



Antidotes to Envy • Parshat Korach

Korach, the rebellious rabble-rouser who challenges Moses' and Aaron's leadership in this week's parsha, is identified in *Pirkei Avot* as the paradigm of someone who instigates a dispute not for the sake of Heaven (5:17). What exactly were his motivations? Rashi suggests that Korach was driven by envy. Korach, according to the midrash Rashi cites, was upset that his cousin Elzaphan was appointed the leader of the children of Kohath, even though Korach's father was older than Elzaphan's. Korach was also envious of the higher statuses of his other cousins, Moses and Aaron.

Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher (1255-1340) depicts envy's stark dangers on our psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being. He includes a blunt and pessimistic prognosis: "[envy] is a terrible trait and is a disease that has no remedy." Culling from another teaching from *Pirkei Avot*, "Envy, lust and the pursuit of honor drive a person out of the world" (4:21), he describes how Korach's envy literally removed him from this world. He was swallowed by the pits of the earth, never to be seen again.

Korach was green with envy. This imagery may shed light on another Midrash, quoted by Rashi, that Korach approached Moses with a garment entirely made of *tekhelet*, usually translated as blue wool, and asked him if it was subject to the obligation of ritual fringes, *tzitzit*. *Tekhelet*, according to Rashi on Exodus 25:4, is not blue, but *yarok*, green. If so, this Midrash may be symbolically portraying Korach as physically wrapped in envy. He approaches Moses with

hostile cleverness, while subconsciously parading his true feelings.

Despite envy's dangerous allure and severe consequences, Rabbeinu Bahya's conclusion that there is no remedy may be too fatalistic. Dr. Robert Leahy conceptualizes envy as a complex emotion and outlines an approach to treatment using principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). One strategy includes targeting unhelpful or irrational thoughts, known in CBT as cognitive distortions, and challenging them with alternative and adaptive attitudes.

A relevant example Leahy provides is "unfair comparisons," which is when "you compare yourself exclusively with those doing better than you—often the leading people." As an alternative mindset, Leahy suggests that instead of comparing yourself with the person performing at the top, it is more useful to, "...try comparing yourself to the average person or to people in the bottom 10%. In fact, why do you even have to compare yourself at all?"

Perhaps this is what Moses' meant by his response to Korach: "Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you direct access to perform the duties of God's Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that [God] has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?" (Numbers 16:9-10). Instead of looking upward at Moses, Aaron, or Elzaphan and making a social comparison, Korach

should have looked at his position of prominence in relation to the rest of the Israelites.

Gersonides adds another strategy: satisfaction with the qualities with which God had graced him. Wealth, as defined by Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot*, is being happy with your own portion (4:1). “Envy,” writes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “is the failure to understand the principle of creation as set out in Genesis 1, that everything has its place in the scheme of things. Each of us has our own task and our own blessings, and we are each loved and cherished by God” (“The Structure of the Good

Society,” *Covenant & Conversation*). It is this lack of faith in God’s plan, Rabbi Baruch Simon describes in his *Imrei Baruch*, which was the true root of Korach’s rebellion.

While Korach was consumed and destroyed by his envy, we do not have to be doomed to the same fate. We can meditate on our blessings and believe strongly that God grants us everything we need to fulfill our mission in life. It is this faith in God that God has faith in us that generates not envy, but equanimity, gratitude, and hope.

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Character Challenge: To inculcate faith in God and faith in ourselves that we have everything we need, follow Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe’s advice to concentrate intently and intensely on the morning blessing of “*sh’asah li kol tzarhi*” – that God “provides me with all my needs.”

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “The greatest challenge of any society is how to contain the universal, inevitable phenomenon of envy: the desire to have what belongs to someone else. Envy lies at the heart of violence. It was envy that led Cain to murder Abel, made Abraham and Isaac fear for their life because they were married to beautiful women, led Joseph’s brothers to hate him and sell him into slavery. It is envy that leads to adultery, theft and false testimony, and it was envy of their neighbors that led the Israelites time and again to abandon God in favor of the pagan practices of the time.” (“The Structure of the Good Society,” *Covenant & Conversation*).