

BEWARE OF THE GLOWING EMBERS OF THE TZADDIKIM

O
 ne of the great figures and leaders of the Children of Israel was Korach. Our Sages say that he was among those who carried the Ark, which means that he was one of the Levite leaders who loaded the Ark of the Covenant and transported it. Korach was very intelligent, and he also had a dynasty of tzaddikim descend from him, with the prophet Samuel at their head. Despite all this, he experienced a bitter end, being swallowed alive by the earth along with 250 other people.

The Sages ask how Korach, who was so intelligent, could have done such a foolish thing. Korach wanted the priesthood for Elizaphan the son of Uzziel. Yet how did he arrive at such a lowly level that he was literally swallowed by the earth? How did it happen that Korach contested the word of Hashem, Who said that Aaron would be High Priest, no one else?

Korach's sin lay in the fact that he rebelled against the tzaddik of his generation. He rebelled against Moses by telling him, "The entire assembly – all of them – are holy and the L-RD is among them. Why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of the L-RD?" (Numbers 16:3). Was that really the case? Korach knew and could actually see that Hashem constantly summoned Moses and spoke to him, teaching him Torah and entrusting him with prophecies to transmit to the Children of Israel. Yet despite this fact, Korach went to Moses and Aaron and told them that they were exalting themselves at the expense of Hashem's people! Of all people, Moses – described by the Torah as "exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3) – was exalting himself at the expense of Hashem's people? Moses was seeking greatness for himself and his brother Aaron?

Such foolishness, such shameful thoughts, led Korach to the abyss. They led him to set himself apart to contest the priesthood. Furthermore, the Sages said of him: " 'Now Korach took' [Numbers 16:1]. Resh Lakish said: He took a bad deal for himself" (Sanhedrin 109b). This means that the essence of his sin was to have broken the power of the Jewish people's unity. He took 250 men with

him, leaders of the community, and with them he went to oppose our teacher Moses. He broke the power of the Jewish people's unity, and thus he set himself up for failure. He wanted to be for himself – alone – not being in harmony with Moses the tzaddik of the generation. That is why he ended up lost and destroyed.

However if we examine the situation a little more in depth, we will see that in our generation there are also people like this, people who resemble Korach in terms of opposing the tzaddikim of the generation. We often hear various people around us opening their mouths, without shame or fear, to discuss and belittle the tzaddikim of the generation. These people are not all necessarily adults. We hear such things from youngsters as well, even from children, who are capable of telling one another: "Mine is greater than yours...mine is the greater tzaddik." Where do they find the permission and audacity to speak like this? The answer is extremely simple: The young learn it from hearing adults speak. They learn it from listening to how one person speaks against a certain tzaddik, and from how another spews forth insults from his mouth against the great of the generation, against rabbanim, dayanim, and talmidei chachamim. Yet no one responds. Nobody tells them to stop. None calls out and shouts, "Don't you care about the Torah's honor? How can you insult the angels of G-d?" Why is that? How can people reach such a state? To our great regret and shame, today a situation exists in which nothing is important to a person except himself. People think only of themselves; they arrange a bad deal for themselves and decide, "Who's to tell me what I can and cannot do? Who's to tell me what I can and cannot say?" Sadly, this is why people think that they can say and make others hear whatever they want. Today this is called "freedom of expression," for people feel free to say whatever happens to come into their heads. Yet who can foresee the catastrophic results of such behavior?

If people speak like this against tzaddikim and rabbanim, who will guarantee that we can educate a generation of righteous, G-d-fearing people? It is not without reason that this is called "freedom of

expression," for such harmful ways of expressing oneself soon become completely free, leading to a total rejection of the yoke of the Torah and its mitzvot. Now the Sages have said, "Warm yourself by the fire of the Sages, but beware of their glowing embers, lest you be burnt – for their bite is the bite of the fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals" (Perkei Avoth 2:10). Are people not frightened by this? Do people not realize that they will have to give an accounting after 120 years for such words, as well as for not protesting when they heard talmidei chachamim being disparaged?

My friends, let us learn a lesson from the wife of On, the son of Pelet. The Sages said: "On, the son of Pelet, was saved by his wife. She said to him, 'What does it matter to you whether one [Moses] remains as leader or another [Korach] becomes leader, since you are only a follower?'" (Sanhedrin 109b). Because Pelet would remain a follower in any case, his wife told him that getting involved in Korach's dispute would serve no purpose.

We should constantly be reminding ourselves of the same thing. When a discussion occurs among the tzaddikim of the generation, we are not to stick our noses into it; we are not to get involved into matters between mountains. We have no right to get mixed into it, for in any case our personal opinions will not be heard. Therefore since we have no say in the matter, why should we get involved? Why do we need to open our mouths and speak against someone who is holy and precious to the Jewish people? How can we speak against tzaddikim, rabbanim or talmidei chachamim?

We must adopt an attitude of faith. We must believe in Hashem and realize that all His paths are true and fair. Nevertheless, it is impossible to believe in Hashem if we do not believe in the tzaddikim of the generation, whoever they may be. In fact it is written, "They believed in the L-RD and in Moses His servant" (Exodus 14:31). If we have faith in the tzaddik, we will have faith in Hashem. If we act in this way, we will experience good both in this world and in the World to Come. Amen.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Ignoring the Truth

“Do this: Take for yourselves censers – Korach and his entire assembly” (Numbers 16:6).

Rashi explains that Moses attempted to avoid a dispute, which is why he addressed himself to Korach and said: “The gentile way is to have a variety of rituals, with many priests, [not all] gathered in one Temple. We have only one G-d, one Ark, one Torah, one Altar, and one High Priest. Yet you – 250 men – seek the high priesthood!” (Rashi on Numbers 16:6). This is why Moses allowed them to take the incense, which contained a deadly poison, and “the man whom the L-RD will choose, he is holy.” The one whom Hashem would choose would live, while the rest would perish.

This is surprising. Moses made it clear to them that out of all 250 men, only one would be chosen; the rest would die. This is unbelievable. All 250 leaders knew that they were headed for a certain death, yet none of thought of stepping back to repent? How could they not have been afraid? How could they expose themselves to such incredible danger?

We learn an extraordinary principle from here, which is that when a person has a specific desire, he will devote himself completely to his goal. Even if the truth were to jump in front of his face and tell him to stop, he would ignore it and pretend not to notice that it concerns him. This is because he is certain that he is right and everyone else is wrong. It was precisely in this way that Korach’s followers acted, each of them being certain that he would be the sole person chosen to replace the High Priest.

This also reflects the reality of our time, for we encounter similar situations each day. We are sometimes momentarily convinced of being completely right, and only afterwards do we discover our great mistake, which we may have to pay dearly for.

A tiny example of this from daily life would be smoking. There is nobody today who is not aware of the harm caused by cigarettes, the serious illnesses that it causes and the danger it poses to people’s lives. Nevertheless, we see that the tobacco industry is doing extremely well, and multitudes are unable to rid themselves of their desire to smoke. Some people, even though they are at death’s door, still put cigarettes into their mouths, holding this mortal poison between their fingers and smoking with delight. Cigarette warnings labels are already old news to them.

What is happening in this case? We are not dealing with fools here, for doctors and educated people also smoke.

Here too we see that when a person is seized by a specific desire, he simply brushes the truth aside and ignores it, believing that the worst “can’t happen to me.” This is precisely what Korach and his followers believed. Yet how did they end up? Scripture tells us: “A flame came forth from the L-RD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense” (Numbers 16: 35). Korach fought against the potent truth of Moses with the idea that he would be saved, and he never for a second imagined such a fateful end. It is with regards to this that the sage said, “Truth, even when it is as bitter as woodworm, is preferable to the sweetest lie!”

Korach’s Wife

When Korach returned from the Beit Midrash, his wife asked him: “What happened today in Moses’ yeshiva?” He replied, “Today he gave us a new mitzvah, the mitzvah of tzitzit: Fringes made with a thread of techelet and attached to the corners of a four-sided garment.” His wife shot back: “Moses is mocking you! Each day he comes along with another mitzvah and tells you that Hashem commanded it. Now if a thread of techelet in the tzitzit constitutes an important mitzvah, I’ll fashion a tallit made entirely of techelet for you and your followers, so you can go to Moses and ask him what the law is for such a tallit. See what he tells you! That way you’ll realize that he’s invented everything he orders you to do.”

Korach’s wife also said to him: “Moses is mocking you! He named his brother as High Priest, and his brother’s sons as deputy priests. As for you and your family, the sons of Kohath, he made you a laughingstock by shaving you from head to toe. Not only that, but he waved you about in all four directions.” When Korach heard his wife’s foolishness, he thought: “I have to find people to revolt against Moses.” He walked around the entire camp of Israel completely shaved, and no one could recognize him. When people asked him, “Who did this to you,” he said: “Moses did this, and it wasn’t only to me that he did this, but to all the Levites! He even waved us around like lulavs! However his brother Aaron, he arrayed him in the garments of the High Priest and appointed him to minister in the Tent of Meeting, like a bride adorned in her finery.” When Moses’ enemies heard these things, they began to sharpen their knives and organize a large rebellion against Moses, with Korach as their leader.

The Story of the Widow

As the leader of this band of rebels, Korach began to fuel their revolt by telling his followers outrageous stories:

“In my neighborhood there was a widow, and with her were her two fatherless daughters. The widow had only one field, and when she was about to plow, Moses said to her: ‘You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together’ [Deuteronomy 22:10]. When she was about to sow, Moses said to her: ‘You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed’ [Leviticus 19:19]. When she was about to reap the harvest and to stack the sheaves, Moses said to her: ‘You shall not harvest the gleanings, the overlooked sheaves, and the corners of the field’ [Leviticus 19:9; Deuteronomy 24:19]. When she was about to bring the harvest into the granary, Moses said to her: ‘Give the heave offering, the first tithe, and the second tithe.’ She submitted to the law and gave them to him. What did the poor woman then do? She sold her field and bought two sheep, so she might clothe herself in the wool shorn from them and profit by their offspring. As soon as the sheep brought forth their young, Aaron came and said to the widow: ‘Give me the firstling males, for this is what the Holy One said to me: “All the firstling males that are born of your herd and of your flock you shall sanctify to the L-RD your G-d” [Deuteronomy 15:19].’ Again she submitted to the law and gave the firstling males to Aaron. When the time came for shearing, she sheared her two sheep. Then Aaron again came along and told the widow: ‘Give me the first portion of the shearing, for the Holy One said, “You shall give him...the first shearing of your sheep” [Deuteronomy 18:4].’ She said, ‘There is no strength in me to withstand this man. I will slaughter the sheep and eat them.’ After she slaughtered them, Aaron came to her once more and said: ‘Give me the shoulder, the jaws, and the maw.’ The widow said, ‘Even after I have slaughtered my sheep, I am still not free of his demands. I will devote my sheep to the Sanctuary.’ However Aaron said to her: ‘In that case, they belong entirely to me, for the Holy One said: “Everything devoted in Israel shall be yours” [Numbers 18:14].’ Aaron picked up the sheep, went his way, and left them weeping – the widow and her two daughters – and they eventually starved to death.”

It was in this way that Korach managed to arouse people’s anger. This imaginary story of his shows us the power of contempt. Everything he said was a lie, for when the Children of Israel were in the desert, they had no need to sow or reap, as the Torah itself states: “It is not a place of seed, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates” (Numbers 20:5). Therefore how could this widow have had a field that she could sow? Furthermore, how could she die of hunger while the rest of the Children of Israel were fed from the manna that fell from heaven? The answer is that Korach invented the entire story. Nevertheless, it aroused strong feelings in the hearts of his foolish followers, and so dissension ignited like a fire in a field of thorns.

Moses was fully aware of what would happen to Korach in the end. He therefore followed Korach and tried to calm him down, in order that he cease his wickedness. However Korach paid no attention to Moses, and he continued to act in a deplorable way. When the Holy One, blessed be He, saw that

Korach continued to add to the fire he had started, He descended toward the community and told the Children of Israel to move away from the tents of Korach and his followers. Hashem then brought about a great miracle, and the earth beneath their feet began to give way, just as in an earthquake. Korach and his followers, however, were not swallowed up immediately. Instead, the earth forcefully drew them in and sucked them into its interior like a vacuum (according to the holy Alshech). Even Korach's personal possessions, wherever they were throughout the camp, were sucked into the earth, and if his neighbors had borrowed a needle from him, it too was swallowed up. The Sages have said that even if Korach's name was written on papers belonging to others, it too was erased and disappeared (Yerushalmi, Perek Chelek). When the earth swallowed his possessions and all remnants of his work, there was no longer any remembrance of Korach. From here we learn the terrible punishment of those who encourage conflict, such that even the Holy One, blessed be He, does not desire to leave any trace of them in this world! Everyone should therefore put an effort into doing everything possible to avoid dissension, which Hashem absolutely abhors.

The Sages have said, "Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will have an abiding result, and that which is not for the sake of Heaven will not have an abiding result. Which is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his faction" (Perkei Avoth 5:17).

This seems difficult to understand, for the Mishnah should have said, "The dispute between Korach and Moses," just as it said, "The dispute between Hillel and Shammai." Why instead does it use the expression, "The dispute of Korach and all his faction"?

The answer is that the Sages are teaching us a great principle here. When a dispute is for the sake of Heaven, all secondary participants have a single goal – "the sake of Heaven" – as did the followers of Hillel and Shammai. That, however, is not the case when a dispute is not for the sake of Heaven. In that case, the party with a grievance does not have a single goal, and there are internal conflicts within it, for each of its members is seeking his own selfish gain, as was the case with Korach and his followers. Each of them wanted to become the High Priest, and the result was that internal disputes flared up concerning which of them should have that role.

We may also say that the dispute between Hillel and Shammai was a true dispute, and that each side merited having the Halachah in accordance with their view. However in the case of Korach's rebellion, his grievance was based on a lie, for he knew that Moses was clearly in the right. Consequently, Moses had no dispute with anyone, yet Korach tried to instigate one. This is why the Mishnah uses the expression, "The dispute of Korach and all his faction." It does not mention Moses' name because he had nothing to do with Korach's dispute, and it was clear that Moses was in the right.

A TRUE STORY

Moses and His Torah Are Truth

Rabba ben Bar Chana related: "We were once traveling in the desert, and there we were joined by an Arab merchant who, by taking sand and smelling it, could tell which was the way to one place and which was the way to another. ...He said unto me: 'Come, I will show you the men of Korach who were swallowed up.' I saw two cracks that emitted smoke. I took a piece of clipped wool, dipped it in water, attached it to the point of a spear, and let it in there. When I took it out, it was singed. He said unto me: 'Listen attentively to what you hear.' I heard them say: 'Moses and his Torah are truth, and we are liars.'"

– Bava Batra 73b-74a

A MATTER OF EDUCATION

Directing Conflicts To Hashem

"Moses heard and fell on his face...saying: 'In the morning the L-RD will make known...through this you shall know that the L-RD sent me'" (Numbers 16:4-5, 28).

Such were some of Moses' reactions when faced with the dispute of Korach and his followers. Although this grave conflict should have been met with an extremely harsh reaction, Moses and Aaron nevertheless acted with humility before Hashem, directing (as it were) the problem to Him. The Torah does not state that they employed violent measures, either verbally or physically.

When someone is confronted by adversity, especially one stemming from a person who hates and attacks him, it is easy to attribute this to the person in question and attempt to foil his plans directly. However that is not what a great man does, for he sees his adversity as a way in which Hashem is addressing him. We see this in the case of Joseph's brothers, who said: "Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother...that is why this anguish has come upon us" (Genesis 42:21). Thus when a great man tries to thwart the plans of the person attacking him, he does so only by addressing Hashem. For a person who has faith in Hashem, the effort that he must exert in solving his problem consists of praying to Hashem with all his heart.

This approach, which is inherently just, also provides us with a guideline for education. Youngsters raised in an atmosphere of conflict and personal animosity are more likely to develop a hostile view of the world. When a person encounters opposition at home and outside, it is easy for him to adopt an antagonistic attitude, one of anger and finger-pointing. However one who is raised in an atmosphere of conflict, yet perceives it as a trial from Hashem – one in which he must act according to His ways – such a person will maintain a more charitable view of the world. Such adversity occurs especially among those who deal with the needs of the community, and the advice offered to them is provided by the Psalmist: "I have set the L-RD before me always" (Psalms 16:8). Every conflict they encounter should be directed solely to Hashem, for the sake of Heaven.

GUARD YOUR TONGUE

Lashon Harah is at the Heart of Dissension

Because of Korach's rebellion against Moses, he and 250 men (leaders of Israel, and even babies) lost their lives. All this was due to the sin of dissension, a sin of criminal proportions. However the main factor in all this was Lashon Harah. Korach managed to ensnare the leaders of the people by the Lashon Harah he uttered day and night against Moses, who according to Korach had personally appointed his relatives to high position. Whoever listened to these hollow words believed Korach's Lashon Harah and joined his rebellion, which in the end brought about the death of many. Korach was punished measure for measure, for just as he opened his mouth to utter words of Lashon Harah and slander, so too did the earth open its mouth to swallow him. From this we learn just what kind of disaster results from the improper use of the tongue

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Sin of Dissension

“That he not be like Korach and his assembly” (Numbers 17:5).

The Gemara states, “‘So Moses stood up and went to Dathan and Abiram’ [Numbers 16:25]. Resh Lakish said: ‘This teaches that one must not be obdurate in a dispute.’ As Rav said: ‘He who is unyielding in a dispute violates a negative command, as it is written, “That he not be like Korach and his assembly” [ibid. 17:5]’” (Sanhedrin 110a). The Mishnah Berurah (156:4) rules that whoever maintains a dispute transgresses this prohibition.

The Sages have said: “Come and observe how grievous a thing dissension must be, seeing that the Holy One, blessed be He, exterminates all memory of one who foments dissension! For so it is written: ‘A flame came forth from the L-RD and consumed the 250 men’ [Numbers 16:35]. Rabbi Berekiah commented: How grievous a thing dissension must be! The Heavenly court as a rule inflicts penalties only on sinners who are 20 years old and upward, and the terrestrial court does so only on those who are 13 years or more. However in Korach’s dissension, babies of a day old were burned and swallowed up in the bottomless abyss, as it is written: ‘With their wives, children, and infants...they and all that was theirs descended alive to the pit’ [vv.27-33]” (Bamidbar Rabba 18:4).

The Chafetz Chaim wrote that it is a sacred duty to not prolong a conflict, even if one is completely in the right. We learn this from Moses, as it is written: “So Moses stood up and went to Dathan and Abiram” (Numbers 16:25). This means that Moses did not want to prolong the conflict, hence he went to them in order that they change their minds. This teaches that not only entering a conflict is prohibited, but that if a person has the opportunity to alleviate a conflict, yet refrains from doing so, he is also held accountable and transgresses a Torah prohibition. As our Sages have said (Bamidbar Rabba 18:12), four types of people are called wicked: One who raises his hand to strike his fellow, one who borrows and does not repay, one who shows insolence, and one who is given to contention, as it is written: “Turn away now from the tents of these wicked men” (Numbers 16:26).

The Sages have also said that if there is a conflict in the house, in the end it will be destroyed. If there is a conflict in the synagogue, in the end the congregants will be dispersed, and furthermore the synagogue will be deserted. If there is a conflict in the city, blood will be spilled in the city. If two talmidei chachamim, or two rabbinic courts, in the same town maintain a dispute, in the end they will disappear. We must realize that as long as peace reigns among the attendants below, peace will reign among the attendants above, as it is written: “He built His sanctuary [in] the high heavens” When did this occur? It occurred when “He established it forever [on] the earth” (Psalms 78:69). The Netziv of Volozhin wrote that there are two types of rivals: (1) Those whose only concern is themselves, not even claiming to worry about others; and (2) Those who pretend to be unselfish in their actions. The Torah warns us against both categories by stating: “That he not be like Korach and his assembly.” We must not be like Korach, who started a grave conflict for his own selfish gain. Nor should we be like his followers, who allowed themselves to believe that they were involved in a dispute for the sake of Heaven. This applies especially to the sin of dissension, in which the evil inclination makes a person believe that he has various reasons, as well as the permission, to become embroiled in a dispute. The Sages have also said that a dispute that is not unselfish has no future. This is alluded to by the word machloket (“dispute”), whose letters can be rearranged to form the phrase chelek met (“a dead part”). This means that none of the parties involved in a dispute can benefit from it. In addition, the word machloket stands on the leg of the letter kuf, alluding to the inherent instability of the parties involved in a dispute. They are all destined to lose.

To our great regret, we find a tremendous number of disputes in our time as well. No doubt that many of the misfortunes and calamities we see each day stem from this grave sin. Let us therefore flee from dissension and pursue peace.

EISHET CHAYIL

Modesty in Public Settings

Modesty is a distinctive sign that reveals itself not only in a person’s manner of dress, but in all behavior. It is part of a person’s lifestyle that affects all areas of life and is reflected in every action. The honor of a Jewish woman depends on behavior that is composed, refined, and restrained. The goal of such behavior is to express one’s intention to remain unnoticed, an intention that must be the guiding principle for a woman wherever she is.

As the Midrash states, “The daughters of Israel are not loud, they do not walk with a haughty bearing, and they are not boisterous in the streets” (Tanhuma Nasso 2). What the Midrash is saying is clear: Women must not go about in the street making noise, speaking loudly, wearing heels that clang, etc. They must also avoid walking in very large groups that draw people’s attention. When women are walking in the street or when they stop, they must be sure not to block the way, particularly when standing in public places where large numbers of people are present (such as on a bus or in a hospital). Women must also be careful not to get wedged between men, which is not decent at all.

A Jewish woman who acts in a composed and discreet manner will merit that people listen to her, and her personality will shine with wisdom and nobility. Above all, she will merit sanctifying G-d’s Name by her conduct.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Simcha Bunim Alter of Ger – The Lev Simcha

Rabbi Simcha Bunim Alter, the saintly Gerer Rebbe, was born on the day following Passover in the year 5658. His father was the Imrei Emet Zatzal, the Gerer Rebbe in Poland. From his youth, people could see that Rabbi Simcha was destined for greatness. He looked down on the pleasures of this world, and beginning from his early years he studied the holy Torah at all hours of the day.

When he reached the age for marriage, Rabbi Simcha wed the daughter of his uncle, the saintly Rabbi Nechemia Alter Zatzal (the brother of his father and the son of the Sefat Emet of Ger). After Rabbi Simcha’s wedding, he continued to study Torah and did not leave his father for an instant, constantly placing himself at his service.

On Adar 2, 5737, after the passing of his brother, the Rebbe and author of Beit Israel, Rabbi Simcha accepted the leadership of the Ger community, which he guided with tenderness yet firmness toward tranquil waters. As Rebbe, he established important decrees for the Jewish people. He was the first to decree that people should not spend excessive amounts on family celebrations, nor should they purchase homes that were too expensive, decrees that have eased the lives of many of our fellow Jews. The Rebbe also issued the well-known decree to study Daf Yomi in the Jerusalem Talmud. During his time, many new districts for Ger Chassidim were built, the most important being Kiryat Ger in Ashdod. The Gerer Rebbe passed away on Tammuz 7, 5752, and he is buried on the Mount of Olives in the Ger mausoleum. May his merit protect us all.