

A Muse: Korach

“They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, “it is too much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and God is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of God?”

Commentaries through the ages have tried to get to the core of the rebellion which Korach was staging against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Was it Korach's contention that since we were all at Sinai, everyone heard the “word” of God and thus everyone is holy and not in need of any intercessors? Or perhaps it was his position that since all the Hebrews heard the word of God why should everyone but the Levites be excluded from work in the Temple? Perhaps Korach's party was seeking an end to the special status of the Priests that was separating the people from contact with God? While all of these suggestions are valid the heart of the rebellion can also be understood by examining the perception of “holiness” within the context of the rebellion.

Interestingly, two giants that took opposing positions relative to understanding “holiness” were Prof. Yeshayhu Leibovitz and Harav Kook. While Prof. Leibovitz had a profound respect for Harav Kook he disagreed with him as to the true meaning of kedusha. Leibovitz understood kedusha to be “sociological-transcendental” as apposed to Harav Kook who saw it as Immanent-Ontological”.

According to Leibovitz, kedusha is the result of the normative performance and observance of halacha. It is the observance which sets the Jewish people apart and makes us holy. For example, if one were to wish to make a room holy, he would have to perform certain rites, and fulfill certain obligations for it to be considered holy. Rules would have to be established that would limit who can enter the room, when it can be accessed and by whom. Similarly a book takes on holiness by the reverence to which it is accorded. People handle it carefully, they kiss it they don't let it drop to the floor and they don't pile on to it books of lesser importance. The holy man is someone who stands out, who doesn't conform to the norms of society whether it is in dress, haircut or other observable behaviors.

“Holiness” of the Harav Kook variation, immanent-ontological, assumes that the object itself has innate holiness and is independently holy regardless if someone so designates it as such. If a person doesn’t accord a certain behavior to a holy place or object, the objects intrinsic holiness isn’t diminished, rather the person becomes diminished.

It is around these two polar concepts of holiness that the entire brouhaha of Korach’s rebellion revolves. Leibovitz interprets holiness within the context of it being up to man to deem something Holy. He basis this on the parsha of tzitzit when the text says “v’asitem et kol mitzvotai v’hetem kedoshim...” Holiness is contingent upon man’s behavior. Holiness is a function of obligation and performance. Korach, rejected this premise by saying that a priori the entire community is holy, whether or not mitzvot are performed. Harav Kook rejects this interpretation of Korach’s rebellion and claims that it was their rejection of holiness as immanent-ontological that was their sin. They sought to break out of the intrinsic nature of the proscribed holiness by appropriating holiness to areas that weren’t part of the master plan.