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KORACH

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LA VOIE
A SUIVRE

THE END OF A DELUSION (BY RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA)

It is written, “Korach the son of Itzhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi” (Bamidbar 16:1). Kabbalists have stated that Korach will be very important in the future, serving as Kohen Gadol in the Third Temple (see the Arizal’s Likutei Torah on Parsha Ki Tisa and Sha’ar HaPessukim on Ezekiel 20). They base themselves on the verse, Tzaddik katamar yifrach (“A righteous man will flourish like a palm tree” – Tehillim 92:13), the last letters of which form the word korach. This teaches us that this tzaddik will again flourish like a palm tree. Since the Sages have also said that Korach was a clever man (Bamidbar Rabba 18:8), we need to understand why he pursued the folly of contesting Moshe and the priesthood. We cannot say that he was a rasha, since he will flourish in the future.

Furthermore, all the Children of Israel saw that Miriam was punished because she had spoken Lashon Harah about Moshe. The Holy One, blessed be He, testified: “Not so is My servant Moshe. In My entire house he is the trusted one. Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles, and the image of Hashem does he behold. Why did you not fear to speak against My servant Moshe?” (Bamidbar 12:7-8). That said, why was Korach not afraid of contesting Moshe and the priesthood?

He Did Not Control His Eyes

We may explain this according to what the Sages have said about Korach: “His mind’s eye misled him. He foresaw that a long and distinguished progeny would emanate from him, particularly Samuel, whose importance would equal that of Moshe and Aaron... and that from among his descendants 24 Levitical divisions would be formed, all of whom would prophesy under the influence of the Holy Spirit... He argued: ‘Is it reasonable, since such greatness is destined to emanate from me, that I should remain silent?’” (Bamidbar Rabba 18:8). In other words, Korach logically inferred that if his descendants would be as important as Moshe and Aaron, how much more is he! Hence Korach believed that he should serve as Kohen Gadol, not Aaron.

We may therefore ask what prompted Korach to be swallowed by the earth, him and all his followers. The answer is that he did not control his eyes when he saw the kind of descendants that he would have, and he brought evil upon himself. Our Sages have given us a great principle: “The disciples of the wicked Bilam possess an evil eye, an arrogant spirit, and a greedy soul” (Pirkei Avoth 5:19). They descend to Gehinnom, as it is written: “And You, O G-d, You will lower them into the well of destruction; men of bloodshed and deceit shall not live out half their days. But as for me, I will trust in You” (Tehillim 55:24). The Sages of the Talmud have testified, “Ninety-nine [die] through an evil eye, and one through natural causes” (Bava Metzia 107b). This teaches us that a person sometimes descends to Gehinnom on account of his eyes, and when he looks at others with an evil eye, he brings evil upon himself and them as well.

The verse, “And You, O G-d, You will lower them into the well of destruction” was also fulfilled in Korach, for he was swallowed by the earth. Although he knew that his descendants would be as great and important as Moshe and Aaron, he did not remain silent, but instead contested the priesthood and sought glory for himself. In truth, the words of Korach’s followers also led them astray when they told Moshe: “Even if you were to gouge out the eyes of these men, we shall not go up” (Bamidbar 16:14). This is difficult to understand, for could they not have told him something else to affirm their unwillingness to go, even if those men were to be blinded? The answer is that they opposed Moshe only because they followed their eyes. Hence their words led them astray and they said, “Even if you were to gouge out the eyes of these men.”

He Did Not Look to the Tzitzit

According to what we have said, we may explain why the passage on Korach is juxtaposed to the passage on the tzitzit: “You shall look upon them and remember all the commandments of Hashem and fulfill them” (Bamidbar 15:39). Korach did not look to the tzitzit, but instead envisioned the dynasty that would descend from him. Korach even ridiculed the mitzvah of tzitzit,

as our Sages cite him arguing: “A tallit that is entirely composed of blue cannot exempt itself from the obligation, but four blue threads can exempt it?!” (Bamidbar Rabba 18:3).

Since Korach renounced the mitzvah of tzitzit, it was as if he had renounced the entire Torah, for the Sages have said: “The mitzvah of tzitzit is equal to all the mitzvot of the Torah” (Nedarim 25a). Since Korach and his band of followers cried out from Gehinnom, “Moshe and his Torah are truth” (Bava Batra 74a), we see that they had renounced Moshe’s Torah. They did not properly fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit, for they did not look to them, but instead used their eyes for evil. Hence they ended up descending into Gehinnom.

This is a great principle: Whoever merits the Holy Spirit and sees what others cannot see, such a person must ask himself if what he sees can help the Jewish community. If his vision comprises something good for the community, he has the right to use it. Otherwise he does not, since a person is only shown things for a valid reason, things that are good for the Jewish community. This is what happened with Korach: He saw that a great dynasty would emerge from him, and he used this vision for his own personal needs by contesting the priesthood. As for Moshe, he acted only for the good of the Jewish people throughout his life. As the Sages have said (Mechilta, Yitro), Moshe did not deal with his own affairs after speaking with G-d, but went directly from the mountain to the people.

Korach did not conduct himself like Moshe. When Moshe merited the revelation of the Shechinah, he did not occupy himself with his own affairs. Yet when the greatness of his descendants was revealed to Korach, he used this vision for his own ends and contested the priesthood. This teaches us that Korach did not contest the priesthood because of wickedness or jealousy, but because of the evil eye. Since he possessed an evil eye, he thought that he was greater than Moshe and Aaron, for he believed that his descendants would be greater than them. Yet in the end, Korach lost on all counts.

THE PARABLE AND ITS MEANING BY THE MERIT OF OUR FATHER ABRAHAM

It is written, "I have presented your priesthood as a service that is a gift, and any alien who approaches shall die" (Bamidbar 18:7).

A good and compassionate king ruled over a kingdom of fools. They did not understand the king's benevolent nature, nor did they realize that he demanded neither honor nor the taxes that were rightfully his.

Among these subjects was a wise yet poor man who carefully watched how the kingdom was governed. He tried to determine who was ruling them and pouring out his benefits upon all the people. He observed and studied a great deal, until he concluded that it was the king who governed them all, demonstrating his compassion and giving bread to all the inhabitants of the kingdom. When he understood this, he became enthusiastic about the king's greatness, and he went into the streets to proclaim his discovery. He also wanted to please the king.

One day, the king disguised himself with simple clothing and went out to see what was happening in the kingdom in order to be as helpful as possible. No one recognized the king, with the exception of the wise and poor man, who had devoted his life to understanding how the kingdom was governed. When he saw the king, he quickly bowed before him and presented his request. He asked the king to come to his home and partake of a meal of vegetables. At first this seemed like a joke to the king, since he lacked nothing. However the king realized that this man had recognized him and wanted to honor him. He therefore went to the poor man's home and ate a meal of vegetables, enjoying it as if it were a royal meal.

When the king saw the extent of this man's love and devotion, he ordered that a small attic with a bed be built for the man, along with a chair and a lamp, and that a meal of vegetables be prepared for him so he could visit from time to time. From then on, the king's love for the man increased to the point that he refused none of his requests. In fact he became famous as a great man in the royal palace, having an important status.

There was a cruel and wicked man in the kingdom as well. When he saw how the wise man had drawn close to the king on account of his meal of vegetables, he thought: "I'll do the same thing to get closer to the king." When the king passed by his village, he went out to meet him and exclaimed: "Sire, I have prepared a double portion of vegetables for you, with beans and lentils. Come to my home and partake of this meal of vegetables, which you love."

The king and his servants began to laugh at this foolish man, who had imagined that the king actually needed a meal of vegetables. He failed to realize that it was only because of his faithful friend that he did this. The king forsook his own honor and approved of the meal that he had prepared, all so that his friend would be happy.

The lesson contained in this parable, explains Rabbi Alexander Zusha HaCohen of Plotsk, is that our father Abraham recognized his Creator at a time when all the nations of the world were still groping in the dark. Without seeing the light, Abraham clearly understood that it was G-d in Heaven Who had created everything, without any benefit for Himself. When Abraham saw the greatness of the chesed that He did for His creations, he became so enthusiastic that he went into the streets and sang the praises of the Creator of the world. He gave himself no rest before having built an altar for Hashem and invoking His Name.

Hashem showed favor to Abraham when He saw the great love that burned within him. He gave him the gift of the offerings, as the verse states: "I have presented your priesthood as a service that is a gift."

In other words, the Children of Israel received a great gift for all the generations by the merit of Abraham, namely the offerings that atone for all sins.

CONCERNING THE PARSHA

Ascending, Not Descending, in Sanctity

It is written, "As for the censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them into hammered plates for a covering of the altar, since they offered them before Hashem. Therefore they are consecrated, and they shall be a sign to the Children of Israel" (Bamidbar 17:3).

The Gemara states that two tables stood inside the porch at the entrance of the Temple, one of silver and the other of gold (Menachot 99a). On the silver table, the bread of the presence was placed when it was brought in, and it was placed on the gold table when it was brought out, for we ascend in sanctity; we do not descend from it. Where do we learn this principle? It is from the verse, "As for the censers of these sinners against their own souls, let them make them into hammered plates for a covering of the altar, since they offered them before Hashem. Therefore they are consecrated, and they shall be a sign to the Children of Israel."

From here the Sages explain why the House of Hillel believed that with regards to the lights of Chanukah, we progress by adding lights: "One is lit on the first day, and thereafter they are progressively increased. ... The House of Hillel's reasoning is that we ascend in sanctity, but do not descend" (Shabbat 21b). In fact if we were to light eight lights on the first night, in accordance with the House of Shammai, it would not be possible to light only seven on the following night, since "we ascend in sanctity, but do not descend."

A Bond of Sanctity

Elsewhere, the Sages discuss the case of a High Priest who becomes disqualified from serving, and another priest takes his place. The Sages say: "The former returns to his office, the latter is unfit to be either a common priest or a High Priest. He cannot be a High Priest for the sake of preventing animosity, nor can he any more be a common priest, for 'we ascend in sanctity, but do not descend'" (Yoma 12b).

Likewise we wear tzitzit before donning tefillin during the Morning Prayer, for "we ascend in sanctity, but do not descend." At first we cover ourselves with a mitzvah by wearing tzitzit, and with the tefillin we bind ourselves with a bond of sanctity.

On another subject, the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah 290) rules that we do not write a mezuzah on parchment used for a Sefer Torah, for we do not descend from a greater degree of sanctity to a lesser degree of sanctity.

Better to Put it Away

With regards to a sanctified object that is worn-out and about to be placed in a geniza because it is not fitting to be used for its primary spiritual purpose, some authorities (such as the Taz) believe that it may be used for a purpose of lesser sanctity. In other words, it is better to use it for a purpose of lesser sanctity than to place it in a geniza. Others object to such a view, believing that it is better to place such an object in a geniza, not to make it descend from a higher to a lower form of sanctity.

AT THE SOURCE

Not for the Sake of Heaven

It is written, “Korach the son of Itzhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi” (Bamidbar 16:1).

The commentators have pondered the language of the Mishnah: “What is a disagreement for the sake of Heaven? The disagreement of Hillel and Sham-mai. And which is not for the sake of Heaven? The disagreement of Korach and all his followers” (Pirkei Avoth 5:17). Did Korach have a disagreement with his followers? He had one with Moshe! It should therefore say, “The disagreement of Korach and Moshe.”

The book Nezer Yosef cites the words of Rabbi Yosef Ades Zatzal in stating that with regards to sins that incur the death penalty, a person is not executed unless all the judges except one find him guilty. Otherwise, if all the judges were to find him guilty, they may have conspired together to kill him. Hence if all the judges find him guilty, he is not sentenced to death.

Korach, who was not an ordinary man, did not want to hatch a plot against Moshe without a trial. In a trial, when the verdict is given, the judge with the least seniority expresses his opinion first (in order not to be influenced by those who are greater than him). Hence in this case, no judge ruled in favor of Moshe, since they all found him guilty, until they came to Korach, who was the greatest among the judges. Since Korach knew the law according to which at least one judge must plead in favor of the accused, he was obligated despite his own intentions to disagree with all his followers in order to clear Moshe by his words, so that Moshe would ultimately be sentenced to death. Since Korach was obligated to disagree with his followers (a disagreement that was not for the sake of Heaven), the Tanna expressed himself by saying, “The disagreement of Korach and all his followers.”

Standing Up in the Same Way

It is written, “They stood up before Moshe, with certain men of the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 16:2).

Rabbi Moshe Mizrahi explains that the law is that a person must rise before his teacher as soon as he sees him, and how much more should he rise before the king and leader of the prophets, Moshe Rabbeinu. To irritate Moshe, they stood up only when he came very close to them, within four cubits. Thus the verse states, “They stood up before Moshe,” i.e., when he was very close to them, as they would before an ordinary talmid chacham.

Along the same lines, the Chida writes in his book Nachal Kedumim: “It is possible that the verse is alluding to the fact that they showed disrespect for him by comparing his honor to that of the leaders of the tribes. The verse states, ‘They stood up before Moshe, with certain men of the Children of Israel,’ meaning that they stood up for Moshe in the same way that they stood up for the leaders of the tribes.”

Only By His Anger

It is written, “As for Aaron, what is he that you should protest against him?” (Bamidbar 16:11).

This verse is nicely explained by Rabbi Ovadia Yosef Shlita, who cites a statement in the Gemara: “By three things may a person’s character be determined: By his glass, by his pocket, and by his anger” (Eruvin 65b).

Now Aaron’s character could not be determined “by his pocket,” since he received all his material needs from the Children of Israel: Offerings and tithes, the first part of the fleece, etc. His “glass” could not be examined either, since he was prohibited from drinking wine, as it is written: “Do not drink wine or strong drink” (Vayikra 10:9).

The only way to evaluate Aaron’s character was by “his anger.” Thus Moshe said, “Aaron, what is he,” meaning that if they wanted to know Aaron in order to “protest against him,” they would have to irritate him and see if he actually became angry, or if he remained completely calm.

The Pinnacle of Humility

It is written, “Moshe was very angry, and he said to Hashem: ‘Do not accept their offering’” (Bamidbar 16:15).

Such was the pinnacle of humility that was anchored in Moshe, as the Alsheich states. Moshe was extremely angry, and yet he spoke neither violent nor harsh words. He simply asked Hashem not to accept their offering.

By Allusion

It Spreads

It is written, “He placed the incense and atoned al ha’am [for the people]” (Bamidbar 17:12).

Rashi states, “Why with incense? Because the Israelites were slandering and vilifying the incense, saying that it was a deadly poison: Through it Nadav and Avihu died; through it 250 people were burned” (Rashi on v.13).

An allusion is contained in the expression al ha’am, which is formed by the initials of Al Avon Medivrei Lashon Harah (“on the sin of words of Lashon Harah”).

In fact incense represents a special atonement for the sin of Lashon Harah. The Gemara explains that even what a person says in secret will end up being heard outside, just as the smell of incense spreads (Yoma 44a).

– Bayit VaShem

IN THE LIGHT OF THE PARSHA FROM THE TEACHINGS OF THE TSADDIK RABBI DAVID PINTO SHLITA

Korach Was Punished Measure for Measure

The Sages have said that Korach was an intelligent man, among those who carried the Ark (Bamidbar Rabba 18:3). They also said, “Now Korach, who was a clever man – what reason had he for such folly? His mind’s eye misled him. He foresaw that a long and distinguished progeny would emanate from him, particularly Samuel, whose importance would equal that of Moshe and Aaron, as may be inferred from the text: ‘Moshe and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among those that call upon His Name’ [Tehillim 99:6]. ... He argued: ‘Is it reasonable, since such greatness is destined to emanate from me, that I should remain silent?’” (Bamidbar Rabba 18:8).

This is surprising. Did the fact that Samuel was one of Korach’s descendants give him the right to contest Moshe and Aaron, whose every word came from Hashem? We find that Samuel taught the Halachah before his teacher Eli (Berachot 31b), and had it not been for the merit of his mother Hanna, who prayed for him, he would have been punished. Thus Korach reasoned as follows: If my descendant is also going to be great among Israel, contesting his teacher and teaching the Halachah before Him, I will also contest Moshe my teacher and push the Sanhedrin to teach a Halachah before him. Korach did not see well because he was deluded by visions of personal grandeur.

Our Sages said in this regard, “Do not make it [the Torah] a crown for self-aggrandizement, nor an axe with which to cut. So too would Hillel say: ‘He who exploits the crown [of Torah] shall perish’” (Pirkei Avoth 4:5). This teaches us that whoever derives personal gain from the words of Torah will perish.

From where do we learn this? We learn it from Korach, who believed that because he was among those who carried the Ark and was very clever, he had the right to use the crown of Torah for personal gain. Furthermore, his eye deceived him when he saw his descendant the prophet Samuel, leading him to want to make the Torah into his instrument to contest Moshe and Aaron. Hence Korach was punished when Heaven opened a chasm into which he perished.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

RABBI DAVID SHRAGA

Rabbi David Shraga Zatzal descended from an illustrious family in the Persian town of Yezd. He was the only son of the righteous and pious Rav Ohr Shraga, a contemporary of the saintly Rabbi Chaim ben Attar and the Baal Shem Tov. In fact the Baal Shem Tov once told his students, “I have a friend from afar, Rav Ohr Shraga.”

One time as Rav Ohr Shraga was studying Torah, a time when he would usually merit the revelation of Eliyahu HaNavi, it was revealed to him that his ancestry dates to a dynasty of pure gold, going all the way back to King David. From one subject to another, the Rav asked Eliyahu HaNavi from where his family descended, and he told him that it was from King David. As early as his youth, Rabbi David Shraga was known in the Torah life of his city, which everyone knew as “miniature Jerusalem.”

Yezd was a city of sages and talmidei chachamim who loved and respected Torah, a city in whose alleyways walked important figures, scholarly and noble men who always had words of Torah on their lips and minds, as well as ba’alei batim who earned a living during the day and studied for the rest of the time. It is therefore not surprising that the only complete edition of the Talmud in Iran at that time was found among the Jewish community of Yezd.

Like an Angel of G-d

Rabbi David Shraga’s busy day began at around midnight, as he recited Tikkun Chatzot and lamentations over the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Shechinah. When the rooster crowed, he began his service of Hashem with the strength of a lion. He was among the first members of the minyan for Shacharit, after which all the members of the community would gather around him to study Chok LeIsrael. Rabbi David was the leader of the group, and his face resembled an angel of G-d. Every day he would translate the Gemara for his students, as well as the Mishnah, Zohar, and Halachah. He also taught them Mussar and the ways of proper conduct so they would know the path to follow.

Rabbi David would also answer halachic questions during this time, as many people would share their doubts with him, asking him questions about daily life. In fact questions came to him from the four parts of the Shulchan Aruch, questions that he analyzed with a tremendous degree of logic, wisdom, and poise, all through the pure perspective of Torah.

The Path of the Sun

With regards to the role that he played in helping the community, Rabbi David Shraga performed shechita and verified meat. After he finished answering all the questions put before him each weekday, he would devote some time to this holy task by going to the slaughterhouse and shechting a certain number of animals and verifying the meat. He then quickly returned to the Beit HaMidrash, where numerous students awaited him, eagerly anticipating every word that came from his mouth. He completely devoted himself to each of his students, generously sharing the wealth of his mind and his Torah.

The only break in Torah study depended on the path of the sun and its light, which was clearly seen in relation to the steps that people took to get to the rooftop during the summer. If the sun was shining, Rabbi David could be seen on the eastern side of the stairs.

At midday, when the sun began to climb the western side of the stairs, his students knew that lunchtime had arrived.

Pearls of Wisdom

When Rabbi David Shraga left for the Holy Land, a long-held desire of his, he settled in the Bucharim district of Jerusalem. Many of his relatives and acquaintances had settled there, and there he resumed his diligent study of Torah. Rabbi David was an excellent speaker, and pearls of wisdom emerged from his lips. He gave public lectures that were attended by large crowds, who would gather every weekday and Shabbat to listen to him. During his lectures, he would delicately weave matters of everyday life to the cautions of Mussar with love and simplicity. He would repeat to himself the teachings of the Sages regarding man’s duties in this world towards Heaven and towards his fellowman.

With True Sanctity

Among his numerous students, some were struck by misfortune. Whenever this would happen, they did not hesitate to see Rabbi David Shraga and explain their difficulties to him, and he would always try to find ways to help each one according to his needs. For this purpose, he would also use amulets, which he knew how to make with great skill and true sanctity. Every person according to his needs received help. Rabbi David was particularly skilled in the writing of these amulets, some of which were designed to protect women during pregnancy. Apart from this, his son the gaon Rabbi Baruch Shraga Shlita (who serves as Av Beit Din in Jerusalem) said that Rabbi David knew how to conduct the Goral HaGra, a procedure famous for its extraordinary revelations. Very few select individuals are fortunate enough to know its secret, and Rabbi David would use the Goral HaGra for delicate and complex matters that were fitting to keep secret.

The Passing of the Tzaddik

The extraordinary life of Rabbi David Shraga came to an end on Tammuz 4, 5622. He was laid to rest on the very same day on Har HaMenuchot in Jerusalem. It is said that on the night before his passing, a certain number of people who regularly prayed with him at the Kamal synagogue of the Yezd community had an unusual dream. They dreamed that the Sefer Torah which stood in the synagogue’s holy ark had fallen next to the seat usually occupied by Rabbi David.

On the following day, when the people who had this dream recounted it to one another, they understood that it was not a coincidence. A few hours later, the sad news arrived that the tzaddik had left this world.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Even if Said in the Presence of Many

If a person who speaks Lashon Harah warns his listeners not to recount it to others, even if he spoke in the presence of many people, it would be Lashon Harah for them to recount it to others, even in passing. Even if he notices that one or two of the listeners have not respected this warning, but have spoken to others, the third person must not relate what he heard to others, even in passing.

– Chafetz Chaim