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Great Ideas Are Dangerous

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 26, 1975)

Jewish mysticism teaches a great principle, which it derives from the verse in Kohelet that God created the world *זה לעומת זה*, “one opposite the other.” This means, according to the Kabbalah, that every manifestation of holiness in the world had an underside of profanity and destructiveness. Hence, when God emanated the ten spheres of holiness, there came into being, corresponding to them *עשר ספירות דמסאבותא*, the ten spheres of impurity. This underside of evil and impurity that always accompanies the phenomena of sanctity, is referred to as the *סטרא אחרא*, “the other side”—a term often applied, in Yiddish, to the devil or demons.

This is not only a mystical idea, but a universal truth that applies at all times and places.

For instance, love is a great idea, but it can easily be distorted into something powerfully destructive: lust. The same tender and warm feelings of love, when applied to the wrong person, become illicit and immoral. No wonder that the word *חסד*, which is usually used to express the idea of affectionate generosity, is also used by the Torah to describe a particularly ugly form of incest.

Self-confidence is a great attribute. Every parent wants to inculcate this quality in his children. Yet by the slightest twist, this great idea reveals its “other side” of impurity, and it becomes -- arrogance, changing a confident person into an insufferably supercilious one.

Democracy is certainly a great idea, one which has inspired millions. Yet the same idea of power being invested in the people can, if one is not careful, turn into its “other side,” and become merely mob-rule. What is a lynch mob, if not democracy distorted?

All of these, and many more, are great ideas which are dangerous. I often use this as a test of an idea. If someone proposes an idea to me, I see if it can become dangerous if it is distorted. If it can not, then probably the idea is trivial!

Of course, one can simply opt for safety and security by abandoning all great ideas--but that is a living death. Rather, it is incumbent upon us to search out greatness, but to beware of going to the extremes, to be always suspicious of taking things to their “logical conclusion,” which usually means the *Sitra Ahara*, the “other side.”

The same principle applies to the quality of zeal. Without it, commitment has little value and can hardly survive. Judaism cannot do without the passion that goes with zeal. Our Sidra begins with the personality of Pinchas, who is the symbol of zeal, *קנאה* in Biblical Hebrew, *קנאות* in modern Hebrew. The Children of Israel sinned with the Midianite women in the cult of the idol Baal Pe-or, and Zimri, one of the princes of the Tribe of Simeon, had flaunted his immoral liaison with a Midianite princess before Moses and the children of Israel. If this had gone unopposed and unpunished, only God knows how dreadful the consequences would have been for Israel then and for all posterity. Whereupon the Priest Pinchas took a sword and stabbed the two perpetrators to death. Our Sidra tells us that because of this act of zeal, Pinchas was awarded with the High Priesthood as a hereditary gift.

Unquestionably, *Kana'ut* is a valuable sentiment. Without this zealotry, without this passion, commitment is at best superficial. Zeal involves self-sacrifice and earnestness.

Such *kana'ut* is not an easy achievement. There may be those who resort to zealotry as a substitute for thinking, but that is not always the case. The zealot is often a lonely man, willing to sacrifice popularity for the sake of his ideals. Consider the difference between the last Sidra and this one. Read through what the pagan prophet Balaam had to say about our people--a veritable string of adulatory compliments! Every time you feel hesitant and uncertain as a Jew, go back to the prophecies of Balaam, and you

will emerge much more optimistic and self-confident. And yet, the Rabbis considered him a pervert and the tradition refers to him as בלעם הרשע, the evil or wicked Balaam! Contrariwise, Pinhas, according to many of our commentators, incurred the displeasure and animosity of large numbers of Israelites by his act of zealousness. And he is praised and offered the perpetual High-Priesthood in recognition of his act!

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 required a great deal of zealousness. Looking back at that era with the benefit of historical perspective and emotional detachment, many of us who at that time were opposed to the extremist groups now can recognize that the so-called “Stern Gang” and the Irgun were indispensable for the success of our venture. And these groups proved far more civilized and moral and humane than the guerrillas of so many other nationalist movements. It is for this reason that we ought offer our respect and undying gratitude to those two young men who were hanged by the British in 1947 and who this past week were re-interred on Mt. Herzl with honors by all of Israel.

And what is true for the State is true for Judaism. We have survived to this day because of the self-sacrifice of countless zealots, the successors of Pinhas.

That is why I am not overly anxious for our camp, what we call “Modern Orthodoxy,” to cut off from the “right wing.” The “Yeshiva world” and the “Hasidic world” are reservoirs of passionate commitment, without which we are wishy-washy, wan, weak, and wavering. Of course I am unhappy with many of their policies. But our very survival may well depend on the degree to which we can become inspired by their zeal and learn to bring passion to our commitments, no matter how much we may disagree with them on specific issues.

In our Sidra, Pinhas is therefore praised and rewarded.

And yet, if we study the verses of today’s Sidra carefully, we can find in them tell-tale signs of reservation and hesitation about zealousness. Our Rabbis were much more explicit when they said that Pinhas acted שלא ברצון חכמים, “against the wishes of the Sages.” But even in the Torah itself we find hints of apprehension that, like all great ideas, Kana’ut has an “other side,” that of destructive fanaticism. The other side of a warm-blooded approach is a hot-headed one.

Thus, one verse reads: לכן אמר הנני נותן לו את בריתי שלום, “Therefore say, Behold I give him (Pinhas) my covenant of peace.” However this verse is a bit difficult. Should it not say לו אמור or אמור לבני ישראל, “say unto him” or, “say unto the Children of Israel?” Instead we find the word אמור all by itself. A number of years ago, a student of mine became

proficient in Semitic languages, and published an article on one verse in the beginning of the Torah, which describes the actions of Cain towards Abel. When we read of the murder by Cain, the Torah says ויאמר קין, “and Cain said,” but does not tell us what he said. This student discovered that in cognate languages, the root אמר frequently means “to puff up” with anger. Thus it means that Cain became angry with Abel and therefore killed him.

I suggest that the same is true for this verse. It means: Therefore become angry, show your displeasure, even at the same time that you are rewarding Pinhas! And give him the covenant of peace, teaching him that zeal must never be sustained, that it is appropriate only for extraordinary moments in history, but that in ordinary life situations there must be only Shalom, peace. The ברית (covenant) is meant for the regular ongoing activities of life, and there only peace and not zeal must prevail.

So the next verse: “And it shall be for him and his descendants after him for an eternal covenant of the priesthood תחת אשר קנא לאלוקי.” That is usually translated as, “because he was zealous for his God.” I suggest that here the word תחת has the meaning of, “instead.” Thus, Pinhas, who did something meritorious when he performed his act of zeal, must not learn to adopt a policy of peace and priesthood instead of zeal. Or perhaps תחת means, in almost a physical sense, “underneath,” that even when one is zealous, underneath the zeal must always be love and peace. Not vengeance but love, not zeal but peace, are the attributes of hereditary priesthood.

So, in all aspects of contemporary life we must seek out Kana’ut, but by keeping it confined and restrained and in the context of love and peace, we will avoid the “other side” of fanaticism.

As I have said, I admire the zeal of our right-wing. But אמור, we must become upset and indignant when it is thoughtless, abusive, uncivilized. At that point, it can well become destructive and self-defeating.

Of course it is not easy to propose clear formulae on how to determine when zeal shades into fanaticism, when passion becomes poisonous.

But if we are conscious of this potential of danger, if we are aware of how destructive great ideas can become, then we will be able to latch on to greatness and avoid the snares and pitfalls of “the other side.”

If אמור, if we are sensitive to the abusers of exalted ideas, then we will attain שלום, לכן הנני נותן לו את בריתי שלום, the blessing and covenant of eternal peace.

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Take Care of Me When I'm Dead

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

The other night I heard a talk given by a history professor about a book he recently wrote which discusses the contributions to American democracy of Alexander Hamilton, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The author mentioned that all of these men were worried about the legacies that they would leave behind, and wanted to be remembered in a good light. John Adams, in fact, began working on his legacy more than twenty years before he died. Finally, despairing of explaining himself properly to the American people, he said to his good friend James Madison, "take care of me when I'm dead," thereby entrusting his legacy to him. This story resonated for me because of what we read in this week's parsha about the petition made by the daughters of Zelophchod to Moshe, and the subsequent petition of Moshe to God, which, as we shall see, can be phrased as, "take care of my people when I'm dead."

After recording the census of the Jewish nation taken before entering the Holy Land, the Torah tells us that daughters of Zelophchod came before Moshe and Elozor and said that their father died in the wilderness without having any sons, and, therefore, they should receive his portion in the land. As Rashi points out, this episode occurred in the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt, after the death of Aharon, because if Aharon had still been alive, the Torah would have recorded that it was Moshe and Aharon who the daughters petitioned, not Moshe and Elozor. Moshe, not knowing what the law was in this case, brought the petition before God, and He responded that the daughters were correct, and that they should receive their father's portion in Eretz Yisroel. God then told Moshe to ascend a mountain and view the Holy Land before he died, because he would not enter it. Moshe petitions God to choose a leader for the nation, and God tells him to appoint Yehoshua. Rashi writes that the reason Moshe made this request now was because he heard God's response that the daughters of Zelophchod spoke correctly, and they inherit their father's portion in the land. Moshe thought that the time had also come for him to claim his rights, and ask that his sons inherit his position and become the leaders of the nation. There are a number of things we need to understand, in connection with this explanation of Rashi. First, even though Moshe did not know how to respond to the daughters of Zelophchod, he

did know that there is a law of inheritance. Therefore, why didn't he ask about the inheritance of his leadership earlier? Secondly, if Moshe was simply claiming his inheritance, why did he phrase his request in the manner in which he did, asking for a leader who would be able to relate to each person on their own level, and praying that the nation not be left as a flock of sheep without a shepherd? On the other hand, if his primary motivation was to assure that the people would have a leader after his death, why did he ask that his sons be appointed? Moreover, if he did have a claim for transferring the leadership role to his sons, why, then, was it given to Yehoshua, instead?

Rav Nissan Alpert, z"l, in his *Limmudei Nissan*, writes that even though Moshe had been taught the laws of inheritance at Mt. Sinai, they did not register with him internally until he was confronted with an actual question in regard to their application. This explanation aligns with an explanation given by Rav Yechezkel Abramsky, z"l, of the gemara in Shabbos, which tells us that when Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, the angels complained and said that the Torah should remain in heaven, with them, and not be given to human beings, who would only corrupt it. Moshe told them that the Torah should of right be given to man, because only human beings experience the circumstances to which the laws of the Torah apply. For example, he argued, only human beings, and not angels, have parents whom they need to honor and fear, and only men work for six days of the week and must observe the seventh day as Shabbos, as a testimony to God's creation of the world. Rabbi Abramsky explained that even though the angels understood this, they still wanted to retain control of the halachic process, and decide how the laws of torah should be applied, rather than allowing human beings to make such decisions. Moshe argued, however, that only those who actually observe the Torah are able to understand the halachic process in a proper way, and apply the laws appropriately. According to Rabbi Alpert, then, Moshe, in a similar way, did not appreciate the full implications of the laws of inheritance until he was confronted with an actual case that he had to decide. Once the daughters of Zelophchod presented their petition, Moshe realized that the time had come for him to make his own petition, as well. I believe, however, that there is an additional element in the petition

of the daughters of Zelophchod that motivated Moshe to make his request, and can help explain why he presented it in the way which he did.

After the daughters of Zelophchod presented Moshe with the basic facts of their case, they asked, “Why should the name of our father be omitted from among his people because he had no son?” (Bamidbar 27:4). The words used to express the issue of being omitted, ‘lamah yigarah’ - literally, why should it be omitted - are very similar to the words used by the people who, as recorded in parshas Beha’aloscha, were impure at the time the Pesach sacrifice was brought in the second year after the exodus, and were thus precluded from bringing it. They then came to Moshe and said, “Why should we be left out by not offering God’s offering in its appointed time among the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 9:7). The words these people used were ‘lamah nigara’ - why should we be left out, similar to the words used by the daughters of Zelophchod, ‘lamah yigara.’ In both cases, the petitioners felt an inner sense of loss by being excluded from the Jewish people in a seminal event in its history, and asked Moshe to be included. When Moshe then realized that, just as the daughters of Zelophchod had a claim to their father’s inheritance, his own sons had a claim to his, he also understood that a leader needs to respond to the inner essence of each individual, as expressed by the daughters of Zelophchod when they said ‘lamah yigara,’ and the petitioners in parshas Beha’aloscha said, ‘lamah nigara. Therefore, when Moshe asked God to appoint a leader in his place, he said, “May the Lord, God of the spirits of all flesh appoint a man over the assembly” (Bamidbar 27:14), meaning, as Rashi explains, that God, who knows the personality of each individual, should

appoint a leader who will be able to deal with each person according to his unique personality.

Rabbi Avrohom Binyomin Sofer, known as the Kesav Sofer, writes in his commentary that the reason Moshe felt that only his sons were qualified to lead the people was that they had observed him on a day to day basis, dealing with the individual needs of each person who came to him. God, however, responded that his student Yehoshua, who never left his tent, and constantly observed him throughout their forty years in the wilderness, was the one who was really qualified to lead the nation in this manner. Why was Yehoshua more qualified than Moshe’s sons to lead the people in a way that responded to each person’s inner essence? Rabbi Avrohom Borenstein, in his commentary Shem MiShmuel, writes that while the leader of the nation must respond to each person’s inner needs, he must, at the same time, maintain the unity of the nation. This is why, he says, the section of the daily olah sacrifice, or ‘korban tomid,’ immediately follows the section of Yehoshua’s appointment. That daily sacrifice came from communal funds, and represented the unity of the nation. Although Rabbi Bornstein does not say this, perhaps we can suggest that this was also the element that Yehoshua had which Moshe’s sons lacked, since Torah, as well, is the basis of the unity of the Jewish people. Thus Yehoshua, as Moshe’s devoted student, understood not only how to respond to each person’s inner needs, but also understood how these needs actually emanated from each person’s connection to the Torah. With this understanding, he was able to maintain the unity of the nation while at the same time responding to each person’s inner essence.

Kaparah For Our Free-Will

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled “Being Mechaper for our Free-Will,” given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jul 21, 2016)

Chazal have a very strange drasha in this week’s Parsha on the topic of Rosh Chodesh. The pasuk says *ve-seir izim echad, chatas la-Hashem*. Rashi explains that Hashem is telling us: Bring korban Chatas on Me—to atone for Me. Why do we need to atone for Hashem? Because He was mima’et the Yare’ach. There is a well-known Aggadah in the Gemora about the Sun and the Moon. They were the shnei me’oros ha-gedolim—they were both equally large. However,

the Moon complained that two kings cannot wear the same crown—someone must be in charge. So, very fairly, Hashem said to the Moon to go and make itself smaller. And therefore, Hashem said: Bring kaparah for Me for doing this. And therefore, on Rosh Chodesh—which is all about the waxing and waning Moon—we bring this korban as kaparah for Hashem. This is obviously a peculiar Aggadah that cannot be understood on its simplest level. What does it mean to be mechaper for Hashem?

Hashem doesn't do anything wrong—He is perfect. He doesn't do us favors. He certainly doesn't need us to be mechaper for Him. It sounds almost blasphemous! So, what point are Chazal trying to convey in this Aggadah? There are numerous peshatim found in the Acharonim. Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains this Aggadah allegorically. He says: What is the meaning of the Moon becoming smaller? It is not referring to the actual size of the Moon. The mi'ut ha-Yare'ach means the diminishment of Hashem's light—Hashem withdrew some of His spiritual illumination from the world. The Kabbalah says that the mi'ut ha-Yare'ach came from the chet of the Eitz ha-Da'as. What does this mean? He says that the mi'ut ha-Yare'ach means that Hashem runs the whole world. Hashem is all-powerful; He's all-knowing; He created the whole world. Everything should just be ratzon Hashem. As it says: Kol ha-nikra bi-shmi ve-lichvodi barasiv, yetzartiv af asisiv (Yeshaya 43:7). But Hashem withdrew His light from the world and gave Man bechirah chafshis. That was, as it were, the chet that Hashem did. What did Hashem do wrong? He didn't do anything wrong. But He withdrew His light and gave us the ability to do a chet. He gave us the independence to use our bechirah chafshis to decide whether to do the right thing or the wrong thing—to resolve to obey Him or to rebel. You could attribute every bad thing in the world to Hashem's decision to give us the bechirah chafshis. Why did He do this? If we would make a free will choice to do the right thing, it would be more meaningful and deeper. And it would achieve something higher than if we were just robots or malachim, or any other part of the beriya. However, Hashem ends up being responsible for all the evil in the world. How are we mechaper for that? How do we show that our bechira chafshis is actually a good thing? When we do mitzvos—when we use our bechira positively, we are mechaper, as it were. Because we really create something greater. And even if we did aveiros—*be-*

makom she-ba'alei teshuva omdim, tzadikim gemurim einam omdim. Even if we did things wrong—if we do teshuva for those aveiros, improve, and start doing the right thing from now on, we retroactively made it a good thing that Hashem gave us bechira chafshis. Because now the world is misaleh—it goes to a higher level than it would have been, had we not done those aveiros. And that's what it means when we bring this kapara on Rosh Chodesh. What is Rosh Chodesh? It's a Chag—as it were—a special day of his'chadshus. It teaches us that even though the Moon diminished in size, it can increase again. Even if you went down to the lowest spiritual level, you could always have his'chadshus—you always have another chance. And therefore, by taking the message of Rosh Chodesh to heart, we realize that whatever we did—however low we fell, nevertheless, we can always go back up. And when we realize that we have the ko'ach of his'chadshus to do teshuva and turn our aveira into something good—then it comes out that we have been mechaper. We have turned all the bad that Hashem indirectly caused in the world into something good. And even though, as Rav Hirsch says, it seems irreverent to say that we are mechaper for Hashem. We don't really mean to be blasphemous—to say that we are more powerful than Hashem, as it were. But it teaches us something true. We are not, chas ve-shalom, more powerful than Hashem. But Hashem gave us bechira chofshis specifically so that we can fix those things that He can't fix on His own—because He left it up to our free will. It's up to us to take whatever bad there is in the world and make it into something good—fix the world, and make it into Hashem's ideal creation. Hashem can't do that. He's waiting for us to be mechaper for Him, as it were, for the mi'ut of Yare'ach. When we use our bechira chofshis properly—and turn the bad into something good with the ko'ach of his'chadshus—we perfect the creation of the world and, as it were, justify Hashem to show that everything He did leads to kevod shomaim.

A Fusion of Past and Present

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Ours is a religion of the new; even as we commemorate historical events, our mindset is in the here and now. As Rashi writes, “Every day, [the mitzvot] shall be new in your eyes, as though instructed that day.” (Commentary to Devarim 26:16)

Similarly, the Talmud avers that authentic Torah study leads to new ideas. (Chagigah 3a) We may offer a voluntary prayer any time we choose, but only if we include a new element. (Berachot 21a)

This religion of the new makes spiritual sense; the

appoint Yehoshua bin Nun as the next leader (v.18-23), which Moshe promptly proceeds to do, before the eyes of the entire assembly.

Interestingly, the very next topic in the parsha is the Korban Tamid - the daily burnt offering offered twice a day in the Mishkan (and then Beis HaMikdash). The very next pasukim say: And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: “Command Bnei Yisrael and say to them: My offering, My food, for My fire offerings, a spirit of satisfaction for Me, you shall take care to offer to Me at its appointed time” (28:1-2).

Rabbi Shalom Rosner asks, “What is the connection between Moshe requesting a successor and the korban tamid?”

“The Mishkan Betzalel (Rabbi Betzalel Yehuda Rudinsky) offers a beautiful explanation linking these two seemingly distinct directives. A leader, like a king, is totally committed to his people, constantly acting on their behalf. There is no personal time for a king, no moment when he is free from responsibility. He is on duty 24/7. Moshe’s request of HKB”H was that He would appoint a leader who is like a king, like a shepherd. Just like sheep cannot be abandoned for a moment, so too, Bnei Yisrael cannot be abandoned for a moment.

“HKB”H replies to Moshe: You are asking that Bnei Yisrael should have a constant leader? You are asking Me to do something constant for them? Tell them to do something constant for Me. The korban tamid is offered twice daily. Please have Bnei Yisrael offer a daily sacrifice to show they are constantly connected to Me. If Bnei Yisrael do that for me, I will provide them with a leader that will care for them.

“... The significance of the korban tamid, as its name implies, lies in its constancy and consistency. It is the same sacrifice that we offer each morning and evening. It symbolizes the way we are required to approach our avodat Hashem. Indeed - Shachrit and Mincha were instituted based on the korban tamid. We cannot have an attitude of, ‘Oh, I davened and learned yesterday, let me take a break today.’ We must act in a consistent, persistent and unrelenting manner. If we serve G-d with consistency, He will provide us with the constant supervision and guidance of devoted and dedicated leaders” (Shalom Rav, v.II, p.281-283).

As we enter the summer months, this is an especially relevant, timely and pertinent lesson and reminder. Our

level of avodas Hashem should not change based on vacations we may take, new places and environments we may visit, and new situations we find ourselves in. To be an eved Hashem is to live by the maxim of שְׂוִתָּי ה' לְנִגְדֵי תָמִיד, *I have placed Hashem before me always and consistently* (Tehillim 16:8).

Parshas Pinchas teaches us that when we are consistent in our service of G-d, middah k'neged middah (measure for measure), He will be consistent in the care and providence He provides for us, and to us.

Rabbi Boruch Perton relates, “When I was Mechina (in Yeshivas Ner Yisrael Baltimore), I had earned the rank of Eagle Scout with the Boy Scouts. I wanted an extra ‘out Shabos’ to attend the special celebration being held in my honor. I asked Rebbi (Rabbi Yosef Tandler z'l), who had never heard of an Eagle Scout, for permission to go. I explained what an Eagle Scout was, and he said, ‘You can go on one condition. I will write a dvar Torah that you will say at the event.’ And he did. It was about priorities and values, and stressed that the most important thing in this world is not being an Eagle Scout, but being a ben Torah.

“I went, and I gave the dvar Torah. Without exaggeration, every time I spent Shabos with him for the next thirty years, he reminded me of that dvar Torah. In November 2010, I was spending a Shabos with Rebbi when his brother, R' Shalom, was there. Once again, Rebbi reminded me of that dvar Torah, saying it over to his brother at the Shabos table” (I am Your Servant, Artscroll, p.246).

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l teaches that, “An individual must be the same person on the street, at home, in the office, in his bedroom, and in Shul as he is when he stands wrapped in his tallis during Ne'ilah... This idea is the underlying theme of the maxim, שְׂוִתָּי ה' לְנִגְדֵי תָמִיד. In His audience, one’s behavior is consistent” (Machzor Ha'Rav la'R”H, p. 577-579).

In our every day lives, may we place G-d before us always and consistently, and in His great compassion, may He place us and our needs before Him tamid, always and consistently.

Leaving Our Routine

Rabbi Yossi Goldin

In the opening of this week's parsha, we encounter G-d's praise of Pinchas for his extra-judicial killing of Zimri and Kozbi. G-d praises Pinchas effusively, and suggests that his actions even prevented G-d's destruction of Am Yisrael. What remains elusive, however, is any hint regarding the cause of Bnei Yisrael's sin at this particular juncture. Two parshiyot ago, at the end of Parshat Chukat, the nation successfully defeats the armies of Cheshbon and Bashan- Bnei Yisrael appear on a high, primed for entry into Eretz Yisrael. Last week's parsha, the story of Bilaam and Balak, occurs outside the purview of the nation, and therefore doesn't seem to impact their mindset. Yet at the end of Parshat Balak, Bnei Yisrael suddenly begin a large-scale descent towards sin- committing adultery with the women of Moav/Midian as well as serving avodah zara.

What was the impetus for the nation's sudden decline- why now? A number of suggestions are made by the commentaries, but I would like to share the suggestions of the Ohr HaChaim and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch. Both suggest that the answer to our question can be found in a seemingly innocuous statement made by the Torah at the beginning of this entire episode. The Torah opens the narrative of Bnei Yisrael's sin with the words: "And Yisrael settled in Shittim, and the nation began to commit adultery with the women of Moab". By explicitly mentioning where Bnei Yisrael "settled" before they sinned, these commentaries explain, the Torah also hints to the cause of their downfall. The Ohr Hachaim points out that the root of the word "Shittim" means "to travel and explore". Following their successful victories against the nations of Cheshbon and Bashan, many members of the nation decided to take a break, and left the camp of Am Yisrael to travel and explore the areas around them. This opened them up to the challenge of outside influences, ultimately leading to their sin. Rav Hirsch, in his commentary on the Torah, gives a similar but slightly different explanation- he suggests that the name "Shittim" references an actual place mentioned in Sefer Micha, a place that was a "woody shady region". Rav Hirsch explains: "After the victorious fight against Sihon and Og, rich with their booty, Israel settled down to a comfortable enjoyable rest ... it was a wooded, shady region which offered a very welcome relaxation after the long wandering in the burning sun of the desert."

It was this desire for relaxation and enjoyable rest that ultimately caused Am Yisrael to "break away from the moral faithfulness to duty to which they kept themselves hitherto" and sent them into a downward spiral into sin.

While the Ohr HaChaim and Rav Hirsch differ in the particular details, the overall message is the same. At this point in time, Am Yisrael had just enjoyed two major victories, and were looking forward to the opportunity to take a break and enjoy themselves- to step out of their regular schedule. And while that desire may have been understandable, the new circumstances and reality also opened the Jewish nation to new challenges and struggles that they were not prepared for- ultimately resulting in their falling to temptation.

In our day to day lives, we often establish a certain routine- and within that established routine, we strive to make sure that proper time is set aside for those things that are important to us- family, Torah study, spiritual growth. While there may be specific times where we fail to maintain all that we strive to accomplish, once a routine is established, we are generally successful at sticking to it, and to prioritizing the values that have been incorporated into that routine. Over time, we are better able to assess and recognize the difficulties and points of friction within this daily routine- and work hard to navigate through them in the best way that we can.

The big challenge occurs, however, when we are taken out of our routine- a family vacation, the Chagim, the summer. Most often, these changes are welcome, and at times even extremely important. We may look forward to these experiences for months. We all need time to take a break from our daily lives- to recharge, re-energize, enjoy ourselves, and relax. At the same time, a singular challenge arrives with these "extracurricular" moments- as, during them, we can no longer rely on our routine, or on our habits, to ensure that we keep to our value system and act accordingly. A change in schedule, environment, and numerous other factors can lead to unique challenges that we are not accustomed to, or typically prepared for. In addition, sometimes the overall atmosphere and mindset during vacation is one of freedom and loosening of restrictions. We must therefore be extra vigilant; to make every attempt to identify the pitfalls in advance and to

prepare ourselves for them. In addition, we must be extra-sensitive to our standards and values, and make sure that even during these “vacation” moments, we are true to who we are and to what we believe in.

As we begin another summer season- one that we all deserve after an intense couple of years of isolation, social distancing, and overall anxiety- it is incumbent upon us to remember this message both for ourselves and our children. For many of us and our children, the summer is the highlight of our year- an opportunity to spend more time with family and friends, to go on vacation, to enjoy ourselves and to relax. And most often, it is a well-deserved opportunity; crucial for our mental health and happiness. At the same time, the summer vacation- like all breaks from routine-presents certain challenges. For some of us, summertime may tempt us to lessen our commitment to tefillah, Torah study, and overall spiritual growth; or we may be enticed to participate in specific activities that we would normally not get involved in. For our children, the lack of a basic school structure may create an environment in which they are not davening, learning, or growing spiritually or educationally during these summer months. And we may tend to be laxer about the types of things we allow our kids to do during this vacation period, as well. Specifically for teenage and pre-teenage children, the

summer months can sometimes be associated with various types of activities that during the year we would never normally allow our children to take part in- but they we tend to allow it during the summer. As responsible parents, we must not take a passive and laissez-faire attitude towards all of this. We must be thoughtful about the values that are important to us, and ensure that even during this extended vacation, both we, and our children, remain committed to those values. Particularly with regards to our children, we must be sure to fill in any educational and religious gaps that may exist due to the lack of structure- and not allow this time to simply become a “free for all”.

We all, as parents and adults, have religious standards and values that we believe in setting for ourselves and our children. These ideals and principles form the backbone of our religious identity- and we strive to maintain them throughout our daily lives. The lesson we learn from Bnei Yisrael at Shittim is that, while it is always a struggle to stick to our ideals, it is particularly challenging to do so when we move outside our routine; when we are suddenly faced with new and often unfamiliar challenges. The more aware we are of these challenges in advance, and the more we plan for the moments of their appearance- the better equipped we will be to help ourselves, and our children.

The Children of Korach, Dasan and Aviram

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

In the course of presenting the genealogy and census of B'nei Yisroel in Parshas Pinchas, the Torah tells us, “And the children of Korach did not die.” (Bamidbar 26:11) Explaining how they survived the calamitous event of being swallowed up by the earth along with their father and his crew, Rashi cites the Gemara in Sanhedrin (110A) that Korach's children had misgivings (“hirkhurei teshuva”) for having been involved with their father's rebellion, and they therefore merited to be saved and were miraculously provided with some type of elevated platform to remain upon when they descended with their father and his crew into the earth, such that they did not sink deep into the ground and were saved.

In contrast with Korach's children, the children of Dasan and Aviram, the main co-conspirators in Korach's rebellion, were swallowed up in the earth and perished. There is no record of these people having done teshuva

and being spared. Why the difference? Why did Korach's children have hirkhurei teshuva and the children of Dasan and Aviram apparently expressed no remorse?

An attitude of defiance toward Moshe Rabbeinu and support for Korach's insurrection on the part of the children of Dasan and Aviram is pretty evident, for the Torah recounts in Parshas Korach that “Dasan and Aviram exited and stood at the entrances of their tents, with their wives and children” (Bamidbar 16:27), whereupon the Tanchuma (cited by Rashi) and Targum Yonasan ben Uziel explain that Dasan and Aviram came out of their tents to brazenly engage in blasphemy (with their families by their sides). It appears that the wives and children of Dasan and Aviram did not object to the conduct of Dasan and Aviram and were in a sense culpable by association and support of these men's evil words and actions. This incident further compels us to ask why the children of Korach disassociated

from their father's evil campaign, whereas the children of Dasan and Aviram did not do so. (Korach's wife was another story; Chazal tell us [Sanhedrin *ibid.*, Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3] that she was a major source of instigation in Korach's rebellion.)

Despite what some people might assume, prior to his uprising, Korach had been a man of great Torah prominence. The Medrash (Bamidbar Rabba *ibid.*, s. 3) relates, "Korach was a great sage and was a bearer of the Aron (the Holy Ark)." The Radal elaborates that all those who bore the Aron were eminent talmidei chachamim, great Torah scholars. It is clear that prior to his rebellion, Korach was a towering spiritual figure.

In contrast, we have no such record regarding Dasan and Aviram, whose backgrounds were quite different than that of Korach. Chazal tell us that the two Jewish slaves who were engaged in a violent fight in Mitzrayim, broken up by Moshe, and who thereupon informed Pharaoh about Moshe's killing the Egyptian who was beating a Jew, resulting in Moshe nearly being executed (Shemos 2:13-15), were none other than Dasan and Aviram. So too, Chazal relate that it was Dasan and Aviram who accosted Moshe and Aharon and wished bad upon them for their having confronted Pharaoh to demand that he free B'nei Yisroel, which resulted in hardship for the people (*ibid.* 5:20-21), and we are also told that the individuals who violated Hashem's command by leaving Mann (Manna) overnight (*ibid.* 16:20) were Dasan and Aviram. Furthermore, it is clear from the words of the Torah and Chazal that the interactions of Korach and of Dasan and Aviram with Moshe were quite different; Korach spoke in grand platitudes with false notions of holiness as he launched his rebellion, and he made outlandish allegations against Moshe – whereas Dasan and Aviram addressed Moshe head-on with vile contempt and sheer chutzpah (e.g. Bamidbar 16:12-14).

Please now imagine the examples set at home for the children of Korach and for the children of Dasan and Aviram. Before his insurgency, Korach was an illustrious Torah personality. Growing up prior to his rebellion, Korach's children undoubtedly were exposed to powerful positive influences; although Korach's children initially went along with his rebellion and only reconsidered their support of it at the last moment, they had absorbed an adequate dose of proper Torah values to inspire them to withdraw from their father's misguided and sinful

campaign of usurpation. Furthermore, even when engaging in his malicious rebellion, Korach remained a bit more dignified and did not stoop to the base and course level of expression as that of Dasan and Aviram; Korach's previous Torah stature continued to rub off somewhat on his personality, and the upbringing of his children during his tenure as a distinguished Torah leader clearly affected them for the long term.

In contrast, the children of Dasan and Aviram were exposed to their fathers' patterns of negative actions from the start. Although every person has free will, the children of Dasan and Aviram were subjected to repeated negative examples by their father and lacked a sufficient amount of positive stimuli to cause them to instinctively reject the malicious ways of their fathers. This is why Korach's children harbored feelings of remorse for having been involved with their father's rebellion and were therefore spared punishment, and why the children of Dasan and Aviram did not follow the ways of Korach's children.

A few crucial lessons emerge from this all. Firstly and quite obviously is the impact that parents' conduct has on their children. When children are raised in strong Torah homes and they see their parents' unwavering commitment to Torah over the course of many years, it impacts and is likely to exert influence even if the parents later veer off the path. We have witnessed how the children of fellow Jews who left Torah observance often continue to follow the Torah, due to their years of proper Torah training, despite their parents' later actions. But when children witness their parents doing that which is wrong, particularly as a long-term way of life, it is far rarer for the children to stick to the right path.

Another lesson is the incredible impact that positive exposure to Torah can have, even if the person is also absorbing messages that are antithetical to the Torah. One never knows if a moment of inspiration will be fondly recalled later and will make an important future impact. Countless stories abound of people who experienced one or two highly inspirational events, which eventually changed their lives.

While we obviously do not seek to emulate the examples of Korach or of Dasan and Aviram, let us recognize the difference between them and appreciate the stark impact of positive exposure to Torah, which can win the day in the face of the most adverse of opposing forces.