

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Korach

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Eliyohu Meir *bas* Avrohom *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The Sin – and Punishment – of Korach and His Followers

The Questions

On the face of it, this *parshah* is comprised of a series of issues and occurrences, one after the other, each of which poses astounding perplexities.

Here we have a man and his followers who not too long ago were witness to the spectacular events surrounding the deliverance from Egypt, at which time they beheld the unprecedented miracles Hashem wrought through His faithful servant Moshe. Shortly thereafter, they stood with the rest of the nation by Mt. Sinai, heard the voice of Hashem, and observed the transmission of His Torah through Moshe.

How, then – only a short time later – did they rise up in rebellion against Moshe's authority? Not only that, but – as the Ramban states (*Bamidbar 16:29*) – they denied the miraculous events of the Exodus (in which they took part)! The picture deteriorates even more, as the Yerushalmi records (*Sanhedrin 10:1*) that Korach's heresy expanded to other areas as well, including denial of the Divine origin of the Torah and the prophecy of Moshe (even though Korach and his followers stood at Mt. Sinai)!

Keep in mind that these were not your garden-variety rogue rabble-rousers. On the contrary, the participants in the rebellion were men of great stature, lofty and spiritual-minded, including members of the tribal leadership featured in the sacrificial dedication of the Altar. The question, then, becomes that much thornier, as men of greatness and virtue seem to have descended to the (spiritual and literal) depths.

The reactions among those who did not participate in the uprising are no less perplexing. They beheld all of the aforementioned wondrous happenings, and even more – the very public and chilling spectacle of the fate that befell the ill-fated movement, as the perpetrators were either consumed by Heavenly fire or hurled alive toward the netherworld through the mouth of the earth. The logical conclusion to be drawn, at the very least, should have been that it was not prudent to start up with these particular leaders. Yet what happened on the heels of these earth-shattering events? “On the morrow, the entire congregation of B’nei Yisrael complained against Moshe and Aharon, saying: ‘You caused the deaths of Hashem’s nation!’” (*Bamidbar 17:6*). Sure enough, retribution was swift; close to 15,000 died in the ensuing plague (*ibid. v. 14*).

How are we to account for the almost inexplicable behavior of the many (otherwise righteous) characters in these episodes? The first hint, perhaps, may be gleaned from the following Mishnah in Sanhedrin (*10:3*), which discusses their ultimate fate:

עַדֵּת קָרַח אֵינָהּ עֹתִידָהּ לָעֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ" בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. "וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל" לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא; דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא.
רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אָמַר, עֲלֵיהֶם הוּא אָמַר: "ד' מְמִית וּמְחַיֶּה מוֹרִיד שְׂאוֹל וְיָעֵל."

“The congregation of Korach will not rise in the future, as it says (*Bamidbar 16:33*): ‘The ground covered over

them' – (referring to their demise) in this world; 'And they were lost from amidst the assembly' – (even) in the World to Come. Such is the opinion of R' Akiva. R' Eliezer says: Concerning (Korach's congregation), it states (*Shmuel I 2:6*): 'Hashem causes death, then resurrects; He brings down to the netherworld, but (subsequently) effects their ascent.'”

The Answer – *Hashkafah* (Outlook) Matters

According to one opinion, at least, Korach's followers retain their share in the World to Come. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (*109b*) cites a further teaching concurring with R' Eliezer's view (that they do have a portion in the World to Come), which applies yet another verse to their situation: "I was led astray, like a lost sheep..." (*Tehillim 119:176*). We see, then, that at the root of their precipitous decline was a "mistake" of sorts; a faulty calculation is what "led them astray."

R' Isaac Sher, venerated Rosh Yeshivah of Slabodka, develops this theme and arrives at some rather astounding conclusions. He bases his deductions on the words of the Rambam (*Commentary to the Mishnah, end of maseches Berachos*), who advances a novel and profound thought. There are times, the Rambam writes, when an individual may be brought to sin *in order* to incur punishment. Hashem's judgment is flawless, but mortals usually cannot comprehend the awesome depth of precisely calculated Divine Justice. However, when Hashem deems it fitting, a person may be subject to this manner of retribution, wherein *the sin itself is the retribution*.

What this means – and how it relates to the players in Korach's company – is that their actions were indeed unfathomable, *but they had little control over them*. Their actual sin, while grave, was comparatively subtle and limited and was in fact confined to their thoughts. They were all essentially virtuous and well meaning, their spiritual stature quite considerable. The fatal flaw they shared, however, inhabited the recesses of their minds; for it was there that existed a certain impurity in their outlook concerning the way they viewed Moshe. Deep down lay a subtle measure of resistance to his authority, which constituted, as well, a blemish in their overall subservience to Hashem and His ultimate Will.

As such, it was Divinely determined that they would be punished by sinning in the way that they did. In other words, the irrational behavior that was displayed – open rebellion against Moshe, further agitation against the leaders despite witnessing the horrific fate of the original dissidents – was actually, to an extent, Divinely orchestrated. Again, the totality of the Divine calculations involved in mandating this exact method at this time cannot be fully grasped by limited human intellect. (It does seem – at least in part – to have served the function of setting a very public example, leaving an impression to last for generations to come.) The profound point R' Isaac seeks to bring out is that the sin of these exalted figures entailed a flaw in their outlook, a certain "chink" in the armor of their belief system. Their ensuing actions were more a part of the punishment than a part of their sin, as they were led on a path of issuing outrageous declarations of heresy and committing reckless acts of sedition.

What does emerge from the above is the premium apparently placed upon perfection in *emunah* (faith). In his letters, R' Shach, *zt"l*, focused on a phrase from the liturgy of the *Yomim Nora'im* (High Holidays): לְהוֹרִיגָה דְעוֹת יְיָ – "The One Who examines attitudes (while sitting) in judgment." Hashem scrutinizes the actions of all people – but does not stop there; He examines the refinement of their beliefs, as well.