KORACH: The First Influencers

On ben Pelet is a mysterious figure in the Torah. We know almost nothing about him. This week's parashah mentions him in the context of Korach's rebellion: On is a leader of the tribe of Reuben who joins Korach to challenge Moshe's political role. After they make their case against Moshe, the anti-Moshe coalition gets ready for the next day: in the morning it will be decided –by divine providence– who the true leader of Israel is. The following day, the Divine Presence reveals itself and confirms Moshe's appointment. Korach, his henchmen, and his followers were punished and lost their lives. The Torah names those who died in the uprising, but On ben Pelet is not listed among the dead. Why? What happened to On?

The Influence of a Wife

The Sages explain that behind Korach's rebellion stood his wife. It was she who, out of ambition, jealousy, and envy, pushed him to rise up against Moshe. She didn't merely encourage his rebellious thoughts: she egged him on, day after day. She filled his head with words that fed his resentment and his pride, making him feel that Moshe and Aharon had taken from him what he deserved. According to the Midrashim, this influencer kept telling him how unfair it was that his cousin held all the power, while he –every bit as important, and of distinguished lineage– held no leadership at all. She awakened in him a craving for greatness, until Korach could no longer see reality clearly. The ambition she cultivated in him was, in the end, what led to his ruin.

By contrast, the Midrash tells us that On ben Pelet was saved by his wife. After Korach and his followers confronted Moshe, On came home and told his wife that the question of leadership would be settled the next day, and that he would try to become one of the people's leaders. But his wife was not impressed by the prospect of political prestige. She acted with

intelligence and common sense: when her husband laid out his plans, she discouraged him from siding against Moshe. And she proceeded not only with common sense, but with a great deal of strategy. First, she convinced him that no matter who replaced Moshe, he would still end up in the background. His role wouldn't change: Korach was only using him.

The Strategy of On's Wife

Though On agreed with his wife, he told her he still had to show up, because he had already committed to Korach and his friends. Seeing that On was set on going through with his plan, she said nothing –but she decided to take the matter into her own hands.

What did On's wife do? She most likely kept him awake as long as possible that night. And before he went to sleep, she gave him a very strong wine to drink, which left him sleeping far longer than usual. In the morning, when his friends came to fetch him and wanted to enter the house to wake him, On's wife deliberately let her hair down –something a married Jewish woman did only in front of her husband– and, out of modesty, the men stayed waiting outside. So they asked her to wake him instead.

I imagine they must have shouted to her from outside the tent that it was late, that the revolt was about to begin. And she must have answered: "Don't worry. You go on ahead –I'll wake my husband and he'll be right there with you." And so she kept her husband asleep a couple of hours more: exactly the time needed for the tragic revolt to run its course. With great intelligence and feminine influence, she saved his life!

Korach's wife fed her husband's ambition to rebel against Moshe and led him to his destruction; On's wife used all her intelligence, her charm, and her influence to save him. And she succeeded.