

Parshas Korach – Gershon Hepner

ג' תמוז תשע"ה – 19 June 2015 – שבת פי קרח

This week I am celebrating the fortieth anniversary of my Bar Mitzva here in North Hendon. Does anyone remember it?!

In the final showdown between Moshe and Korach, Moshe gave Korach a chilling caution:

"If these people die like all people...then it is not HaShem Who has sent me. However, if HaShem will create a phenomenon, and the earth will open up and swallow them and all their belongings, and they will descend alive into the abyss, then you will know that these people have provoked Hashem." (16:29-30)

It appears that the main thrust of Moshe's stark warning was that Korach may meet a swift, violent and dramatic demise. However, he prefaces this threat with a seemingly unnecessary introduction –

"If these people die like all people...then it is not HaShem Who has sent me."

This first half of Moshe's warning appears to be wholly redundant. After all, if Korach would not die by unnatural means, then surely Nature would take its course, and in the fullness of time Korach would die a natural death. Why then, did Moshe make this first statement at all?

Many years ago I posed this question to Rabbi Cooper zt"l, and I published his beautiful answer in this newsletter two years ago. You can see his explanation on <http://northhendon.co.uk/sites/default/files/Korach%205773.pdf> and copies of it are available in Shul this Shabbos.

At the time I suggested the following answer to Rabbi Cooper zt"l, and he gave it his stamp of approval.

The Gemara in Brochos (5a) advises four strategies to vanquish the Yetzer Hora; each strategy to be used only in the event of the failure of the earlier strategies. They are, in sequence:

- 1 to make the Yetzer Hatov angry with the Yetzer Hora;
- 2 to learn Torah;
- 3 to recite Kerias Shema;
- 4 to remind oneself of one's own mortality

For Moshe to derail Korach from his sinful mission of jealousy, Moshe should have deployed these methods. Why didn't he?

Strategy #1: This is a method that can work only when the individual stirs up *his own* Yetzer Hatov against *his own* Yetzer Hora. Moshe could not perform this on behalf of Korach – the person will either do it for himself, or not at all.

Strategy #2: In Taanis (7a) we learn that a person who learns Torah '*shelo lishma*' – for an ulterior motive – is despised, and his Torah knowledge is as poison for him.

Tosfos challenges this from the Gemara in Pesochim (50b) that encourages a person to learn Torah even '*shelo lishma*', as eventually it will lead him to learn '*lishma*'. Tosfos explains that the unwanted form of Torah '*shelo lishma*' is defined as Torah that is learnt for the purposes of provoking a quarrel. Such Torah study is never welcome, and whoever learns with that motive is reviled.

The Midrash Rabbah (18:2) tells us of Korach's questions to Moshe designed to ridicule the Torah. Korach enquired whether a Tallis made entirely of Techeiles requires a Techeiles thread, and whether a room full of Sifrei Torah requires a Mezuzah. Korach's questions are reasonable Halachic queries, but they were intended to insult Moshe, and to make a mockery of the Torah.

Clearly then, Korach's Torah learning was in the style of '*shelo lishma*' designed for the purposes of provoking a quarrel, and Moshe could not encourage Korach to learn in order to dispel his Yetzer Hora.

Strategy #3: Moshe was not in a position to urge Korach to recite Kerias Shema, which features the very Mitzvos that Korach had used to ridicule Moshe, namely Tzitzis and Mezuzah. Korach could hardly be expected to say Shema in an appropriate manner, as the mere mention of these Mitzvos was likely to trigger another outburst from Korach.

Strategy #4: Moshe's final option is still open to him. He has one last chance to pull Korach round, and that is by reminding Korach of his own mortality. Moshe turns to Korach and begins his warning with the words "*If these people die like all people*".

Moshe's main message to Korach is that unless he would mend his ways, the earth would swallow him up. However, Moshe attempts to deflect Korach's Yetzer Hora by prefacing this message with a none-too-subtle reminder that his time on earth had a limit.

LE'ILUI NISHMAS MY GREAT GRANDFATHER, WHOSE YAHRZEIT FALLS ON 8TH TAMMUZ
HORAV REB YESHAYA NOSSON BEN REB MOSHE ZVI FREILICH HY"D