

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXXVIII: Korach (Num. 16:1–18:32)

Essay 7. Korach's punishment

”וַיִּלְלוּ כָּל-עַדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמֹּחֶרֶת עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם הִמַּתֶּם אֶת-עַם ה' .” קִשָּׁה דִמְאָחַר שָׂרְאוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם כְּפָה אוֹתוֹת וּמוֹפְתִים שֶׁעָשָׂה מֹשֶׁה וְהַמִּשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁר שִׁפֵּט אֶת קֶרַח וְעַדְתּוֹ, אִיךָ מִלְּאוֹ אֶת לִבָּם לְחַלּוֹק עָלָיו בְּדִבְרֵים הַלְלוּ.

“Next day the whole Israelite community complained against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You have brought death upon the L-rd’s people.’”¹ A difficulty is: After they saw with their eyes how many signs and wonders that Moses did, and the judgment with which Korach and his band was judged, how did it enter their hearts to disagree with him about these things?

וַיִּשַׁר לֵאמֹר שֶׁתְּלוּנָתָם הִיָּתָה עַל הַמְּאִתִּים וְחַמְשִׁים אִישׁ שֶׁנִּשְׁרְפוּ עַל שְׁנֵי קְטָרֵי קֶרַח, וְזֶה הַקְּטָרֵת לֹא עָשָׂה אֶלָּא בְּדִבְרֵי מֹשֶׁה שֶׁאָמַר לָהֶם "זֹאת עָשׂוּ" וְכוּ'. וְהוֹקֵשָׁה לָהֶם מֶה הִיָּתָה פְּנוּנַת מֹשֶׁה לִּיְתֵן עֲצָה לְמֵאִתִּים וְחַמְשִׁים אִישׁ לְהַקְטִיר קְטָרֵת כְּדִי שִׁימּוּתוֹ, וּבִשְׁלֵמָא אִם הִיָּה אוֹמֵר אֶף לְדַתְּו וְאַבִּירָם שֶׁיִּקְרִיבוּ הַקְּטָרֵת הַיִּיְתִי אוֹמֵר שֶׁכֵּלֶם שְׁוִים בְּחֵטָא וְכֵלֶם חֲלָקוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְנִבְוֵאתוֹ אוֹ עַל כְּהוֹנֵת אַהֲרֹן. וְהִדִּין גוֹתֵן לְהַמִּיתָם אוֹ לְגְרוּם לָהֶם תְּחִבּוּלוֹת כְּדִי שִׁימּוּתוֹ כְּדִי שֶׁיִּמְלֶכֶן עָרוּף יוֹרָה דְעָה (סִימָן קנ"ח) וְ"ל, הָאֶפִּיקוֹרְסִים וְהֵם אוֹתָם שֶׁכּוֹפְרִים בְּתוֹרָה וּבְנִבְוֵאת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל מִצְוָה לְהוֹרְגָם. אִם יֵשׁ בְּיָדוֹ כֹּחַ לְהוֹרְגָם בְּסִיפֵי בְּפִרְהֶסְיָא הוֹרְגָם, וְאִם לֹא יָבֵא בְּעֵלִילוֹת עַד שֶׁיִּסְבֵּב הַרִיגָתָם עַכ"ל.

It can be said that their complaint was about the 250 men who were burned for going in to burn incense,² and they only burned this incense by the word of Moses, who said to them, “Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans,” etc.³ It was difficult for them to understand what Moses’ intention was in giving advice to 250 men to burn incense so that they would die. Granted, if he had also told Dathan and Abiram to offer incense, I would have said that they were all equal in sin and they all disagreed about Moses and his prophecy, or about Aaron’s priesthood. In such a case, the law allows them to be put to death, or to cause them to be tricked so that they may die, as is brought in the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah (siman 158, se’if 2). See there, where it states that regarding the *epikorosim*,⁴ and those who disbelieve in the Torah and the prophecy from Israel, it is a mitzvah to kill them. If one has

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¹ Num. 17:6.

² Num. 16:35.

³ Num. 16:6.

⁴ Jews who deny the Torah and the concept of prophecy.

the power to kill them with a sword, he kills them publicly, and if not, one should develop a plan so that one can cause their deaths.⁵

אָבֵל עֵתָה שְׁמִשָּׁה לֹא אָמַר שְׂדֵדָתוֹ וְנֹאבִירָם יִקְרִיבוּ הַקְּטוֹרֶת אֱלֹא הַמֵּאֲתִים וְנִחְמָשִׁים אִישׁ עִם קֶרֶחַ, יֵשׁ סִבְרָא לִזְמוֹר שְׂיֵשׁ חֵילוּק בֵּין מִי שְׁחָלַק עַל גְּבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה לְמִי שְׁחָלַק עַל כְּהוֹנְתוֹ שֶׁל אֶהֱרֹן. וְלִפִּי שְׁהַמֵּאֲתִים וְנִחְמָשִׁים אִישׁ לֹא הָיוּ כֹּף כֹּף חוֹטְאִים שְׁהָרִי לֹא חָלְקוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְגְבוּאָתוֹ רַק עַל כְּהוֹנְת אֶהֱרֹן כְּמוֹ שְׁפָתַב מִהַרְשֵׁ"א בְּפֶרֶק חָלַק, מִשּׁוּם הֵכִי לֹא הָיוּ חֲיִיבִים מִיָּתֶה כְּדֵתוֹ וְנֹאבִירָם, וְאַף קֶרֶחַ אַף עַל פִּי שְׁחָלַק עַל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה לוֹ מְקוֹם לְהִנְצֵל לְפִי שְׁעִינוֹ הַטְעֵנוּ.

But now that Moses did not say that Dathan and Abiram should offer the incense, rather only the 250 men with Korach, there is a thought to say that there is a difference between those who disagreed about the prophecy of Moses and those who disagreed about the priesthood of Aaron. Because the 250 men weren't such sinners, for they didn't disagree about Moses and his prophecy, but only about the priesthood of Aaron, as the Maharsha⁶ wrote on the 11th chapter of tractate Sanhedrin entitled "All Israel have a portion in the World-to-Come." Because of this, they weren't obligated to a death such as that of Dathan and Abiram, who were swallowed alive by the Earth. Even Korach, even though he disagreed with Moses, he had room to be saved from being swallowed by the Earth,⁷ because his eyes had misled him.⁸

אָבֵל דָּתוֹ וְנֹאבִירָם חָלְקוּ גַם עַל מַעֲלוֹת מֹשֶׁה בְּדוֹן וּפְשָׁע, וְלִכְדָּ כְּתִיב "חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאֲתִים מִחֻזְתָּת וְאַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן" וְכֹי, וְדָתוֹ וְנֹאבִירָם לֹא הִקְרִיבוּ, וְלִכֵּן הַמֵּאֲתִים וְנִחְמָשִׁים אִישׁ לֹא נִעְנְשׂוּ אֱלֹא בְּשָׂרִיפַת נְשָׁמָה וְגוּף קָיִים אָבֵל דָּתוֹ וְנֹאבִירָם חָטְאוּ בְּכָל גּוּפָם וּמְאוֹדָם וְלִכֵּן נִבְלְעוּ בְּכָל מִכַּל כָּל. וְקֶרֶחַ עֲצָמוֹ יֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים שֶׁלֹּא נִשְׂרַף וְלֹא נִבְלַע כִּי לֹא חָטָא כָּל כֹּף אֱלֹא שְׁטָעָה בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂרָאָה שְׁלִשְׁלֵת גְּדוּלָה יוֹצֵאָה מִמֶּנּוּ אֱלֹא שְׁמַת בְּמַגִּיפָה וְכוּ'. וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים שֶׁנִּשְׂרַף וְנִבְלַע הוּאִיל שֶׁהִנֵּה רֵאשׁוֹן וְיַעַל הַמַּעֲשֵׂה, וְאִילוֹ נִשְׂרַף וְלֹא נִבְלַע הָיוּ הַבְּלוּעִים מִתְרַעְמִים וְכוּ', וְכֵן אִם הִנֵּה נִבְלַע וְלֹא נִשְׂרַף הָיוּ הַשְּׂרוּפִים מִתְרַעְמִים וְכוּ'.

But Dathan and Abiram disagreed also about the virtues of Moshe, with malice and rebellion. For this reason, it is written, "Each of you take your fire pan and lay incense on it, and each of you bring that fire pan before the L-rd, 250 fire pans; you and Aaron also [bring] your fire pans."⁹ But Dathan and Abiram did not bring [the fire pans] before [the L-rd], and therefore weren't burned. Therefore the 250 men were punished only with the burning of their souls, but their bodies remained intact,¹⁰ but Dathan and Abiram sinned with their entire

⁵ This halacha also appears in the Mishneh Torah, Murderer and the Preservation of Life, 4:10.

⁶ Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Eidels ("the Maharsha") (1555–1631), *Chiddushei Agadot*.

⁷ Sanhedrin 110a: "And Rabbi Yochanan says: Korach was neither among the swallowed nor among the burned; [he died in a plague. He was] neither among the swallowed, as it is written: 'And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and all their houses and all the men who were with Korach' (Num. 16:32) [from which it is inferred:] But not Korah [himself]. Nor [was he] among the burned, as it is written: 'When the fire consumed 250 men' (Num. 26:10), but not Korah."

⁸ See Rashi on Num. 16:7, that Korach had a prophetic vision that he would have great descendants, and thought that meant he was supposed to seize control from Moses.

⁹ Num. 16:17.

¹⁰ Sanhedrin 52a.

bodies and might, and therefore they were entirely swallowed by the Earth. As for Korach himself, there are those who say that he wasn't burned and wasn't swallowed, because he didn't sin so much; rather, he erred because by prophetic vision he saw a chain of great men descending from him,¹¹ rather he died in a plague.

But there are those who disagree and who say that he was both burned and swallowed, since he was the first and the principal actor. If he had been burned and not swallowed, those who were swallowed would be resentful, etc. If he had been swallowed and not burned, those who were burned would be resentful, etc.¹²

ולכן ביום הראשון היו מסופקים בסבבא זו אכל לא נתרעמו, משום דאפשר נמי לומר שכלם היו חייבים מיתה אלא שדמו נאבירם הואיל ש"הרבו לפשע" לפיכך היתה מיתתם יותר תמונה. אכל ביום המחרת שראו שבני קרח ניצולו וסבורים היו שניצולו לפי שלא היה להם כל כך חטא שטעו בסבבת אביהם, נתרעמו על משה ואהרן לפי שנתנו העצה לקרח ולמאטים ונחמשים איש להקטיר קטרת, דבלא עצה זו היו בנדאי ניצולים לפי שלא חטאו כל כך.

Therefore, on the first day [the Israelites] had doubted this thinking, but they did not resent it, because it's also possible to say that they all deserved death, except that Dathan and Abiram, since they "transgressed even more,"¹³ therefore their death was more serious. But the next day, [the Israelites] saw that the sons of Korach were saved, and their thinking was that they were saved because they didn't have so much sin, as they erred according to the opinion of their father. Then, they were resentful against Moses and Aaron, because they gave the suggestion to Korach and to the 250 men to bring the incense, as without that suggestion, they certainly would have been saved, because they wouldn't have sinned so much.

דבשלאמא השתא שמתו המאטים ונחמשים איש אף שלא היה להם כל כך חטא גם קרח צריך למות עמהם אף על פי שיש לו התנצלות לומר שענינו הטעות, והואיל שמת עם השרופים צריך שימות נמי עם הכלועים כדי שלא יתרעמו וכו'. אמנם אם היו ניצולים המאטים ונחמשים איש מטעם שאין להם כל כך חטא אז גם קרח היה ניצול עמהם לפי שענינו הטעות, ולכן אמרו להם "אתם המתם" וכו' כלומר סבבתם להם המיתה שלא כדין.

Granted, now that the 250 men died, even though they did not have that much sin, even Korach should die with them, even though he has an excuse to say that his eyes misled him. Since he died with those who were burned, it was necessary that he should also die with those who were swallowed, so that they wouldn't be resentful. Indeed, if the 250 men had been saved because they didn't have much sin, then also Korach would have been saved with them, because his eyes misled him. Therefore, [the Israelites] said to [Moses and Aaron], "you have brought death upon the L-rd's people," as if to say, "you brought upon them the death that wasn't according to the law."

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¹¹ See Rashi on Num. 16:7, that Korach had a prophetic vision that he would have great descendants, and thought that meant he was supposed to seize control from Moses.

¹² Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 9:1.

¹³ Amos 4:4.