15)

Another connection between this haftara and the parsha is Shmuel’s lineage: Shmuel was a scion from the house of Korach, and his prominence was compared to both that of Moshe and Aharon (Tractate Rosh Hashana 25b).

The haftara begins with the nation’s gathering at Gilgal to anoint King Saul and proclaim him King. However, Shmuel chastises the people for requesting a king, as it might indicate deterioration of the unique spiritual level of the nation that needed no king to live in harmony. His rebuke ends with a miracle where he calls out to G-d for rain in a mid-summer day, and a rainstorm begins.

THUNDERSTORM

To demonstrate G-d’s “displeasure” at their desire for a king, Shmuel performs a miracle, bringing a thunderstorm in the middle of the wheat harvest. Why this particular sign?

The people didn’t see anything wrong in requesting a king, as the Torah itself commands the appointing of a monarch (Deuteronomy 17:15). Yet, the Torah commands appointing a king because a king has power to enforce law and order and to maintain observance of Jewish law. Shmuel reproached them as they were then on a very high spiritual plane, and thus they didn’t need a king. On the contrary, appointing a king now might bring the secular influence of neighboring nations, as it would change Israel’s unique legislative and social structure to be like that of any regular nation in the land. Appointing a king should be put off until Torah observance is lax and needs enforcement; then it is acceptable despite its negative ramifications. Shmuel demonstrated this by the rainstorm, as rain is a blessing only when it falls in season; but not in the middle of the harvest.

I DIDN’T KNOW THAT!

Korach’s followers attacked Moshe with their mouths, making fun and provoking rebellion. Their sin was compounded by their lowly spiritual stature compared to that of Moshe. They were punished measure for measure: The ground — the “lowly of lowlies” — opened its “mouth” and swallowed them.

• Abarbanel
color we see when we look at the world without any outside interruption, without any object interposed between our eyes and infinite distance. Techelet is the color of “there.”

Techelet is related to another Hebrew word with an almost identical spelling. That word is tachlit which means “end” and “purpose.” Techelet is the end of sight, of all perception. Techelet is seeing all. And it is also its purpose — its tachlit.

A Thread of Blue

The Torah commands that when wearing a four-cornered garment we attach four threads to each corner. These threads are called tzitzit. The word tzitzit is connected to the Hebrew word meaning “to peek” (l’hatzitz). At what are we peeking when we look at the tzitzit?

Three of the threads of the tzitzit are white, the fourth is supposed to be the color of techelet. The mitzva of tzitzit is a mitzva of sight. We have to see them. When we look at the blue of the tzitzit, we see a reflection of the blue of the Heavens, the blue of Shamayim, the place of all the “theres.”

The Blue and the White

Only one of the strands of the tzitzit, however, is blue; the other three are white.

If the end of all sight is the color blue, the beginning of all sight is white. Take the three primary colors, red, green and blue, and paint them on a wheel. Spin the wheel and what will you see? White. White is the root of all color, where seeing begins.

White is the beginning of sight; techelet is the end, the purpose, of sight.

The world view of Korach was: “We have the technology” within ourselves to perfect the world. We don’t need to run anywhere. This world can be Shamayim; here can be there.

Korach was the first to make the utopian mistake of thinking that within humanity is all that is needed to perfect the world.

Perfection, however, can come only from G-d. Only He who makes peace in the heights can bring peace to us and all Israel.

Re: Mother’s day (Ohrnet Shelach):

A student once asked Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, zatzal, whether it was proper to observe Mother’s (or Father’s Day) Day. Rabbi Weinberg responded that the issue is whether dedicating one day of the year for giving special honor to one’s mother detracts from the rest of the year’s honor. Do children say to themselves that they’ve exempted themselves for the whole year now or not? Rabbi Weinberg felt that in a society where honor for parents is at a low point, Mother’s Day is a nice idea. But for observant Jews, Rabbi Weinberg felt (although he wasn’t sure) that it may have a detrimental effect in lessening their honor the rest of the year.

• Baruch Leff

I heard from a mashgiach of a well-known yeshiva that he endorses a shmiras halashon program in which the participants accept upon themselves to refrain from speaking lashon hara (forbidden speech) for certain hours of the day; the argument that this minimizes the importance of the prohibition during the other hours is rejected. Perhaps the same would apply to mother’s day.

• Name Withheld

Re: Absolute Love of Cartoon History:

I absolutely love your cartoon-history: http://ohr.edu/judaism/concern/concer00.htm

This wonderful characterization is just so easy to look at and understand. I hope I find more sites like Ohr.edu. May you be blessed in your fine work.

• Lillian

More Absolute Love:

Your “Ask the Rabbi” email is the first one I read each time it is posted. I am only sorry that it is not posted more frequently. I absolutely love it!

• Brenda Bronstein
No Agent for Sinning

If a man appoints an agent to perform an act of kiddushin (marriage) or gerushin (divorce) on his behalf, we consider the agent’s action as that of his sender. The concept of agency extends as well to transactions and even to certain mitzvot.

When it comes to committing sin, however, the general rule is that “one cannot be an agent for sin.” Rather, it is the agent, and not his sender, who bears responsibility for the sin because we challenge him with the charge “should one listen to the words of the master (Hashem) or to the words of the disciple (the sender)?”

One of the two exceptions to this rule is the penalty which the Torah imposed on a thief who slaughtered the ox or sheep that he stole. The usual penalty of double compensation for a stolen item is increased to four for a sheep and five for an ox if the thief magnified his guilt by selling or slaughtering the stolen animal. If this slaughtering was done by the thief’s agent, the thief nevertheless bears responsibility for his act and must pay the greater penalty.

What if the thief slaughtered the animal on Shabbat? The gemara (Mesechta Bava Kama 74b) states that a thief who slaughters a stolen ox on Shabbat is exempt from the extra monetary penalty because he has simultaneously committed a sin carrying the death penalty and we apply only the more severe penalty.

But what if his agent slaughtered the animal on Shabbat for him?

In such a case, the thief has not committed the sin of Shabbat violation carrying a death penalty, so he is held responsible for the slaughtering which he commissioned and must pay the extra penalty.

In codifying this last ruling, Rambam (Laws of theft 3:6) writes that the agent was commissioned to slaughter the animal and the agent did so on Shabbat. Mishneh Lamelech, one of the leading commentators on Rambam, infers from his language that the thief is only held responsible if he did not commission that the animal be slaughtered specifically on Shabbat. The Shabbat violation then does not relate to him and has no impact on his financial obligation. Should the thief, however, commission the agent to slaughter on Shabbat specifically, we can no longer consider the agent as acting on the thief’s behalf because of the aforementioned general rule that one cannot be an agent where sin is involved. In such a case he will not be considered an agent even in regard to the slaughtering penalty.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE

A man proposes kiddushin to a woman and informs her that he is giving her a silver coin which she subsequently discovers is really gold. Or he informs her that he is a poor man and she subsequently discovers that he is wealthy.

Rabbi Shimon’s position is that if the opposite were the case and she received less than she was promised, the kiddushin would be invalid. But where she received a more precious metal or a more prosperous husband, we do not consider her to have been duped to her detriment and the kiddushin is valid.

The other sages, however, disagree. They contend that any deviation from his presentation renders the kiddushin invalid. Their approach, which is the one established as halacha, begs an explanation. Why should a woman be disappointed in receiving gold instead of silver, or a rich husband instead of a poor one?

In regard to the first question of precious metals, Tosefot already points out that the woman may have an ornament of silver which requires some silver to complete it, and she may therefore prefer silver to gold despite the higher commercial value of the latter. From the gemara it appears that even Rabbi Shimon considers gold to silver to be a deviation for this reason.

But what about wealth for poverty?

Rambam, in his commentary on our mishna, offers a general explanation for the position of the Sages by suggesting that perhaps she prefers the lesser thing or situation for some reason. Since he does not speculate as to what those reasons might be, he leaves us to use our imagination as to why a woman might rather marry a poor man than a rich one.

On a purely human level, she might be wary of a radical change in her lifestyle as a result of “marrying money.” On a religious level, the great teachers of ethics have pointed out that wealth, and the pride which usually accompanies it, is a greater danger to spiritual security than poverty, so that a woman who consented to marry a poor man may not want a rich one.

• Kiddushin 48b

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PARSHA Q&A?

1. Why did Datan and Aviram join Korach?
2. Why is Yaakov’s name not mentioned in Korach’s genealogy?
3. What motivated Korach to rebel?
4. What did Korach and company do when Moshe said that a techelet garment needs tzizit?
5. What warning did Moshe give the rebels regarding the offering of the incense?
6. Did Moshe want to be the kohen gadol?
7. What event did Korach not foresee?
8. What does the phrase rav lachem mean in this week’s Parsha? (Give two answers.)
9. What lands are described in this week’s Parsha as “flow- ing with milk and honey”?
10. When did Moshe have the right to take a donkey from the Jewish Community?
11. What did Korach do the night before the final confrontation?
12. What sin did Datan and Aviram have in common specifically with Goliath?
13. Before what age is a person not punished by the Heavenly Court for his sins?
14. What happens to one who rebels against the institution of kehuna? Who suffered such a fate?
15. Why specifically was incense used to stop the plague?
16. Why was Aharon’s staff placed in the middle of the other 11 staffs?
17. Aharon’s staff was kept as a sign. What did it signify?
18. Why are the 24 gifts for the kohanim taught in this week’s Parsha?
19. Who may eat the kodshei kodashim (most holy sacrifices) and where must they be eaten?
20. Why is Hashem’s covenant with the kohanim called “a covenant of salt”?

PARSHA Q&A!

1. 16:1 - Because they were his neighbors.
2. 16:1 - Yaakov prayed that his name not be mentioned in connection with Korach’s rebellion (Bereishit 49:6).
3. 16:1 - Korach was jealous that Elizafan ben Uziel was appointed as leader of the family of Kehat instead of himself.
4. 16:1 - They laughed.
5. 16:6 - Only one person would survive.
6. 16-6 - Yes.
7. 16:7 - That his sons would repent.
8. 16:7,3 - Rav lachem appears twice in this week’s Parsha. It means “much more than enough greatness have you taken for yourself (16:3)” and “It is a great thing I have said to you (16:17).”
9. 16:12 - Egypt and Canaan.
10. 16:15 - When he traveled from Midian to Egypt.
11. 16:19 - Korach went from tribe to tribe in order to rally support for himself.
12. 16:27 - They all blasphemed.
13. 16:27 - Twenty years old.
14. 17:5 - He is stricken with tzara’at, as was King Uziyahu (Divrei HaYamim II 26:16-19).
15. 17:13 - Because the people were deprecating the incense offering, saying that it caused the death of two of Aharon’s sons and also the death of 250 of Korach’s followers. Therefore, Hashem demonstrated that the incense offering was able to avert death, and it is sin, not incense, which causes death.
16. 17:21 - So people would not say that Aharon’s staff bloomed because Moshe placed it closer to the Shechina.
17. 17:25 - That only Aharon and his children were selected for the kehuna.
18. 18:8 - Since Korach claimed the kehuna, the Torah emphasizes Aharon’s and his descendants’ rights to kehuna by recording the gifts given to them.
19. 18:10 - Male kohanim may eat them and only in the azara (fore-court of the Beit Hamikdash).
20. 18:19 - Just as salt never spoils, so this covenant will never be rescinded.

KASHA! (KASHA MEANS “QUESTION”)

How would you answer this question on the Parsha?

Farrel Werner <fwernieone@aol.com> asked:

Dear Rabbi,

What did the people mean when they told Moshe, “You killed Hashem’s People?” (17:6) Obviously, Moshe didn’t kill them. Korach’s followers died by Divine decree: The ground swallowed some and fire from Heaven killed the others.

Dear Farrel Werner,

Those who complained reasoned as follows: Although the first-born lost their rights as kohanim (priests), they should retain the right to serve as leviim. Thus, they felt the testMoshe had proposed, that his detractors offer incense, was unfair. The incense offering was designated specifically for kohanim, so it wasn’t a true test for those who deserved at least to serve in the lesser capacity of levi.

* Based on Ramban

Do you have a KASHA? Write to kasha@ohr.edu with your questions on any Parsha!
**PRAYER IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE**

**From: Michelle in Los Angeles**

*Dear Rabbi,*

*Why do we say prayers from a prayer book? Why can’t each person just say their own prayers?*

**Dear Michelle,**

Great question! I’d like to reply by sending you an essay written by a friend, Doron Kornbluth.

The television screen zooms in on an old man. The narrator tells us that he is an unhappy individual who would love nothing more in life than to sit and read. Unfortunately for him, he has a nasty wife who berates him constantly. His boss yells at him. People honk at him. He has been so crushed by the years of abuse that, at this point, even the slamming of a door makes him cringe. The stress is too much. The noise is too much. No one will leave him alone. Finally, he can’t take it anymore. “Can’t everyone just go away?” he exclaims angrily, “just go away!”

This man is an employee of the Library of Congress. One day, when he is working in the deepest vaults of the library, many floors below ground level, he somehow gets locked inside the vault and falls asleep. When he wakes up and manages to extricate himself from the vault and return to the main office, he notices that he is alone. Moving into the large reading room, he notices the same thing. He walks out into the street and again not a soul is to be found. He peruses the book stacks of the greatest library in the world and makes large piles of what will happily occupy the rest of his life. When he takes the first book down in order to open it and begin reading, a small smile forms on his face. His dream has come true — he can spend his remaining years alone, reading.

As he turns to find a place to sit, the camera slowly zooms in on his face. Within moments, his glasses accidentally slide off his face, fall to the ground and smash into a thousand pieces. The narrator tells us that without them, he is blind. It dawns on him and us that our protagonist will never be able to see — or read — again. He is stuck in the Library of Congress, helpless and completely alone.

In a very different venue than the remarkable 1960’s Twilight Zone episode I’ve just described, picture the following. A woman confides to her therapist that although she married the exact man she wanted to, he was the wrong man. Noticing the confused look on the therapist’s face, she asks:

“Why do we say prayers from a prayer book? Why can’t each person just say their own prayers?”

Disturbed? Bewildered? Scared? Actually, the man is happy. He realizes that his prayers have been answered. He now has all the time in the world, with absolutely no distractions and no one to bother him. He can sit and read...and read...and read. With the energy and enthusiasm of a child, he peruses the book stacks of the greatest library in the world and makes large piles of what will happily occupy the rest of his life. When he takes the first book down in order to open it and begin reading, a small smile forms on his face. His dream has come true — he can spend his remaining years alone, reading.

It is crucial to pray to G-d personally in order to deepen our private connections to G-d, and feel His presence in our struggles, victories and failures. And yet, with modern lives often lacking clarity, the traditional prayers are vital as well, because they help us realize what we should want.

The truth is that often we really don’t know what is good for us. In both stories above, the characters involved wished for something, got what they wanted, and yet ended up considerably unhappier than they had originally been!

The answer is that we can and should pray to G-d directly, in our own words, beseeching the Almighty for what we deeply desire. One rabbi I know often mentions that his mother prayed throughout the day: “Please, G-d, let me get to work on time,” “Please, G-d, keep my children healthy,” “Please, G-d, let my challahs come out well...” Even within the traditional prayers themselves, there are places for individuals to insert their private petitions. Such from-the-heart prayer gives expression to our fears and longings, and, perhaps more importantly, helps create a personal connection to G-d, which is the basis of all true spiritual growth.

But we don’t always know what we need. Perhaps this is why, about 2500 years ago, the Jewish sages instituted formalized prayer. While the Matriarchs and Patriarchs had the greatness and clarity to form their own prayers, later generations needed help focusing on what is really important. If left to my own devices, my prayers might end up sounding more like a loan application than the pleas of a Jew speaking with his Creator to gain meaning and purpose. Without the structure of traditional prayers, would I regularly ask for peace, wisdom, or brotherhood — all cornerstones of Jewish life and religion?

Doron Kornbluth edited Jewish Matters and co-edited (with his wife Sarah Tikvah) Jewish Women Speak. (www.jewishmatters.com)