The Sons of Korach

Contemplating *Teshuvah*

by

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Balak failed. Bilaam failed.

Try though they might, they could not speak ill and curse *B’nei Yisrael*. Yet, evil is ever resourceful and ever determined. There was one last, best hope to bring down the great nation of Israel – sexual immorality. So, we see the Moab women entice the people and many, many fall to their enticement. The Midian women set their sights on the elite. Zimri was a prince, of the tribe of Shimon.

With Midian utilizing this “nuclear” weapon, the people were nearly brought to their knees. Sexual immorality was the almost unbeatable rival.   It is then, when the people were most vulnerable to the lure of immorality that God commands Israel to go to battle with Midian, “to exact retribution.” (31:16)

God is patient with much of human frailty and drama, but He does not tolerate immorality. For all our flaws, we remain His nation… until we lose the shield of morality. Without morality and righteousness, we cease to be His nation.  In *Moreh Nevuchim* (1:36), Rambam notes that it is only when provoked by immorality that the Torah speaks of God’s anger, His af (wrath). For in our immorality, we risk falling too far.

The opening of our parasha reports that, Pinchas “…zealously avenged Me among them.” God commands Moshe to, “… harass the Midianites and smite them, for they harassed you...”

The Or HaChaim explains that the Midianites had to be eradicated not simply to exact revenge but to make clear that we need to constantly battle immoral pleasure and lustful acts. We are like our ancient brethren, in an eternal battle with immorality. Desire is always pulsing just beneath the surface, ready to reemerge. God is making clear that *B’nei Yisrael* needs to understand that what seems to be a momentary, tempting pleasure is, in fact, a threat to its very existence. There can be no truce; no amiable withdrawal. There must be absolute defeat. Immorality must be wiped out. There can never be enough, *tzniut*.

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The price for such immorality? A plague. Twenty-four thousand perish. *Vayehi acharei ha’magefa* (it was after the plague) begins the next chapter. And after the plague? God does what He always does – He counts those who remain; He takes a census. “Like a shepherd who counts his sheep after the flock has been ravaged by wolves,” Rashi explains, “God wanted to count His children who survived…”

So, Chapter Twenty-six enumerates the tribes and their families, beginning with the tribe of Reuven and families, including the children of Eliav – Nemuel, Datan and Aviram. Yes, the infamous Datan and Aviram who, “…contended against Moshe and Aaron among the assembly of Korach.”

For those who might not remember what happened, the Torah reminds us, “Then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed two hundred and fifty men...” followed by, almost as an afterthought, Ub’nei Korach lo meitu – but the sons of Korach did not die. What? These rebellious ones were swallowed up, “they and all that was theirs descended alive to the pit” … and then a “…flame came forth from Hashem and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.”

It was a certain and complete punishment for Korach, his wife, his children… but no, now in *parashat Pinchas* we learn that Korach’s sons did not die.

They did not die.

But did they live?

The phrasing is troubling. We are not told that they lived, just that they did not die. If they were spared what happened to them? Could they have been swallowed up with the others but not die? Rashi examines this disturbing phrasing by citing the Talmud (Megilah 14a) which tells that Korach’s sons had indeed, “initially, took part in Korach’s counsel” but as the *machlokes* progressed, “their hearts entertained thoughts of *teshuvah*.”

*Teshuvah*! Exoneration! But they seem *not to be exonerated*. Instead they were assigned to a place, “…created for them at a high place of *Gehinom* where they still dwell.” And from that place, they “…sing *shirah*.” (Sanhedrin 110a)

The Lubavitcher Rebbe tells us that it’s true Korach’s sons considered *teshuva* – considered it but did not actually repent. To all outward appearances, “they remained rebels to the very end.”

Genuine *teshuva* demands a complete break with sin, not simply the contemplation of it. Therefore, as far as we are concerned, they “perished along with everyone else.”  Still, it is not nothing to contemplate *teshuva*. That contemplation, the Rebbe tells us, meant that they remained alive, “…but hidden from the view in the interior of the earth.”

There is often a disconnect between what we see and what exists in the inner recesses of another’s heart. But, as Chazal teach, we can only judge by what we see and hear. We have no access to another’s heart and soul. Only the One Above sees our hearts and seeing the hearts of Korach’s sons, He put them, “at a high place of *Gehinom*”.

“Everyone does it” is both an excuse and an invitation. Who is strong enough to stand opposed to the crowd? Who is strong enough to stand opposed to evil and errant ways *in their own homes*? Imagine Korach’s sons constantly seeing and hearing their father and his cohorts standing up against God and His emissaries, Moshe and Aaron! How could they, surrounded by such evil, be expected to find their way to goodness? For them simply to contemplate *teshuvah* was more than most of us could imagine.

But why, even for them, is the contemplation of *teshuvah* not enough? It is true that initially they, “took part in Korach’s counsel” but then, “their hearts entertained thoughts of *teshuva*.” Why isn’t that good enough? Isn’t that *teshuva*? Why do they get a high rise in *Gehinom* but not forgiveness, and not life?

What is missing is a simple act, the act of stating out loud, “I have sinned”. *Teshuva* without *vidui* (confession) falls short. Thus, in *Hilchot Teshuva* Rambam states, “If a person transgresses any of the mitzvoth of the Torah, willingly or inadvertently, when he repents and returns from his sin, he must confess before God.” He must *verbally* confess; he must perform *vidui*. The essence of *teshuva* is *vidui ­*– a verbal confession.

Contemplating. Reflecting. Considering. Conjuring. Wishing and hoping. We can do all these – and all are commendable – but until and unless we speak our failings and inadequacies, our sin, out loud, *teshuva* is lacking. Rambam concludes that, “Whoever confesses profusely and elaborates on these matters is worthy of praise.”

*Vidui* focuses us on our sins with a laser like sharpness. It is not real until it is spoken aloud. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explains in the context of the laws of transactions relating to property and other areas, dvarim sh’balev einam dvarim – words in one’s heart, are not words. *Vidui* forces man to admit the facts as they really are, to express the painful truth.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches that it is not God who needs our confession. He *knows* what is in our hearts. He knows what we think, contemplate and consider. He knows our psychological methods and ways. *Vidui* is not for God, it is for us. We need, “honest and unreserved confession.”

 Which brings us to B’nei Korach’s fate. They sinned. They clearly sinned. But unlike the others, their “…hearts entertained thoughts of teshuva”. They contemplated but never confessed. As a result, their punishment was lessened to, “at a high place in *Gehinom*.”   They were swallowed up with the others, but because of their *teshuva* contemplation, they did not sink all the way to the depths of *Gehinom*.

 Recognition of sin and error is a step in the right direction. Korach’s sons contemplated that first step. As a result, their punishment was lessened. Their *teshuva* was not complete for there was no *vidui* therefore, their forgiveness was not complete.

The passage in Sanhedrin (110a) concludes, “…and from that spot amru shira – they sang. They sang praise for being “saved”. But what, really, was for them to sing about? After all, they were condemned to *Gehinom*. And yet their “contemplations of *teshuva*” and their recognition of the conflict and challenge of their upbringing was enough to stir within them a melody, a song, a glimpse of righteousness.

And that is not nothing.

Misdeeds have their consequences. A price must be paid. Regardless of where one finds himself – serving a long sentence in *Gehinom*, or in prison, or, due to the cruelty of others, in the Gulagor in Auschwitz, or in any demeaning or dehumanizing place – so long as there remains a song within his soul, there is a Godly recognition that they “did not die”.

Psalm 47, numbered among the 150 Psalms, was written by the sons of Korach. L’amenatzayach li’vney Korach mizmor – “…acclaim God with shouts of joy...He is the Great King over all the earth...Sing to the Lord, sing! ... For God is king over all the earth; sing with keen understanding...”

Even at the very last moment, Korach’s sons were able to contemplate *teshuva*. They and their children were able to compose Psalms, to reach the highest spiritual levels of Godly praise as modeled by King David, the Psalmist himself.  Even more than being able to compose a Psalm, consider that we recite this Psalm prior to blowing the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah! Just as we stand at the precipice, preparing to reach the pinnacle of our religious experience and inspiration, we speak the song of B’nei Korach.

B’nei Korach did not die. Despite participating in their father’s rebellion, they were able to contemplate *teshuva*, they were able to take the first step toward God. If they can take that first step, certainly so can we! If they were able to rise above the immorality of their time *even if just as a contemplation of doing so* then so can we. None of us has sunk so low as to not be able to contemplate our sins and, having contemplated them, perhaps taking that necessary next step to *teshuva* – confession.

In the stillness of the critical moment when, on Rosh Hashanah, we are to hear the blast of the Shofar it is Korach’s sons who sing to us from *Gehinom*, who remind us to repent with all our hearts and souls *and our words* so that we may know forgiveness.