

The Path To Follow

Korach

447

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THE GRAVE POWER OF SCORN

It is written, “Korach, son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, separated himself with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliav, and On son of Peleth, the sons of Reuven. They stood before Moshe with 250 men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown” (Bamidbar 16:1-2). The Midrash says, “When the Holy One, blessed be He, told Moshe: ‘Take the Levites from among the Children of Israel and purify them’ [Bamidbar 8:6], Moshe immediately did so to Korach, but he was no longer recognizable. He was asked, ‘Who did this to you?’ He replied, ‘Moshe did this to me, and not only that, but he took hold of my hands and feet, and I was waved. He then said to me, “Behold, you are clean!”’ Immediately, Moshe’s enemies began to incite Israel against him” (Tanchuma, Korach 3).

This is absolutely astounding. How could Korach and his followers have possibly thought of challenging Moshe Rabbeinu over Israel’s leadership and priesthood, to the point of saying: “Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem” (Bamidbar 16:3)? All the Children of Israel had seen Moshe ascending to Heaven and receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai, and from among all Israel, only Aaron and his sons the kohanim went up the mountain. The verse states, “Then you shall ascend, and Aaron with you” (Shemot 19:24) – Moshe was a division by himself and the others were a division by themselves (Mechilta D’Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Shemot 19:24). If Korach had been worthy, why did he not immediately say at that point: “How are these men different from all the other sons of Levi, to go up the mountain?” Yet that did not enter his mind, for everyone knew that G-d had told Moshe: “Behold, I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever” (Shemot 19:9). G-d did not speak to Korach in any way, and if he had wanted to say something and oppose Moshe at that point, the Children of Israel would not have listened to him. So why did they listen to him afterwards?

Furthermore, all the Children of Israel had seen, when Miriam spoke against her brother Moshe by criticizing him for having separated himself from his wife, that G-d punished her and defended Moshe at that point, having explained the difference between Moshe and the other prophets: “If there shall be a prophet among you, in a vision shall I, Hashem, make Myself known to him. In a dream shall I speak with him. 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. At the image of Hashem does he gaze” (Bamidbar 12:6-8). Hashem revealed that Moshe was the only one who spoke with Him mouth to mouth, and even if they had other prophets, they would not reach the same level as Moshe. Therefore how could Korach have led the people so astray that he could ask how Moshe felt superior to everyone? Did

he not realize that they did not elevate themselves on their own, but that it was G-d Who had elevated them?

We Must Always Flee From Scorn

From here we learn just how grave scorn is. We must always avoid it, for it is as disastrous as death. The Sages have said, “Scorn is very grave, for it begins with suffering and ends with destruction” (Yerushalmi, Berachot 2:8). They also compare the Torah to oil: “Just as when you hold a full cup of oil in your hand and a drop of water falls in, a corresponding drop of oil comes out, likewise when a word of Torah enters the heart, a word of scorn comes out. And if a word of scorn goes in, a word of Torah comes out” (Shir HaShirim Rabba 1:21).

Korach only began to challenge Moshe’s leadership by scorning him, deriding the fact that Moshe had shaved and waved him. On the verse, “nor sits in the seat of scorners” (Tehillim 1:1), the Aggadah says that it was Korach who scorned Moshe and Aaron, for he began to mock them, saying: “There was a widow in our neighborhood....” Korach also said to them, “Moshe Rabbeinu! A tallit that is entirely of techelet, does it require tzitzit?” He said yes. “A house that is completely filled with Torah scrolls, does it require a mezuzah?” He said yes. Still again: “A wound that is [half an inch] in diameter, is it pure?” He said that it is impure. “And if it entirely covers a man?” He said, “Then it is pure.” At that point Korach said, “The Torah does not come from Heaven, Moshe is not a prophet, and Aaron is not a Kohen Gadol” (Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 10:2).

With the Thoughts of the Heart

As a result, we see that Korach began by scorning and mocking the mitzvot given by Hashem. He should have handled his differences of opinion as talmidei chachamim do: When they argue a point of Halachah, each one explains his viewpoint, seeks to understand the other’s reasoning, and goes to the heart of the matter by studying it from all angles. Korach did not do this, but scorned the mitzvot and Moshe’s words. In no way did he try to understand the Halachah, which is why he eventually spoke sacrilegiously, to the point of saying: “The Torah does not come from Heaven, Moshe is not a prophet, and Aaron is not a Kohen Gadol.”

Since Korach had started to scorn them, words of Torah left his heart and he abandoned the essence of his argument. At first he wanted to verify the halachot, but since he started arguing in a spirit of scorn, he forgot his core arguments and started to challenge Moshe’s authority without trying to understand the Halachah. The Sages teach, “The first step in transgression is evil thought, the second is scorn” (Derech Eretz Zutah). Since Korach began to challenge Moshe’s authority and leadership, we immediately see that his intentions were not pure, for when the Sages of Israel discuss Halachah, nobody seeks to humiliate the other, for all they want is to understand the Halachah.

The Wife of On

It is written, “On son of Pelet” (Bamidbar 16:1).

The Gemara cites Rav as saying, “On son of Pelet was saved by his wife. She said to him: ‘What does it matter to you whether this one [Moshe] remains master, or that one [Korach] becomes master? You are only a disciple!’ He replied, ‘What can I do? I have taken part in their counsel, and they have sworn me [to be] with them.’ ... She gave him wine to drink, made him drunk, and laid him down inside. She then sat down at the entrance [of their tent] and loosened her hair. Whoever came [to summon her husband] saw her and turned back” (Sanhedrin 109b-110a).

It seems that On could have told his wife, “It’s true that now I’m only a disciple. But if I support Korach and his followers, who believe that the priesthood does not belong to Aaron, then one day my sons may become Kohanim Gedolim!”

The author of Brit Shalom states that this is why On’s wife loosened her hair, in order to prevent any of his sons from ever becoming a Kohen Gadol. In fact the Sages say that Kimchit merited having seven sons who served as Kohen Gadol, for she said that “never in my life have the beams of my house seen the plaits of my hair” (Yoma 47a).

If such modesty resulted in her sons becoming Kohanim Gedolim, it is clear that immodesty prevents sons from ever becoming Kohanim Gedolim. Therefore On could never say that he had a reason for joining Korach.

Rav & Rabbi

It is written, “They said to them, ‘Rav lachem [It is too much for you]!’” (Bamidbar 16:3).

In the book Ben Ish Hai, Rabbeinu Yosef Haim of Baghdad explains this verse according to a statement of the Sages: “Every ‘Rav’ is from Babylon. Every ‘Rabbi’ is from Israel.”

We may say that Korach’s followers began to scorn Moshe by saying, “Why do you feel superior to the congregation of Hashem? You are not entering Eretz Israel to hold the title of ‘Rabbi.’ You remain outside of it, only holding the title of ‘Rav.’”

Permanent Dwellings

It is written, “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses” (Bamidbar 16:32).

Contrary to what is stated in this verse, which describes the dwellings of Korach and his followers as houses, they were previously described as tents: “Turn away now from the tents of these wicked men” (v.26), “Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrance of their tents” (v.27).

There is a great difference between a house and a tent: A house is a permanent dwelling, whereas a tent is a temporary dwelling. Therefore why does the Torah speak of houses in one verse (“the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses”), and tents in another (“turn away now from the tents of these wicked men”)?

In his book Imrei Shefer, the gaon Rabbi Shlomo Kluger Zatzal provides a nice explanation for this:

A house is a permanent dwelling and a tent is a temporary dwelling. Thus in the desert, where the Children of Israel did not perma-

nently encamp in the same place, since each encampment was only temporary, their dwellings are described by the term “tent.” Thus we read, “Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the entrance of their tents.” Hence as long as they were alive and journeyed from one place to another with the Children of Israel, their dwellings were described as “tents” – temporary dwellings. Yet now, once they were swallowed by the earth, they and all their possessions, and now that their graves were their dwellings, their temporary “tents” became permanent “houses.” In fact they settled there, in Gehinnom, with their tents. Since their dwelling places became permanent, they were called “houses,” as we read: “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses.”

In the Light of the Parsha

The Difference Between Jethro and Korach

What the Torah says about Jethro is completely different from what it says about Korach. In regards to the latter, the Torah states: “Korach took” (Bamidbar 16:1), which the Sages explain in the following way: “He separated himself from the congregation to persist in a dispute, as it is said: ‘Why does your heart take you away?’ [Job 15:12], meaning that it removes you, to isolate you from others” (Tanchuma, Korach 2). Korach opposed Moshe only because of the pride that dwelled in him.

The Sages teach that Korach said, “My father and his brothers were four, as it says: ‘The sons of Kohath: Amram, Itzhar, Hebron, and Uzziel’ [Shemot 6:18]. Amram was the first, and his two sons received greatness – one a king and one a Kohen Gadol. Who is entitled to receive the second [position]? Is it not I, the son of Itzhar, the second brother to Amram? Yet he [Moshe] appointed the son of his [Amram’s] youngest brother for leadership! I hereby oppose him and will invalidate his word” (Tanchuma, Korach 1).

From here we see that Korach opposed Moshe and Aaron only because of his pride, for he did not want to feel inferior to them.

Now concerning Jethro we read, “Jethro...took a burnt-offering and feast-offerings for G-d” (Shemot 18:12). The Torah testifies that Jethro was unlike Korach. Because Korach was filled with pride, he challenged the priesthood and leadership of Israel, seeking greatness for himself, something that led him to disown the Torah. Yet Jethro – because his heart was contrite and he humbled himself before Moshe and Aaron – merited to eat before G-d. If one objects by saying that he only ate bread, this is not so, for he merited the Torah, which is compared to bread. Thus it is written, “Come and eat of my bread” (Mishlei 9:5), concerning which the Sages say: “Bread refers to Torah” (Bereshith Rabba 70:5). Since Jethro acted with humility, he merited the Torah. He began with offerings and finished with bread, for the Torah did not see the offerings, but rather Jethro’s heart, which was contrite. The proof is that he is first described as “Jethro,” but in the end is described as “Moshe’s father-in-law,” teaching us that he greatly humbled himself before Moshe, to the point of annulling himself, both he and his name. This means that he annulled his own soul, as it is written: “a living soul, that was its name” (Bereshith 2:19). He considered himself only as Moshe’s father-in-law, saying: “I am nothing on my own. My entire being depends on Moshe.”

With a Clear View of the Situation

The wealthy Straus brothers, who lived in America some 80 years ago, made great contributions to settlements established in Eretz Israel. One of these brothers was Nathan Straus, a man who provided the funds to build the city of Netanya, which carries his name.

The contributions of these two brothers were primarily destined for companies employing people who were not mitzvot-observant. At one point in time, the leaders of the ancient community of Jerusalem decided to address the Straus brothers and ask them to support the chesed organizations of Jerusalem.

The leaders of the orthodox community described to the brothers the conditions in which the residents of the city lived, while at the same time asking the brothers to contribute to the construction and maintenance of a soup kitchen, where the city's poor could come and eat with their families.

Although Nathan Straus was moved by the terrible description he heard, his brother refused to contribute any money to this cause. That being the case, Nathan Straus sent his own personal contribution, asking that he be notified when the construction of the building was complete. He would then return to Jerusalem and see the place for himself.

As a result, a few months later he was joyfully told that the work was finished, and that the building would be inaugurated with great pageantry. Naturally, he was invited to this celebration in Jerusalem. He was accompanied by his brother, who had refused to contribute to the project.

Upon their arrival in Israel, the brothers traveled to Jerusalem, and when they reached the building in question and saw hundreds of poor people eating there, their reactions were completely different.

Nathan, who had contributed to the project, was very moved by what he saw. He expressed great satisfaction that his money had been used for such a valuable cause.

His brother, who failed to contribute to the project, looked upon the poverty of Jerusalem's residents but did not even sympathize with them. On the contrary, he expressed his disgust over what he was seeing, and he did not hide his repulsion at the sight of Jerusalem's poor.

When they were leaving the building, Nathan Straus tripped on the stairs and broke his ankle. He was immediately brought to a hospital, where it was determined that his injury was serious. He therefore had to stay there for a certain time.

When his brother came to visit and saw him twisting in pain, he said with an air of derision: "See, this is the thanks you get for contributing to Jerusalem's soup kitchen!"

Nathan listened to this insulting remark without responding.

Since important business affairs awaited him in Europe, Nathan's brother decided to return without waiting for his brother to be healed.

[Translator's Note: Nathan's brother traveled to England, where he boarded the Titanic. He perished when the ship sank during its maiden voyage.]

The brother who had scorned the donor lost his life in this catastrophe. Only then was it clear that Hashem wanted to protect the life

of the donor by a set of circumstances that forced him to remain in Israel due to a broken ankle.

One Who Believes Does Not Ask Questions

In the course of our lives, we are sometimes confronted by questions of this kind, questions that arise in people whose faith is not complete. Such questions come to them when they perform an exceptionally good deed, and not only are they not rewarded for it, they are even punished! This leaves them with questions.

A true believer knows that such questions are not real. They do not even begin to be a question. He knows, and believes with all his heart, that he has been promised a reward for every good deed he performs. However he was never promised a reward immediately after a good deed.

It is very possible that G-d, Who sees all that is hidden, has decided that his reward will not come in this world, but only in the World to Come. Many other things are also possible.

Either way, someone who believes does not ask questions. From the above story we see that such questions are not real, for in actuality what appears to be a punishment is not really one at all. Rather, it may be the greatest reward that can be given to a person who helped Jerusalem's poor with his own money.

Only Hashem knew that the ship was going to sink, which is why only Hashem could place the donor in a situation where he would break his ankle. As such he did not board the boat with his brother, which is what saved him.

Naturally, this is what Hashem wants in many other instances in which He "punishes" those who have performed a mitzvah. There is no punishment in such cases, only a reward.

The difference is that in the above story, it is possible to clearly see the reward. Everyone knew that the ship sank, whereas in most cases nothing can be seen.

This is exactly where faith comes into play. The fact that a so-called punishment comes upon someone who performs a mitzvah is only meant for the good! What good is this? It may be that a person will not discover it before leaving this world for the next, a World that is entirely good. He will then get a view of the whole picture. At that point he will see and understand that G-d keeps His promises to those who fulfill mitzvot, rewarding them according to their good deeds.

– From Barchi Nafshi

Guard Your Tongue!

Praise in Public

It is absolutely forbidden to praise someone in public, for when many people gather together, in general there are some who hold opposite points of view, or are jealous, and the fact that someone is being praised will lead others to disparage him.

If we believe that our listeners will not disparage the person in question, for example because they do not know him, then it is permissible to praise him, even before a large group of people, as long as we do not exaggerate.

Segulot for Remembering One's Learning

Midrash Talpote provides 15 suggestions, drawn from the book Ephodi, to help us acquire an excellent good memory. They are as follows:

1. Study with an experienced talmid chacham and experienced friends in learning and pilpul, for arousing a person's natural enthusiasm restores and strengthens the soul's abilities, among them being the power of recollection.

2. Constantly consult the books of the Sages of Israel, which contain many general principles and summaries, as the Sages say: "A teacher should always teach his student in a short way" (Chullin 63b).

3. Establish signs and mnemonic devices for those who study and write. The Sages of the Talmud also employed this principle, saying: "The Torah can only be acquired with mnemonic signs" (Eruvin 54b). The most famous of these is found in the Passover Haggadah with regards to the Ten Plagues: "Rabbi Yehudah would refer to the ten plagues by acronyms: Detzach, Adash, Be'achav."

Several signs of this kind are mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch: Yad Shachat Dam (for recalling the seven kinds of liquids) = Yain (wine), Davash (honey), Shemen (oil), Chalav (milk), Tal (dew), Dam (blood), and Mayim (water); Chanak Nefesh (for recalling the eight kinds of blemishes that render an animal treif); and others.

Furthermore, we shall cite an important observation from the Shelah HaKadosh: "I have seen people who, when there is a sign in the Gemara, do not fully develop it, but are content on just reading it. This is certainly not what should be done. I believe that certain signs, in addition to their direct value as acronyms, allude to great secrets."

4. Constantly read from one kind of book. That is, always read from the same format, not study once from an old Tur (for example) and once from a new Tur, for this can disrupt the imagination.

5. The books from which we study must be printed nicely and with clear writing. The place that we occupy in the Beit HaMidrash should also rejoice the heart.

6. Learning is done while singing and with a melody. For example, musical movements lead a person to remembering the syllables and words that were put to them. The Ba'alei HaTosafot state (Megillah 32a) that they usually studied the Mishnah accompanied by a tune, for they studied them by heart, and this was the way in which they could best remember them. In his book Devash Lefi, the Chida states that melody helps a person to remember, and that sadness leads to forgetfulness.

7. It is written, "They are life to those who find them [lemotzeihem]" (Mishlei 4:22). Do not read lemotzeihem, but lemotzihem – who utter them verbally. Hence we must pronounce our words aloud as we study, since it is not enough to think of them. In the Midrash (Tanchuma, Mikeitz), we find the story of a long-time disciple named Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, who would usually study to the point of perspiring. He would revise his studies in the bathroom, but since he did not utter them aloud, he fell ill and forgot them. What caused all this? It was the fact that he did not bring them forth from his lips. In this regard it is said, "If words are not verbalized, something is lacking."

8. One who studies must have the intention of understanding the meaning of the text that he is verbalizing. By doing so, he will engrave it in his memory and he will not be like a swaying branch.

9. The shape of square letters and their sanctity improves one's memory.

10. We must read from books whose print is large, not fine, for in this way our learning will be more easily engraved in our minds.

11. We must teach others what we are presently learning, for we firmly establish it in our minds by concretizing it.

12. We must not rush, but learn calmly and with composure.

13. We must study Torah for its own sake, not for money or honor. In fact having the right intentions allows us to conserve and remember what we have learned.

14. We must fix a time for learning without changing it, be it in the morning or evening. This must be a fixed time that does not change.

15. We must pray to the One Who gave the Torah, asking Him to give us health and strength to study and remember what we have learned.

Hashem Will Reward Us

What follows are other segulot that we find in various books:

The book Ohr Tzaddikim mentions the custom of kissing a book when opening and closing it, especially a book on Kabbalah. This is also a segula for a good memory.

The book HaEshkol describes the segula of reciting the names of Rav Papa's ten sons after completing a tractate. It is said to be a segula to drive away forgetfulness. The reason that we mention them at the end of each tractate is given in Yam Shel Shlomo: The sons of Rav Papa were great in Torah, and because he prepared a feast for them upon completing a tractate – for he was very wealthy and supported those who studied Torah – he is mentioned along with his ten sons.

Another segula, said in the name of the kabbalists, is to recite the prayer of Rabbi Nechunya ben Hakanah upon entering and leaving the Beit HaMidrash.

One who is careful not to think of Torah in places where it is forbidden, and one who is careful not to think of Torah during prayer (or not to study during the repetition of the Shaliach Tzibur) merits an improved memory. This is what Rabbi Yehudah HaChassid wrote: "May your heart not push you to think of Torah words [in the bathroom or bathhouse], telling you that you will forget them if you fail to think of them. This is because you will later forget what you recalled by thinking of Torah in these places. Likewise during prayer, if you distance words of Torah from your heart as you pray, or when you find yourself in a place where it is forbidden to think of Torah, Hashem will give you back what you have forgotten, and you will remember still more" (Sefer Chassidim 546).

The following story is mentioned in the book Otzar HaChaim in the name of the book Ramatayim Tzofim:

Someone came to find the holy Rabbi Elimelech to ask him for help with his memory. The Rabbi said to him, "Do teshuvah. Great is teshuvah, for it reaches the Throne of Glory and in you will be fulfilled: 'There is no forgetfulness before the Throne of Glory' [Berachot 32b]."

Sefer Chassidim cites another story concerning a person who asked a Torah scholar, "Mice have eaten from my bread. Can I eat this bread?" When the Torah scholar asked him why he would not eat it, he replied: "Lest I forget what I have learned. I'm careful not to eat what may lead to forgetfulness, but now I'm hungry."

The Torah scholar replied, "You are not guilty of forgetting unless you do so deliberately. However I see that you do not study Torah. In fact you are doing nothing when you should be busy. All day long, you neglect words of Torah, and you spend your time with ignoramuses listening to useless things. Better that you should pay no attention to things that may lead to forgetfulness, in order for you to forget the useless things that you occupied yourself with."