

*Yad Avraham Institute*  
**Weekly Torah Commentaries Series**  
*The Portion of*

**Korach**

June 25, 2009

**Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita**

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**About the Yad Avraham Institute**

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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*New York*  
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**B"H**

## Korach

*Presented by*

**Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita***

***Dean***

### ***1. Conscience, the Stabilizing Characteristic of the Jewish People***

The Torah tells us that Korach together with Dasan and Aviram led a mutiny against Moshe and attempted to usurp his authority as the leader of the Jewish people. They claimed that the Torah was not the Word of G'd but rather the word of Moshe, thus undermining the authenticity of Torah. In order to quell the uprising, Moshe sent an agent of the court to Dasan and Aviram in order to summon them to meet with him. Although Dasan and Aviram refused to come to Moshe saying, "...Even if you would gouge out our eyes, we shall not go up" Moshe was agreeable to go to them despite the fact that he was the leader and king of the Jewish people. He was willing to forgo his status for the sake of defusing the opposition. Seemingly, Moshe's offer to meet with Dasan and Aviram was because of his unique level of humility. Moshe is referred by the Torah as, "**the most humble man who ever walked the face of the earth.**" However, the Midrash explains this differently.

The Midrash states, "Moshe said, 'If they are not willing to come, I will go to them. Perhaps if I go myself they will become embarrassed and repent.'" Moshe believed that if Dasan and Aviram would see that the leader of the Jewish people was willing to compromise his status on their behalf, they would be ashamed. By feeling a sense of shame, Moshe believed that they would recognize that they had done wrong and withdraw from their position, thus terminating the mutiny. However, this was not so. The Midrash continues, "When Dasan and Aviram had seen Moshe coming towards them, they began ridiculing and blaspheming him. They came out of their tents with an erect and haughty posture and were not willing to change." Had they felt shame they would have repented because shame is the basis for one to understand and appreciate the wrong that he had done. Without a sense of shame, one is not able to recognize or internalize the wrong of his actions.

The Gemara in Tractate Yevamos tells us that there are characteristics that are unique to the Jewish people because they descend from the Holy Patriarchs; Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. The Jew possesses the characteristics of "Compassion/mercy, shame/conscience, and the propensity to do acts of kindness." Because of the Jew's innate sense of conscience he will naturally be unable to live with the wrong that he had done. His conscience will compel him to repent and correct his ways.

The Gemara tells us that the First Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people had violated the three cardinal sins (idolatry, murder, and forbidding sexual relationships). The Second Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred among Jews (*sinaas chinam*). The Gemara tells us that Reb Yochanan was asked, "Which generation was greater – that of the First Temple period or that of the Second? It would seem that violating the three cardinal sins would be considered more severe than baseless hatred, thus causing them to have greater culpability." Reb Yochanan responded, "Look at the Citadel (Temple). After 70 years of exile, the Temple was restored. However, after the destruction of the Second Temple, it has not yet been rebuilt. Evidently baseless hatred is more severe than violating the three cardinal sins." Why is this so?

The three cardinal sins are obviously wrong to any moral and ethical person. Thus, understanding and appreciating the evil of these actions would seem to be relatively simple. One initially can be overtaken by lust and other issues which causes one to be blinded to the obvious. However, over time, one regains his rational understanding of right and wrong, thus causing him to repent. On the other hand, baseless hatred which is seen as something that is part of the human condition can be easily justified on many levels. One does not feel a sense of shame when he sees no wrong in his negativity towards his fellow. Therefore, one will not repent as he should.

Moshe said, "Perhaps if they will see me (the leader of the Jewish people) coming to them, they will feel ashamed and repent." However, because they did not feel shame and they remained defiant in order to bring about the destruction of Moshe.

Avraham, our Patriarch was one of the most humble people to ever live. It was because of his selfless quest for truth that he came upon G'd as the Omnipotent Being. He espoused monotheism to all mankind. The motivating factor behind his quest was his desire to know who is his benefactor. Avraham wanted to be beholden to the One who was the source of all good so that he could pay a debt of gratitude. Until he came upon the source of all good, he continued his search. Avraham's sense of indebtedness was rooted in his sense of conscience. How could Avraham continue to be a beneficiary without locating his benefactor and expressing his appreciation. In contrast, Dasan and Aviram had not shame and thus could not repent.

## 2. Wisely Choosing One's Location

The Midrash states, "Our Rabbis of blessed memory said, 'Woe to the evil person (rasha) and woe to his neighbor. It is good for the devoutly righteous and it is good for his neighbor.' Where do we see this? Dasan and Aviram were destroyed because of the dissention of Korach. They were his neighbors and thus influenced by him. His location was in the south...The location of the camp of Reuvain was juxtaposed to the family Korach...It is because of their proximity to him that they joined with him in the mutiny against Moshe. In contrast, the camp of Yehudah which included Yissachar and Zevulun was on the east....They were neighbors of Moshe, Aaron and his children...Because they were in close proximity to Torah, they merited to become Torah Sages. As it states in Psalms, 'Yehudah the legislator of law...' The children of Yissachar were 'yodei binah' (those who possessed special insight and clarity)... Even the tribe of Zevulun was also endowed with a special level of Torah.'"

Although the tribes that were included within the camp of Yehudah did not engage with Moshe to a greater degree than any of the other tribes, they nevertheless achieved a unique dimension of Torah scholarship. This is attributed to the fact that they were in the proximity of Moshe who was the tzaddik. Being a neighbor alone, is sufficient cause to be the beneficiary of the tzaddik's presence. It is not necessarily determined by one's degree of interaction with the tzaddik, but rather being in his proximity. If one is within the proximity of an evil person,

he will become diminished because of the spiritual void and vacuum that is associated with the rasha. Because the rasha represents and pursues ideals that are contrary to the Will of G'd, the Divine Presence is not associated with him.

The Mishna in Ethics of our Fathers states, "Rabbi Chalafta Ben Dosa Of Kfar Chananya Said: "If ten people sit together and occupy themselves with Torah, the Divine Presence rests among them, As it states, 'G'd stands in the Assembly of the L'rd What is the source that teaches us that the same is true if even five sit together? It states, 'He has founded His band upon the earth.' What is the source that teaches us that the same is true even if three sit together? It states, 'Among the judges He renders judgment .' What is the source that teaches us that the same is true even if two sit together? It states, 'Then the G'd fearing conversed with one another, and the L'rd hearkened and heard.' What is the source that teaches us that the same is true if even one Jew sits and learns Torah? It states, 'In every place where I have My Name mentioned I will come to you and bless you.'"

Maharal of Prague asks, "The Mishna cites verses to indicate that the Divine Presence is associated with various settings of Jews who engage in Torah study, including the individual who studies alone. Evidently, there must be a difference regarding each of these settings, since the Mishna cites various verses to establish the value of each situation. What is the difference?" He explains that although it is true that the Divine Presence rests even upon the one Jew if he is engaged in Torah study, the intensity of His Presence is not the same as that of more than one. Thus, if ten Jews, which is a quorum, are studying Torah, the intensity of Divine Presence is much greater than if only five engage in Torah study because ten Jews represent a microcosm of the entire Jewish people. This will bring about the most advanced level of attachment to the Divine Presence.

The Midrash states, regarding the holy Patriarchs, , "Hein, hein haMerkava – they are the Chariot (of the Divine Presence)." Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov because of their dimension of spirituality and accomplishments were the location for the Divine Presence in this existence. In this way they were the equivalent of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. If one were to be exposed to that level of intensity of spirituality, one would be positively impacted and influenced. Moshe, being the pillar and conduit of Torah was the location of G'd's Presence. In addition, he was the spiritual equivalent of the entire Jewish people. Aaron, the High Priest was to a degree the spiritual equivalent of his brother Moshe. His

sons, the Priests (Kohenim) were the ones responsible for the service of G'd. Therefore, the fact that the camp of Yehudah was in their proximity, they were influenced to become some of the most advanced Torah sages of the Jewish people. The basis for their spiritual capacity was their proximity to G'd's Presence.

In contrast, if one were in the proximity of an evil person such as Korach who was self-absorbed and envious of Moshe, one would be spiritually diminished. The Divine Presence had no relevance to Korach because of what he represented. His objective was to usurp Moshe's authority and thus undermine the credibility of Torah. Because Dasan and Aviram's location was juxtaposed to the location of Korach, although they may not have initially interacted with him, they were negatively affected because of the lack of holiness. This is the understanding of "Woe to the rasha and woe to his neighbor."

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "You should distance yourself from a bad neighbor..." It is not necessarily because of the subtle influences of the evil neighbor that one must be careful, but rather simply by being in the proximity of an evil neighbor one will be denied a relationship with G'd.

The Torah states in the Portion of Vayeitzei, "**Yaakov departed from Beersheva and went toward Charan.**" Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why is it important for the Torah to tell us from where Yaakov departed, it would have been sufficient to tell us that Yaakov was going to Charan." The Midrash answers that the Torah is teaching us that when a tzaddik leaves a location it loses its radiance, beauty and splendor. Thus, although Yitzchak and Rivka remained in Beersheva, the level of intensity of the Divine Presence was diminished because of Yaakov's departure. Wherever Yaakov went, the Divine Presence followed because he himself was the receptacle of His Presence.

It was known that the Chazon Ishe only remained in Europe as long as the Chofetz Chaim was alive. After the Chofetz Chaim had passed away he moved to the Holy Land. This was because he believed that as long as the Chofetz Chaim was alive, his dimension of spirituality brought about a level of sanctity upon Europe that was similar to that of the Holy Land. However, upon the passing of the Chofetz Chaim, when that special level of sanctity no longer existed, Chazon Ishe chose to depart.

### 3. *Repentance, Not a Simple Matter*

The Torah states, "**Moshe said to Korach... Let each man take his fire-pan and you shall place incense on them...two hundred and fifty fire-pans; and you (Korach) and Aaron...**" In order to refute Korach's position, Moshe presented him and the 250 members of his assembly, with a test that would determine the one who is G'd's choice to be the High Priest. Only the one who was truly qualified to be the High Priest would survive the test of the burning of the incense and the others would die. Although, Korach should have understood that his chance of survival was almost nil, he nevertheless proceeded.

Rashi cites the Midrash which states, "Korach was an exceptionally wise person. How did he allow himself to enter into such foolishness? It was because his eye had misled him. He had seen a great chain of generations descending from him. He saw that Shmuel the Prophet, who was the equivalent of Moshe and Aaron was to descend from him...He also saw that twenty-four families of Levites will descend from his children that will have prophetic abilities. Korach had said, 'Is it possible that all of this greatness will emanate from me and I should be destroyed?' However, Korach did not see accurately. In fact, Shmuel the Prophet and all of the great families that will descend from his progeny were only a result of Korach's sons repenting at the very last moment. This was the basis for Korach's mistake." Because of his conflicts of interest, regarding the fact that he was denied honor, Korach could never entertain the possibility that he was not worthy.

The Gemara in Tractate Zevachim discusses a situation in which an individual consecrated a sin offering (because he had inadvertently violated the Shabbos) and subsequently, before bringing the sacrifice he became an apostate. He then repented before the offering was brought. The law states that the offering of an apostate cannot be brought as a sacrifice. Although at the time of the initial consecration the offering was valid, and at the time it was meant to be brought the individual was qualified to bring an offering; however, because there was an interim period during which he became an apostate, the offering became invalidated. Tosfos cites a Gemara that tell us that if a Priest (Kohen) had spilled the blood of the offering while transporting it to be sprinkled on the altar and it had flowed into a depression where it could be gathered again to be sprinkled, the service can continue. Although there was a moment in the procedure of the service during which the blood could not be sprinkled, it is not considered an interruption and the offering is valid.

This is because it was within the ability of the Kohen to gather the blood and sprinkle it. It was “in his hand.” Meaning, it was always within the control of the Kohen to bring the service to completion. Tosfos asks, “If this is so then why should offering of an individual who subsequently becomes an apostate become invalidated? Since one has the ability to repent at any moment, it should be considered as not being an interruption of the service because it is within the “hand (ability)” of the individual to repent.” Tosfos answers that the apostate repenting cannot be compared to the Kohen who could gather up the blood for sprinkling. Although one has the ability to repent, when one becomes an apostate it is not a simple accomplishment to change one’s mindset and belief. Thus, it is unlike the Kohen who had spilled the blood in the Sanctuary.

Korach’s sons were fully involved in the mutiny against Moshe. They had shared their father’s distorted understanding of Moshe. How was it possible that they were able to repent, despite their entrenchment of sin, thus allowing the future generations of greatness to emanate from them? What had happened to give them special clarity that allowed them to repent? One could say that because Shmuel the Prophet needed to be brought into the world, G’d allowed them to recognize their mistake and thus repent. However, the Midrash explains it differently.

The Torah tells us that before the community of Korach was destroyed for attempting to usurp Moshe’s authority as the spokesman of G’d, Moshe attempted to reason with Korach to withdraw from his rebellious stance. Moshe entered Korach’s tent where his sons were seated on each side of their father. The Midrash states that the sons of Korach were in a quandary, “When Moshe entered into the tent they covered their faces with the ground. If they were to stand for Moshe (as the law dictates) they would disgrace their father because it would be a dishonor to him to acknowledge their father’s adversary. However if they were to remain seated, they would be in violation of the law which dictates that they must acknowledge the presence of a Torah sage by standing. They decided to stand for Moshe and acknowledge his presence regardless of their father’s disapproval. At that moment, they had stirrings of repentance in their heart. In the merit of standing for Moshe they were able to repent and were not destroyed along with the congregation of Korach.”

Although Korach’s sons had been evil, they were able to extricate themselves from the depths of sin and repent because they merited special Divine Assistance as a result of their own actions. One must not underestimate the ability to make change in one’s life, especially within

the realm of one’s spirituality. The Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin tells us that one cannot repent unless G’d assists him in the process. In order to merit such Divine Assistance one must be worthy, either through his own actions or because of special merit of his progenitors.

#### 4. *Torah, a Double-Edged Sword*

The Torah tells us that in order to establish Aaron as G’d’s choice as High Priest, Moshe said to Korach and his 250 followers, “**Let each man take his fire-pan and you shall place incense on them...**” Moshe forewarned them that only the one who would be qualified to be the High Priest would survive the test of the incense offering. The Midrash states, “Moshe said, ‘The service which I am offering you is the most beloved of all the sacrifices to G’d, the incense offering. If one is not qualified to bring it, he will surely die as we see regarding Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron.’”

Rabbeinu Bachya tells us that the numerical value of “incense (ketoris)” in the Hebrew language (gematria) is the equivalent numerical value of “Torah.” Meaning, there is a commonality between the incense offering and the Torah itself.

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis states, “The Torah can be either a life potion or a death potion.” The Gemara derives this understanding from a verse in the Portion of Haazinu, “**(My Torah) It will decapitate as hard rain and My Word will flow like the dew.**” The study of Torah itself can either destroy a person like a destructive rain or enliven and invigorate the individual like the gentle flowing dew. The Gemara explains that if one studies the Torah for its own sake with a pure intent (*l’shma*) then the Torah becomes a “life potion”. However if one studies the Torah with an ulterior motive, as Tosfos explains with an sinister intent (*l’kanteir*) to undermine another, then the Torah becomes a death potion. We see that although one may study the same exact words, with the same degree of diligence, depending on one’s intent the Torah will either bring him life or become lethal (on a spiritual level). This is similar to the incense offering.

If one is qualified to bring the incense offering and does so properly, he will merit blessing and wealth. The Mishna tells us that if a Kohen had previously performed the incense service, he was not included in the lottery that was used to choose the Kohen to participate in the service. Each Kohen was given one opportunity to bring the incense because of the unique level of blessing that came upon the one who performed it. However, if one is not

qualified to bring the incense offering, rather than causing blessing that same service will result in spiritual destruction. Whether it will bring life or death is only determined by G'd.

Maharal of Prague writes in his work *Gevuras Hashem* that Moshe throughout his life had issues involving water. We find that as an infant he was placed into the Nile by his mother. Moshe had struck the rock rather than speaking to it after the passing of Miriam in order to provide water to the Jewish people. It is because he did not heed the word of G'd regarding the rock that it was decreed that Moshe would not enter into the Promised Land. What is the reason that Moshe's challenges came through water?

Moshe was the conduit and pillar of Torah. It was through him that the Torah was given to the Jewish people. Water, depending on its setting will determine its reality. If it is placed in a wide location, it will spread out. If it is placed in a narrow location it will rise. If it is cooled to a certain point it will become hard and frozen. If it is heated it will evaporate. If it is placed on an elevated location it will flow to a lower location. Similarly, based in its setting, the Torah can either be enhancing to one's life and spirituality or it could be destructive. Since Moshe personifies Torah, his challenges were associated with water.

Ramchal writes in his work *The Knowing Heart* that based on the qualification of the individual, one's action could either bring about a positive result or a negative one. For example, if a non-Kohen officiates in the Temple, although he is a Jew, he will be liable for spiritual excision. However, if the same service was performed by a Kohen, who is qualified, it will bring about a positive spiritual result. If the same Kohen were to officiate without his Priestly vestments, his service is not valid because he is considered as if he were not a Kohen. G'd gave man free choice; however, the degree of consequence (positive or negative) is determined by G'd.

If one performs a mitzvah that he is obligated to perform, he will bring about the desired spiritual result. In contrast, if one performs a mitzvah that he is not obligated to perform, although he did a good deed, he will not bring about the same result. Therefore, the individual does not merit the same reward as the one who was obligated. This is because G'd is the One who determines the consequence and value of one's actions. For example, when a man recites the Shema his spiritual accomplishment is considered greater than if a woman recites the Shema, because she is not obligated to do so since it is a time-

related mitzvah. Women are exempt from time-related mitzvos. Although she recited the same holy words of the Shema as the man, his accomplishment is considered greater because G'd determined that his spirituality is in need of the recitation of the Shema.

The objective and purpose of the assembly of Korach to bring the incense offering was to prove that Moshe's word was not the Word of G'd. They wanted to discredit Moshe. The initiative of their action was based on a sinister intent, which is lethal. They were therefore destroyed by G'd. In contrast, when Aaron had brought the incense offering, he had done so as part of his obligation as High Priest. Thus, his offering was accepted.

## 5. *The Gravity of Hopelessness*

The Torah states, "**Vayikach Korach Ben Yitzahar- Korach son of Yitzahar took...**"...Rashi cites Chazal who explain "**Vayikach Korach** (Korach took)" to mean that Korach "took" two hundred and fifty men who were qualified to be the head of the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel) with his words. Meaning, he persuaded them to join his mutiny against Moshe.

We also find that the Torah states regarding Adam, "**And Hashem G'd formed the man of dust...He took (vayikach) man and placed him into the Garden of Eden.**" Rashi cites Chazal who explain the term "vayikach" to mean, G'd persuaded Adam to enter into the Garden of Eden. Similarly the Torah states, "G'd said to Moshe, "**Kach es Aaron achichah - Take Aaron your brother...**" G'd told Moshe to persuade Aaron his brother with his words to assume the position as High priest.

The word "**vayikach**" which means, "to take," is typically used regarding the taking of an inanimate object or an unintelligible creature, which does not have choice, and therefore it is "taken." However, as it applies to a human being, who has a mind of his own, the term "**vayikach**" must mean to "persuade" or "convince."

A human being with the power of choice typically makes decisions based on his understanding of the issue at hand. He evaluates the situation and then chooses to do or refrain. However, if one sees only one side of an issue and does not recognize that there is an alternative, this individual is not considered to be exercising his power of free choice. Similarly, when one is persuaded by another, one no longer appreciates the alternative and therefore follows the allure of his fellow's words. In effect, as a result of the persuasion and convincing, the individual

becomes no different from an inanimate object that is "taken."

Although the congregation of Korach was a unique and exceptional group of individuals who were qualified to be the head of the Sanhedrin, Korach nevertheless, through his power of persuasion, rendered them helpless. He had convinced them that Moshe had deceived them and denied them an honor that was rightfully theirs.

Ramban at the beginning of the Portion of Korach explains why the mutiny of Korach occurred at this particular time. Prior to this moment, because of Moshe's accomplishments and dedication to the Jewish people, he was beloved and revered by them. If anyone were even to attempt question or usurp his authority, that individual would have been stoned. However, after G'd decreed that the Jewish people should perish over a forty-year period because of the sin of the spies, the Jewish people became demoralized. They began to reflect upon all that Moshe had promised them when they had left Egypt. Korach came with his claim at a moment when the Jewish people were most vulnerable. It was at a time when they were experiencing a hopelessness in their lives.

The fact of the matter is, the Jewish people, although it was decreed that they should perish over a forty-year period, should have not diminished their esteem and reverence for Moshe. The only reason they were denied entering into the Promised Land was as a result of their lack of faith. They chose believed the slanderous reports of the spies. Because of their mindset, they saw Moshe in a negative light. It is natural for a person to be vulnerable and subject to persuasion when he is disappointed and disillusioned. Just as Korach took advantage of the Jewish people when they were their most vulnerable state, so too does the evil inclination take advantage of person when he becomes disillusioned and depressed.

The Gemara cites an argument between Hillel and Shamay regarding whether it would have been better for man to have been created or not. After two and a half years of dialogue there was a consensus between them that it would have been better for man not to have been created. This is because man is prone to spiritual failure. When one reflects on his situation, very often within the spiritual realm, he sees himself lagging behind and not sufficiently accomplished. This brings about a sense of hopelessness which allows the evil inclination to convincing him that it is irrelevant if he transgresses because ultimately it will not make much of a difference.

The interaction of Korach with his assembly is similar to one's own continuous interaction with his evil inclination. One needs to feel that he is advancing and succeeding as a Jew, despite one's spiritual shortcomings. If one recognizes his failings it is a positive, because it will enable him to correct his ways and improve. In order to succeed in this pursuit one must have a sense of his own spirituality. The only way to accomplish this is to engage in Torah study with the intent of actualizing the mitzvos. When enters into a spiritual mindset, one will be encouraged and motivated to succeed despite the setbacks and pitfalls of life.

#### **YAD AVRAHAM DAILY CLASS SCHEDULE**

##### **Monday Through Friday**

5:50- 6:00 am	Chumash with Rashi
6:00- 6:15 am	Pirkei Avos (Maharal)
6:15- 6:30 am	Mishna Berurah
6:30 -6:45 am	Mussar – Path of the Just
6:45 -7:25 am	Talmud—Tractate Chulin –Gid Hanasheh
7:25 - 8:20 am	Davening Followed by Breakfast
8:20 - 8:45 am	Mishna - Rabbi Rovner
9:00 -10:00 am	Daf Yomi- Bava Kamah
2:00pm	Mincha

##### **Special Weekday Classes**

###### **Monday**

11:30 – 12:30pm	<b>Talmud: Megilah</b> Location: Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25 <sup>th</sup> FL.) Enter on 54 <sup>th</sup> Street
1:00-2:00 pm	<b>Ramchal: Derech Hashem</b> Location: Cedarview Capital 1Penn Plaza ( 45 <sup>th</sup> FL. )

###### **Tuesday**

12:10 - 1:10pm	<b>Torah Insight Based on the Parsha</b> Location: Yad Avraham
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###### **Wednesday**

11:30 – 12:30 pm	<b>Talmud: Megilah</b> Location: Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25 <sup>th</sup> FL.) Enter on 54 <sup>th</sup> Street
1:00—2:00 pm	<b>Daas Tevunos</b> Location: Yad Avraham

###### **Thursday**

11:00 –12:00pm	<b>Duties of The Heart</b> Location: Yad Avraham
12:30 – 1:30 pm	<b>Talmud: Megilah</b> Sunrise Capital 641 Lexington (25 <sup>th</sup> FL)