

The True Measure of Success – Parshat Korach

written by Refael Kramer | June 10, 2021



Knowledge is not everything in life or in Judaism. The success and stature of a person is measured by how much energy he invests and what he actually accomplishes and not by how much knowledge or talent he has. The way to actually achieve something is through one's aspirations for good. This is the message of this week's parsha.

This week's Torah portion is *parshat "Korach."* The main focus of the parsha is the story of the controversy between Korach and his followers against Moses. Korach was extremely intelligent. He was wealthy and esteemed, and he came from one of the most distinguished families in Israel: the family of Kehat, the son of Levi. He set out on a divisive mission

against Moses which began with the leaders of the nation, the heads of the Sanhedrin, and included both the greatest and best of the nation, each and every one of them. Korach and his followers' bitter end was that they were pulled down into Hell alive, together with their families and all their belongings. All of them were swallowed up into the earth while they were still alive.

Without a clear understanding of the background, the punishment seems quite severe and even extreme. About this severity, Rashi notes: "Consider the severity of dispute. The earthly courts do not punish until [the accused] has two [pubic] hairs [13 years old], and the heavenly court does not punish until one reaches the age of twenty, but here even nursing babes were punished" (Rashi, Numbers 16:27). Therefore, it is important to understand very well what Korach's sin was, and what was so terrible about the traumatic event. The Torah describes the event: "All the people who were around them fled from their cries, for they said, 'Lest the earth swallow us up [too]!'" (Numbers 16:34).

First the facts:

Korach set out to turn the people against Moses. He gathered together judges and the heads of the Sanhedrin, and he tried to "prove to them" that there was something irrational (G-d forbid) about the *mitzvot*. He wanted to prove that Moses and Aaron had invented (G-d forbid) the laws of the Torah by themselves.

In retrospect, everyone knows that it all stemmed his own from personal jealousy of Elitzafan ben Uziel who was named *nasi*-prince (Rashi Numbers 16:1). This means that it was all his own completely personal issue on his part. But outwardly, Korach concealed his malicious intentions and gave the pretention of one who was seeking and demanding the truth.

Korach presented his claims with drama and ridicule. He turned

up dressed in tallit which was completely the color *techelet* and asked Moses: "This tallit which is made completely of *techelet* threads—must tzitzit be attached to it or is it exempt?" Moses replied: "It must have tzitzit." Then Korach asked: "If a tallit with one single thread of *techelet* exempts the entire garment, how is it possible then that a tallit which is completely *techelet* does not exempt itself? Why should it be required to have tzitzit?" (In our article for parshat *Tazria-Metzora*, we brought Rabbi Natan's comprehensive explanation of Korach's mistake and what kinds of malicious intentions were behind it.)

Knowing Torah is not enough to draw close to the Creator. It is not possible to learn and know the Torah but then to put oneself forward to perform the holy service with one's base desires.

Korach continued: "The entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Numbers 16:3). Korach believed that when a man was a qualified and knowledgeable Torah scholar, there should be no spiritual preference for one person over another. Therefore, he refused to acknowledge that Moses and Aaron were greater than him and claimed: "The entire congregation are all holy. Everyone heard G-d pronounce the first of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, 'I am the Lord, your G-d' (Rashi). If so, there should be no place for class differences." And accordingly, he wanted that he too would have a regular turn to serve as a kohen.

However, Korach had made a grave mistake: the main standard by which man is judged is not the amount of his knowledge—not even Torah knowledge, so long as it is not intended to promote spiritual service and growth in order to come closer to the Creator, to pray with intention, and distance oneself from his physical desires.

Here we come to a very important topic regarding our role and our place in this world: our yearnings and our connection to the Creator.

Rabbi Nachman teaches us a wonderful concept related to this matter:

The letters, as long as they have no vowels, are meaningless hieroglyphics that resemble a body without a soul. It is impossible to proceed from letter to letter without the vowel points. Thus, the letters alone are inanimate, like a lifeless form that cannot move. The vowel points are what enable advancement from letter to letter and give vitality to the letters. In this sense, the letters resemble the *nefesh* or soul. This is hinted to in the verse: "*Nekudot shel kesef*," "Points of silver" (Song of Songs 1:11). The word for silver ("*kesef*") has the same root as the word for yearning ("*kisufim*"). This signifies that it is the yearning that creates the "*neukodot*" (vowel points) which then activates the body. To use a contemporary example, an electrical appliance is operated by the power of electricity according to how it is designed to function, and it will function according to the way it is activated.

To continue the analogy, everything in creation is made of letters and is activated according to the yearnings, in the same way that the vowel points activate the letters. When a person longs for something good, he activates the good which exists in that thing and thereby strengthens the good and inclines that thing towards the side of good. But if he yearns for something bad (G-d forbid), he awakens the power of evil and draws evil on himself. This is even true with regard to Torah study. It is not enough to study. One needs to illuminate the letters of the Torah through his yearnings. Concepts such as "scholar" and "*tzaddik*" can be explained in the same way. It is not enough to be a scholar who knows Torah; rather, a person must also be a *tzaddik*, which means he strives to fulfill the Torah with his fear of G-d more than

his wisdom. When a person learns Torah, if he merits and yearns for good, he causes an influx of goodness. Everything in the world has its source in the Torah, and the Torah is the aspect of: "If he merits it will be an elixir of life, and if he does not merit, it will be an elixir of death," G-d forbid (Yoma 72b). (from *Likutei Moharan* I, 31).



The letters, as long as they have no vowels, are meaningless hieroglyphics that resemble a body without a soul!

Now let us return to our *parsha*:

Korach felt that he was so close to the Creator only because of his knowledge, and he was willing to take a chance and sacrifice the incense. He thought that it would be willingly accepted only because of his knowledge—because he was such a *Gaon* and a scholar who understood the words of the Creator and knew the secrets of the Torah and the secret of the incense.

But this was a grave mistake! Knowing Torah is not enough to draw close to the Creator. It is not possible to learn and know the Torah but then to put oneself forward to perform the holy service with one's base desires. The essence of drawing close to the Creator is reckoned not according to what you

know, but rather by how you behave! The more you implement what you know, the closer you draw to the Creator.

Therefore, Korach, who sinned in this matter, was punished by being swallowed up by the earth. The letters correspond to the body and the vowel points correspond to the soul. Heaven and earth also correspond to the body and the soul, as our sages said on the verse, "He shall call to the heavens above and to the earth below to avenge His people" (Psalms 50:4). "To the heavens above" refers to the soul, "and to the earth below," refers to the body" (Sanhedrin 91).

Korah completely made fun of this whole concept of "*kisufim*" (longing), and thus he gave importance to the body as if that were the only thing that mattered. The dramatic controversy and the way he opposed Moses had a physical expression. He drew the letters of the Torah for bad, and so he drew down the connections of the letters of the Torah for bad, strengthening the aspect of the body over the soul until it literally formed a "mouth" in the earth and swallowed him up. Instead of the body being subjugated to the spiritual and serving it, he attempted to force the soul and the longings to serve the body and thereby the earth. Therefore, it was the earth that literally opened its mouth and swallowed him.

The way to rectify this mistake is to increase one's desire for good. Anyone wants to have mercy on his soul, when he sees what he is going through spiritually, should simply open his mouth and give expression to his soul by crying out to G-d. In this matter also, there are many different levels. It is not enough to do it by rote. It needs to be accompanied with yearning and an infinite desire and constant longing to come closer to the Creator. This is how one achieves an ever-increasing, true closeness to the Creator. The way to connect the aspect of the scholar and the *tzaddik* is through prayer.

This concept is elucidated by the Midrash: Rabbi Yehuda ben Baba says: "The congregation of Korah will rise in the future.

It is written about the congregation of Korach: 'And they were "lost" from the community.' And King David writes in the Book of Psalms: 'I went astray like a "lost" lamb; search for Your servant' (Psalms 119:176). In the future, the lost David will be searched for (and returned), similarly (concerning the congregation of Korach) it will also be searched for (and returned)."

Rabbi Natan explains that the Midrash gives us the path to rectification for the sin of Korach and his congregation. It is by praying with simplicity as King David was always careful to do. He pleaded with G-d with all his being; in every situation, he cried out to G-d. "I went astray like a lost lamb; search for your servant." This crying out and prayer is what will in the future cause You, G-d, to search for the one who got lost.

So too, we have merited in our generation to the wonderful book *Likutei Tefillot* by Rabbi Natan, which is completely based on the wondrous lessons and teachings of Rebbe Nachman from his book, *Likutei Moharan*. This secret is explained in *Likutei Halachot, Rosh Chodesh 5*, but due to lack of space, we shall not go into it here, but will just bring a short quote on the topic.

"According to the general directive that Rebbe Nachman warned us many times to follow, each and every one of us should make a point to seclude himself for *hitbodedut* (personal prayer) every single day, that is, to speak in conversation with G-d in everyday language (each person in his native tongue). He should request that G-d should draw him closer to His service. And he directed us to turn his Torah lessons into prayers, that is, regarding each and every holy point that he revealed in each Torah, he wanted us to pray about it and request and beg G-d that we should be worthy to fulfill it" (*Likutei Halachot, Rosh Chodesh 5*).

Rabbi Natan explains that such a prayer is even higher than

Torah, as he put it: "Such a prayer is not subordinate to the Torah. On the contrary, such prayer is the main way of fulfilling the Torah, since one is mainly requesting help in fulfilling the Torah, which is the essence of the completion of the Torah, as it is said "the learning is not the main thing but rather the deed" (Avot 1:17).

(Based on *Likutei Halachot, Halachot Omanin* 4:35)