

Search All Issues

Community
Directory

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Qualified to lead? Think again

Torah study

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Korach/Numbers 16:1-18:32

The secret behind great nations, corporations and organizations often lies in how they choose their first leaders. The genesis of every group lays the foundation for the future. If the foundation is weak, the building will fall.

Probably the most fundamental difference between the society we live in and those that preceded it is the way our leaders are chosen. Democracy allows the judgment of the majority to rule in the choice of a leader out of respect for each individual and in the hope that this is the method to choose the best person for the job with a minimum of corruption and bad judgment.

The Jewish people's leaders were chosen for them by God. But even with an endorsement from the creator, Moses and Aaron did not have an easy time. In Parshat Korach we learn about the rebellion of Korach and his congregation. Korach, a member of the priestly tribe of Levi, challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron and their teachings of Torah. He gathered a group of 250 supporters, princes and congregational leaders who ultimately were punished by being swallowed up in a pit in a miraculous judgment by God.

What was so bad about Korach's rebellion? What brought on such a horrible punishment? He protested the fact that Moses and Aaron were developing into the clear leaders of Israel and said: "All the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above the Lord's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3)

What is so wrong with this? Isn't there legitimacy in questioning? Doesn't the Torah respect every individual? The answer lies in the Torah's descriptive wording of Korach's actions: vayikach Korach, and Korach separated himself. The use of the word vayikach, literally "and he took," is strange. Why not write vayibadel, the usual way to express separation?

The Mussar masters (an ethical movement yeshivot in the late 19th- and early 20th-century Lithuania) respond by addressing the nature of Korach's motivation to be a leader. Korach was not just a rabble-rouser; he was one of the greatest leaders and scholars of the Jewish people. How did such a great man end up destroying his life and the lives of 250 others in one of the greatest tragedies recorded in the Torah?

The secret of his sin lies in the word vayikach. Korach took for himself. This inward focus is the fundamental difference between Korach and Moses. It led Korach blindly to his own ultimate destruction. Moses, on the other hand, didn't directly respond to Korach's complaints. He simply said, let's let God decide for himself. He wasn't interested in maintaining his position if God didn't want him

STORIES IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURES

What's really
happening on campus?
Community
celebrates marriage

A caring closet

COMMUNITY

'Under God' to stay
Rabbi released from
jail

NATION

Reform movement
considers sex abuse
case

U.N. to hold anti-
Semitism conference
Library exhibit

WORLD

Anne Frank
remembered
Israeli, Palestinian
partner

ISRAEL

'Who is a Jew?'
Sharon cleared of
bribery charges

SPECIAL SECTION

Wonderful Wedding
Happy couples share
their advice

OPINION

Editorial - Heavenly
matches

Commentary -

Bush's other war

Commentary - Needs

of Arab education

Voices - Single

fathers need nurturing,
too

In the Mail - Letters
to the Editor

ARTS

Oriental, Mizrahi
music

BUSINESS

Sliced meats by the
pound and bagels from
New York

People on the move

COMING UP

This Week

MILESTONES

B'nai Mitzvah

Engagements

Obituaries

SENIORS

Events

to stay on.

When we choose our leaders we cannot know the true character of the candidates; we cannot see into the depths of their souls. We can't tell if they want to give or if they want to take.

When God chose Moses to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, Moses did not want the job. He had a speech impediment and did not feel that he could communicate effectively even with Pharaoh. He certainly did not imagine that he could be the inspiring leader who would sweep a nation enslaved for 210 years off their feet and out of Egypt.

Moses was the person who least wanted the job, "a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth." (Numbers 12:3) That is what God looked for in a leader.

That's what we too must look for in a leader: selfless devotion and humility, unbounded concern for everyone else, and the capacity to understand the varied needs of the constituency. A true leader thinks of what can be given, not what can be had.

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[Home](#)