YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Korach**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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In memory of Rebbetzin Rebecca Singer z"l,
wife of Rabbi Joseph Singer z"l, daughter of Rabbi Chaim Heller z"l,
upon her yahrzeit, 27 Sivan
by her daughter Vivian Singer

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**The Indifference of the People of Israel**

Summarized by Aviad Lipstadt

Translated by David Strauss

**The Complaints of the People**

The next sin of the people of Israel, after the sin of the spies, is that of Korach and his company who complained about Moshe and Aharon. In the wake of this sin, several miracles were performed that served two purposes – some were aimed at proving to the people that God chose Moshe and Aharon, and some punished the sinners (by fire or being swallowed up by the earth).

The people's reaction to these events is particularly surprising – once again, they complain:

But on the morrow, all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moshe and against Aharon, saying: You have killed the people of the Lord. And it came to pass, when the congregation was assembled against Moshe and against Aharon, that they looked toward the tent of meeting; and behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared. (*Bamidbar* 17:6-7)

Even after the terrible punishment, the people blame Moshe and Aharon for the deaths of the sinners. This is surprising; it should be remembered that this was not the first sin of the people of Israel, and usually after God punished them, the people acknowledged their sin. Sometimes (though rarely) they even confessed – for example, the *ma'apilim* admitted Israel's error at the time of the sin of the spies:

Then you answered and said to me: We have sinned against the Lord, we will go up and fight, according to all that the Lord our God commanded us. And you girded on every man his weapons of war, and deemed it a light thing to go up into the hill-country. (*Devarim* 1:41)

In other cases, after God revealed Himself and the *Shekhina* descended, the people of Israel learned from their mistakes and tried not to repeat them. In our *parasha*, however, the people continue to blame Moshe and Aharon for the punishment meted out for the people's sin – even after God revealed Himself and administered the punishment. Why?

It appears that the people assumed that Moshe and Aharon were acting out of selfish motives: they believed that Moshe and Aharon killed Korach and his company in an attempt to hold onto their positions of leadership. They could not even imagine a reality in which a person acts out of concern for the community and not just out of selfish motives. This is the difference between Korach's sin and the rest of Israel's sins: While Israel's sins were generally directed toward God, Korach's sin was directed primarily toward Moshe and Aharon.

**Israel’s Rigid Thinking**

Now that we have established that the sin was primarily directed against Moshe and Aharon, the question arises: How could the people *continue* to doubt Moshe after he had put himself to the ultimate test and passed it with flying colors? God performed a manifest miracle – the earth opened its mouth – and yet the people did not trust Moshe. How is this possible?

The question becomes more acute when we consider that even after all that had happened, God proved yet again that He preferred the current leadership over the alternative of Korach and his company. This time, a miracle was performed with staffs to prove that Aharon was chosen by God. But once again, despite this manifest miracle, the people maintained a surprising indifference:

And Moshe brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and took every man his staff. (*Bamidbar* 17:24)

At the end of the day, each of the tribal princes came and took his staff and went home. They drew no special conclusions, but simply continued with their routines as if nothing had happened. Rav Amital used to quote the Kotzker Rebbe, who emphasized the apathetic reaction of the princes to this miracle; Rav Amital explained that people tend to stick to their positions, and don't allow reality to change them.

To illustrate this idea: How many Jews changed their attitudes after the Holocaust? For every *Eim Ha-banim Semeicha*,[[1]](#footnote-1) there are thousands who continued to adhere to their previous beliefs. Even after the Six Day War, the Zionists continued in their views, and Satmar continued in theirs. Human nature does not like to accept change; each person tends to interpret reality in a way that suits his worldview.

**Distrust of Leadership**

Another aspect of the behavior of the people is noteworthy. If we examine the text, we see that not one of the people of Israel approached Moshe after Korach's sin and apologized for the accusations levelled against him. The prevailing feeling in the camp of Israel was that Moshe was trying to exploit the people and working for his personal good. In other words, Moshe was not truly trying to bring the word of God to the people, but was perverting the word of God in order to acquire wealth and honor. The Gemara describes a shocking expression of such suspicion:

"And when Moshe heard it, he fell upon his face" (*Bamidbar* 16:11). What news did he hear? Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: That he was suspected of adultery with a married woman. As it is stated: "They were jealous of Moshe in the camp (*Tehillim* 106:16), which teaches that every person warned his wife on Moshe's account, as it is stated: "And Moshe took the tent, and pitched it outside the camp" (*Shemot* 33:7). (*Sanhedrin* 110a)

The Gemara explains that the people suspected Moshe of committing adultery with the women of Israel. Moshe, who brought the people out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness, is the one who is forced to bear daily accusations that he is trying to undermine the families of Israel. Rashi clarifies that the "jealousy" mentioned here is the "jealousy" of a man who suspects his wife has committed adultery (*sota*). That is to say, the people of Israel truly believed that their leader was leading them astray.

Moshe was forced to continue dealing with this reality even after the dire end of Korach and his company. Soon, the Torah’s narrative will take a thirty-eight-year break, during which time Moshe was forced to lead the people with all the suspicions hanging in the air. It should be remembered that in order for Korach to be able to voice such serious accusations, he would have needed the support of the entire people: without the proper atmosphere, Korach's words would not have been heard, nor would they have received such resonance. Indeed, the people went on to sin at Mei Meriva (Chapter 20) – indicating that nothing had changed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**For Our Time**

Today as well, one can make such mistakes. A person can live his life without taking notice of what is happening around him, and without discerning the mistakes that need to be corrected. For instance: we have talked a lot about the proper response to the corona pandemic. To borrow an image from the shofar blasts on Rosh Ha-shana – the *teki'a* blast after the *teru'a* blast must not be the same as the *teki'a* blast before it. We must harness the corona pandemic to a spiritual reckoning, which will hopefully lead to an improvement in our service of God.

However, it seems that even now, after the first wave (for now), we have not yet been able to draw the obvious conclusions. It seems that we have returned to our routines as they were before Pesach, forgetting everything we have gone through. A person who opens a news site nowadays could change the date to Sivan 5779, because it seems that nothing has changed – the teachers' union continues to clash with the Ministry of Education, and we continue to hear allegations of rape and sexual exploitation in society.

This phenomenon is not new. The Gemara describes a case in which our people behaved in a similar way:

For Eliyahu said to Rav Yehuda, the brother of Rav Sila the Pious: You have said: Why has not Mashiach come? Behold, today is Yom Kippur, and yet relations were had with a number of virgins in Nehardea! (*Yoma* 19b)

The Gemara speaks of a situation in which the people stood on the eve of Yom Kippur eagerly awaiting the coming of the Mashiach. But the prophet Eliyahu arrived, cooling the atmosphere and making it clear that the Mashiach will not be coming anytime soon. What is the immediate reaction to this? "And yet relations were had with a number of virgins in Nehardea" – the people continued in their licentious behavior without concern for the holy day that it was.

There is, however, a different model: Aharon, despite all the suspicions raised against him, was not willing to give up on the people of Israel. At the time of the plague, Aharon did not sit on the sidelines saying "I told you so"; instead, he ran with the incense in order to save the people from death. Like a true leader, Aharon did not hesitate to save the people even at risk to his own life – despite the ingratitude shown him by the people.

*Midrashim* describe the special powers of the incense, to the point that a bride in Yericho could perfume herself with its intoxicating scent. Every leader must strive to be like the incense: he must know how to spread his scent in every direction and influence the people around him. This is true for all of us; we must be like Moshe and Aharon, and continue in our ways despite the difficulties and the ingratitude. We must take care not to fall into others’ unwillingness to accept reality, and after acknowledging reality with open eyes, we must respond to it properly.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Korach* 5780.]

1. The pro-Zionist work of Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal, *hy"d*, which he wrote after the ideological upheaval that he underwent in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this context, Rabbi Soloveitchik used to explan that Moshe's great frustration at the sin of Mei Meriva stemmed from the fact that the generation of the sons did not learn from the mistakes of their fathers. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)