

Has there ever been **UNITY AMONG US?**

The arguments that divide us can be traced all the way back to Korach's rebellion | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WHAT DOES JEWISH UNITY LOOK LIKE? IT'S AN incredibly simple, but important, question. The only recorded occurrence of unity among us took place at the time that we were encamped at Har Sinai (Mount Sinai) preparing to receive the Torah, where we are described¹ as being *k'ish echad, b'leiv echad* (like one man with one heart). Some of our Sages point to other periods in our history where unity – that elusive unicorn – supposedly existed, but even that, as we'll see, is debatable. But, if we don't know what that unity looks like, then how can we really be expected to achieve it?

On a recent walk home from shul on an unseasonably warm winter Johannesburg Shabbos evening, I raised the question with

Rabbi Moshe Kurtstag, Rosh Beth Din of the Beth Din of Johannesburg, and I'd like to share his novel perspective. Rabbi Kurtstag maintains that there hasn't been unity among the Jewish people since the famous rebellion of Korach against Moshe and his brother, Aharon (which, to put this in perspective, wasn't very long after those brief moments of unity that we experienced at Har Sinai). Rabbi Kurtstag believes that Korach actually added a new trait to our Jewish DNA – a gene of *machloikes* (argument), where people fight simply for the sake of fighting. When I noted that there are Sages² who suggest that the entire foundation for the Second Beis HaMikdash (Temple) was the unity that existed among

the Jewish people at that time (and the absence of that unity the cause of its destruction), Rabbi Kurtstag shrugged his shoulders, noting that the writings of the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets) are full of examples of *machloikes* – deep and large divisions that resulted in many civil wars between Jews – and that rabbinic literature, from the very beginning until the present day, is replete with appeals for unity and the setting aside of *sinas chinum* (hatred for others based on no good reason). Accordingly, he believes there has not been unity among the Jewish people since the days of Korach and that only the *Moshiach* (the messiah) himself will be able to bring about unity among the Jewish people.

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So, it's worth revisiting the legendary and well-known dispute between Korach and his first cousins, Moshe and Aharon, which set the paradigm for everything that has followed. The episode opens with an unusual verse: "Korach, ben Yitzhar, ben Kehas, ben Levi, took, and Dasan and Aviram b'nei Eli'av and Ohn ben Peles, b'nei Reuven."³ Although the Torah explicitly states that 250 men joined Korach in his rebellion against Moshe and Aharon, only Dasan, Aviram and someone named

what exactly did Korach take? He "took" counsel. In other words, this was not some spur of the moment decision on the part of Korach. This was a well-planned and thoughtfully executed coup – the very first in the history of the Jewish people – but, unfortunately for all of us, by no means the last.

And our Sages are quick to point out that the motivations which brought about this coup were entirely self-serving and selfish.⁶ This wasn't a dispute that was

20, but in the case of Korach and his assembly, Hashem destroyed even infants.⁹

When this coup so tragically and devastatingly falls apart, however, we're left with a mystery¹⁰: the name of Ohn ben Peles is nowhere to be found. And, although Dasan and Aviram are singled out, as they were in the beginning, as perishing alongside Korach when Hashem opened up the earth to swallow the whole lot of them, Ohn ben Peles, who was likewise present from the start of the coup, is strangely missing.¹¹ So who was this Ohn ben Peles and what was his fate?

Since the Torah mentions Ohn alongside Dasan and Aviram – and fails to mention by name any of the other 250 men who joined in Korach's rebellion, we can begin by considering whether there was some connection between these three men. And almost immediately we see in the very first verse of the parsha that what they shared in common was that they were all from the tribe of Reuven¹² – which Rashi notes¹³ was where most of Korach's followers came from. As we all know, there were 12 tribes – so why did the majority of Korach's followers come from one particular tribe? Rashi explains¹⁴ that it was because they were neighbours. Korach, who was from the family of Kehas, encamped to the south of the Mishkan¹⁵ (the Tabernacle) and the tribe of Reuven also encamped there¹⁶. And our Sages learn from this: "Woe to the rasha (the wicked one) and woe to his neighbour."¹⁷

The Talmud¹⁸ brings the solution to the mysterious disappearance of Ohn, teaching that the wife of Ohn ben Peles managed to save him. How? When she heard about his involvement with Korach's coup, she said to him: "What difference does it make to you regarding who the rabbi is – who the ruler is? In either case, you'll still be a mere student." So Ohn replied to his wife: "What can I do? I participated in their counsel and I swore to them that, if they'll call me, I'll come." She then said (aloud to herself, as we'll understand in a moment): "I know that they're all holy men, because it's written¹⁹: 'For the entire assembly, all of them, are holy.'" Why such

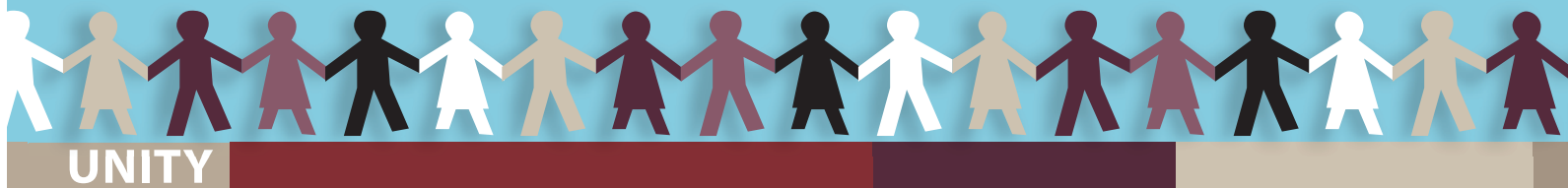
“RABBI KURTSTAG MAINTAINS THAT THERE HASN'T BEEN UNITY AMONG THE JEWISH PEOPLE SINCE THE FAMOUS REBELLION OF KORACH... AND THAT KORACH ACTUALLY ADDED A NEW TRAIT TO OUR JEWISH DNA – A GENE OF MACHLOIKES (ARGUMENT), WHERE PEOPLE FIGHT SIMPLY FOR THE SAKE OF FIGHTING.”

Ohn are explicitly named. And lest we think that Korach and the men who joined him in this rebellion were from the proletariat – from the masses – seeking to bring about a redistribution of wealth and power, the Torah itself informs us that these men were the princes, the leaders of the assembly – "anshei sheim" men who had great names and who were renowned. These men were rabbis.

And the parsha proceeds to tell us that these men, these rabbis, gathered against Moshe and against Aharon.⁴ And one of our Sages⁵ explains the meaning of the odd language of this opening verse that "Korach...took". Korach and his kind were takers – the polar opposite of givers. But,

l'sheim sh'mayim – for the sake of Heaven – for the sake of Truth and truly serving Hashem or His people. In fact, it was just the opposite. This was a dispute about power and honour – it was a dispute rooted in personal interests and personal gain, a power grab – and it resulted in thousands perishing and even more being harmed.⁷ And Rashi even admonishes us⁸ regarding this incident to come and see how terrible machloikes is because even the Beis Din shal matah (the earthly court) will only punish someone who has reached the age of maturity (bar or bat mitzvah) and even the Beis Din shal malah (the heavenly court) will only punish someone who has reached the age of





a strange response on her part? Rashi interprets her statement as though she was thinking out loud. In other words, knowing that all of the followers of Korach were modest and holy, she could thus plan accordingly that they would not dare enter into her tent to fetch Ohn if she sat outside it with her hair uncovered. So she told Ohn: "Turn back because I will save you." And she filled Ohn with wine until he became drunk and then put him inside the tent, after which she sat down by the entrance to the tent and proceeded to let down her hair. Anyone who came to call Ohn would see that her head was uncovered and would then turn back in the direction from which they had come.

The Talmud continues: Meanwhile, the wife of Korach said to him: "Do you see what Moshe has done? He's the King and he appointed his brother, Aharon, to be the Kohein Gadol, and the sons of his brother to be the Deputy Kohanim! If someone brings terumah (gifts prescribed by the Torah), Moshe says: Let it be for the Kohein! If someone brings ma'aser rishton (the first tithe) which is due to the Levi – and Korach was a Levi – Moshe says: Give a tenth (of the first tithe) to the Kohein!" And she continued, "And another thing, he has had your hair cut and made sport of you because he is jealous of your hair!" Finally, Korach responded to his wife: "Moshe also cut his own hair!"

So she replied to him: "He only did it to himself in order to achieve his goal of making you look bad!"

The Talmud concludes by stating that there is a verse from Mishlei²⁰ (Proverbs) which applies to these two women: "The wise among women, she builds her house," this applies to the wife of Ohn ben Peles, "but the foolish one tears it down with her hands", this applies to the wife of Korach. And we should note also that when Dasan and Aviram stood defiantly in the face of Moshe's attempt to spare them from their impending doom, they stood at the entrance to their tents – and the Torah explicitly states that their wives stood with them!²¹ Some midrashim²² contain even more details regarding what transpired with Ohn:

“THIS WAS NOT SOME SPUR OF THE MOMENT DECISION ON THE PART OF KORACH; IT WAS A WELL-PLANNED AND THOUGHTFULLY EXECUTED COUP – THE VERY FIRST IN THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE – BUT, UNFORTUNATELY FOR ALL OF US, BY NO MEANS THE LAST.”

At the time that the earth opened to swallow Korach's assembly, the bed on which Ohn ben Peles was still sleeping – seemingly from still being intoxicated – began to rock and then move towards the opening that Hashem had made in the earth. Ohn's wife, however, grabbed hold of the bed and said: "Master of the Universe! My husband made a solemn vow never again to take part in disagreements. You, who live and endure to all eternity, can punish him in the future if he ever violates his vow." G-d heard her plea, and Ohn was saved.

She then requested that Ohn to go to Moshe, but he refused, for he was too ashamed to look into Moshe's face after he had rebelled against him. So his wife then went to see Moshe. When Moshe saw how Ohn's wife wept and lamented bitterly, she was brought in to see him and told him everything that had happened. He then accompanied her to her home, at the entrance of which he cried out: "Ohn ben Peles come forward. G-d will forgive you for your sins."

It's because of this miraculous deliverance, as well as the fact that he spent the rest of his life repenting for his involvement in this terrible uprising, that this former follower of Korach was referred to as Ohn, which means "penitent", the son of Peles, which means "miracle". For his true name was N'mu'eil ben Eli'av. And the

name Eli'av should ring a bell, as we just mentioned it above. For Ohn ben Peles was none other than the brother²³ of Dasan and Aviram, quite possibly the most famous pair of troublemaking brothers in our history and the model for all those who make machloikes and bring Jewish communities to ruin.

As Rabbi Kurtstag explained, machloikes is now very much in our genes – always lurking there beneath the surface in every cell in our bodies. We must, therefore, make a constant and concerted effort to put aside our personal agendas and politics in a constant effort to come together as a community. May Hashem protect us from all those who seek to create machloikes like Korach and his followers, from all those whose motives are selfish and self-serving, from all those who seek to divide, to alienate, and ultimately, to destroy – and may He help us to recognise our own true motives in every situation so that we may never suffer the terrible fate of Korach and his followers. **IL**

¹Rashi on Shemos 19:2 d"h, vayichan sham yisrael

²See e.g., Sifsei Chaim

³Bamidbar 16:1

⁴See Id. 16:3

⁵See Ramban on Bamidbar 16:1

⁶See e.g., Pirkei Avos 5:20 (in some additions, the number of the mishnah varies)

⁷See Bamidbar 16:33, 35; 17:14

⁸See Rashi on Bamidbar 16:27 d"h u'n'sheihem u'v'neihem v'tafam

⁹See Bamidbar 16:27

¹⁰I am indebted to Rabbi Yaakov Bieler's drasha "The Disappearing Act of Ohn ben Peles" for this observation

¹¹See Bamidbar 16:27

¹²See Id. 16:1

¹³See Rashi on Bamidbar 16:1 d"h v'dasan va'aviram

¹⁴Id.

¹⁵See Bamidbar 3:29

¹⁶See Id. 2:10

¹⁷See Rashi on Bamidbar 16:1 d"h v'dasan va'aviram; see also Negaim 12:6.

¹⁸Sanhedrin 109b based upon Rashi's comments

¹⁹Bamidbar 16:3

²⁰Mishlei 14:1

²¹See Bamidbar 16:26-27

²²See e.g., Ginzberg, Louis, "Legends of the Jews Volume 3"

²³See Bamidbar 26:9