

Purity of Motive

Parasha Korach

Bemidbar 16:1

¹ **K**orah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi separated himself, with Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth, the offspring of Reuben. ² They stood before Moses with two hundred and fifty men from the Children of Israel, leaders of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown. ³ They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "It is too much for you! For the entire assembly — all of them — are holy and HASHEM is among them; why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of HASHEM?"

⁴ Moses heard and fell on his face.

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³¹ When he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open.

³² The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korah, and the entire wealth. ³³ They and all that was theirs descended alive to the pit; the earth covered them over and they were lost from among the congregation. ³⁴ All Israel that was around them fled at their sound, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us!"

³⁵ A flame came forth from HASHEM and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.

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Korach brazenly challenged the leadership of Moshe and the appointment of Aharon as Kohen Gadol. In response, Moshe said that all who considered themselves worthy of the High Priesthood should appear the next morning at the Mishkan carrying a ketores, incense, offering. Moshe warned (see Rashi 16:6) that only the one whom Hashem desired as the Kohen Gadol would survive this test and have his offering accepted; everyone else would perish. Yet the next day, Korach and two hundred and fifty followers stood ready with their offerings. Rashi (v. 7) asks, "Korach, who was a perceptive individual — what drove him to such foolishness?" Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that Korach, through Ruach HaKodesh, saw great men of righteousness and distinction descending from him, including the prophet Shmuel. This knowledge caused Korach — a perceptive man — to believe that his offering would be accepted and that he would live, while everyone else, including Aharon, would perish!

4 For such a man to suffer such delusion, there had to have been some personal desire that blurred his vision and deprived him of his perception. In explaining what impelled Korach to embark on his campaign against Moshe and Aharon, Rashi states:

What caused Korach to argue against Moshe? He was envious of the princship of Elitzaphan ben Uziel, whom Moshe appointed prince over the family of Kehas by Divine command. Said Korach: "My father was one of four brothers. . . Amram, who was the eldest — his two sons took high positions; one [Moshe] is a king, while the other is Kohen Gadol. Who is fit to receive the next appointment [i.e., the princship of Kehas] if not me, who is the son of Yitzhar, the second son after Kehas? — and he appointed the son of the youngest brother instead!"

5 Korach's folly is aptly summed up in the following citation from Mesilas Yesharim (ch. 11):

Envy is likewise rooted in a lack of understanding and foolishness, for being envious does not achieve any gain for oneself, nor does it cause any loss to the one who is the object of envy. . . There is a type whose foolishness in this regard is so great that if he sees his neighbor in possession of a good thing, he broods, worries and feels pained — to the point that he will not even enjoy his own good things because of the pain of seeing that which his neighbor possesses.

6 Korach was not satisfied with being a distinguished member of the exalted tribe of Levi. His uncontrolled envy caused him to become a real-life illustration of a well-known teaching:

רבי אלעזר הקפ"ר אומר: הקנאה והמאנה והכבוד מוציאין את האדם מן העולם.
R' Elazar HaKappar says: Jealousy, lust, and glory remove a man from this world (Avos 4:28).

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Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will have a constructive outcome; but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not have a constructive outcome. What sort of dispute was for the sake of Heaven? — The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of Heaven? — The dispute of Korach and his entire company (Pirkei Avos 5:20).

8
The *Mishnah* describes Korach's rebellion as the epitome of *machlokes* (strife) that is not for the sake of Heaven, and juxtaposes Korach and Aharon, as the exemplars of contentiousness and peacefulness, respectively.

To properly understand the curse of *machlokes* (strife), we must first investigate the meaning of *shalom*. *Shalom* is not merely the absence of strife or disagreement, but a state of peaceful serenity. It is precisely through the interaction of opposites, of fire and water, that God is described as the One Who makes peace. *Machlokes leshem shamayim*, argument for the purpose of reaching truth, is the epitome of *shalom*.

The *Kohanim*, who are the representatives of *shalom* — servants in the *Beis Hamikdash*, the place of *shalom* — were consecrated by killing their relatives who served the Golden Calf. And Pinchas was initiated into the *kehunah* by Hashem and given the covenant of *shalom* as a result of his slaying of Zimri and Kosbi.

9 True *shalom* is the achievement of perfection, the harmonious functioning of the world. As long as evil and evildoers destroy this

harmony, there can be no *shalom*. There is no *shalom*, says Hashem, concerning the wicked (*Yeshayahu 57:21*). Hence, true *shalom* is conditional on destroying evil.

12
In the World to Come, however, says the *Gemara* at the end of *Tannis*, Hashem will make a great circle dance for all the *tzaddikim*, with Himself in the middle. Then, says the *Chafetz Chaim*, two *tzaddikim* who had diametrically opposed approaches will find themselves facing one another across the circle. Each will realize that he and his opposite are both equidistant from the center. Nor will the circle be stationary. Each *tzaddik* will dance around and occupy the positions of every other *tzaddik*, for in the future world every Jew will be able to identify and incorporate all paths. In this world, however, perfection is reached when each group follows its unique path, while acknowledging and respecting all the other paths.

13
The *Gemara* relates that one who sees a kettle, or river, or bird in a dream should expect to find *shalom*. The three factors that prevent the achievement of perfection are jealousy, lust, and haughtiness. All three drive wedges between people and destroy harmonious cooperation and co-existence. The pot unites the power of fire and water to cook food for our sustenance. Yet the pot itself gains nothing and is burnt and blackened. The lustful individual, by contrast, seeks only his own gratification and bases his conduct on one consideration: "What's in it for me?" The pot negates this attitude.

Contemplation of the river is the antidote for jealousy. The river is so beautiful and useful when it stays within its boundaries, and yet so destructive when it overflows those boundaries. *Shalom* requires each person to recognize his place in the world and the unique role he has to play, while at the same time recognizing the contributions and worth of his fellow man. To combat haughtiness, one must learn from the bird. The bird is flexible and light, ever ready to make way for others and fly away.

15
וכן החטאים שהיו בראשית בריאת העולם היו בג' ענינים אלו הקנאה התאוה והכבוד. החטא הראשון היה קנאה, הוא החטא של קין שנבע בתחילתו מקנאה, כמד"כ וישע' ה' אל הבל ואל מנחתו ואל קין ואל מנחתו לא שעה, ומזה הגיע

10
When David sought to build the *Beis Hamikdash*, he was told by the prophet that he could not build the house of *shalom* because his hands were covered with the blood of battle. At the same time, Hashem told David that he could not build the *Beis Hamikdash* because if he were to build it, it would be eternal, and Hashem reserved the option to destroy the *Mikdash* — to vent his anger on wood and stones — if the people sinned (*Eichah Rabbah 4:14*).

The tranquility and *shalom* of Shlomo's reign was marked by the absence of war. Such a passive *shalom* could not produce an eternal House of Peace. David, however, was the epitome of an aggressive *shalom*, one that included the preservation of harmony through aggressive means when necessary. Such a *shalom* could create an eternal House of Peace.

11 Perfection is not the province of any individual. The Jewish people, says the *Chafetz Chaim*, are like an army, which can only be successful if all its varied divisions are represented and united towards a common goal. Today there are a variety of authentic approaches to the Torah — all faithful to the observance of the 613 *mitzvos* as elucidated in the Written and Oral Torah. These approaches differ only in emphasis, but there is a natural tendency for each group to feel that only its approach is correct.

14
ובזה י"ל ענין ג' החטאים שנאמרו בפרשיות אלו. חטא המתאוננים היה בתאוה, כמד"כ והאספסוף אשר בקרבו התאוה תאוה, פי' שרצו תאוות ולכן דיברו סרה על המן, כי המן היה מאכל קדוש, לחם אבירים אכל איש, וכיון שהתקיימו מאכילת המן לא היו מתעוררים בהם שום תאוות, והם התאוה תאוה, שרצו שיהיו להם תאוות. וזה ההיפך מדרך התורה, שיהודי צריך לחפש דרכים אף להפטר מן התאוות, ואילו הם שהיו דור דעה ואכלו מאכל של מלאכים עד שלא נתעוררו בהם תאוות, התאוה תאוה. ולכן היה זה פגם כה גדול כיון שהנא נגד תכלית רצון ה', ויך ה' בעם מכה רבה מאד. וחטא המרגלים נבע מכבוד, כמד"א בזה"ק (ח"ג קנח). שאמרו המרגלים, אי ייעלון ישראל לארעא נתעבר אנן מלמיהו רישין, וימני משה רישין אחרנין, דהא אנן זכינן במדברא למהו רישין אבל בארעא לא נזכי. והיינו שזה היה פגם של גאווה וכבוד, שלא רצו שישראל יכנסו לארץ מאחר שידעו ששם הם כבר לא יהיו נשאים, ע"כ הוציאו דיבת הארץ רעה כדי שישראל לא יאבו להכנס לארץ. והפגם של קרח ועדתו היה קנאה, כמו שפירש"י על מאמר הקנאה וכו' מוציאים את האדם מן העולם, הקנאה שקנא קרח במשה ואהרן. וכמד"כ ויקומו לפני משה ואנשים מבני ישראל חמשים ומאתים, שלכאורה מה היה נפק"מ לאותם אנשים מבני ישראל אם משה יהיה המנהיג או קרח, הרי בין כך ובין כך לא הם יהיו המנהיגים, אלא זה היה פגם של קנאה, שנתקנאו במשה ואהרן שבידם כל הממשלה על עם ישראל, וקנאה אין לה הגיון. ור"נ אנשים אלו היו ראשי סנהדראות, האנשים הגדולים ביותר, אלא מחמת קנאה שהיתה בהם נפלו כ"כ. זה היה השורש של החטאים הגדולים של ישראל שנאמרו בתורה, הקנאה התאוה והכבוד, שהם נגד תכלית רצון ה'. ובהיותם במדבר נכשלו בחטאים אלו ונענשו עליהם, כי טרם כניסתם לארץ ישראל היו צריכים לשבר תוקף ג' קליפות אלו.

וכיון שענין זה הוא עיקר העבודה ותכלית רצון ה', וזה שיא המדרגה שיהודי יבטל עצמו בבחי' אין שע"ז העולם עומד, על כן יש התגברות חזקה מאד של היצה"ר דוקא בענינים אלו של ישות, הקנאה התאוה והכבוד, וכלשון הרמב"ם בנוגע לתאוה שאין לך דבר בכל התורה כולה שקשה לרוב העם לפרוש ממנו כעניני תאוות, כן הוא גם בקנאה וכבוד. ולכן כתבה התורה בפרשת קרח ואנשים מבני ישראל חמשים ומאתים נשיאי עדה קריאי מועד אנשי שם, ולכאורה כיון שהיו חטאים בנפשותם לשם מה הוזכרה מעלתם, אלא ללמד שהיצה"ר מתגבר מאד בענינים אלו שהם העיקר, ואפי' האנשים הגדולים ביותר, וכן קרח עצמו שפקח היה ומנושאי הארון, בכל זאת נפלו בזה. וכן על המרגלים כתבה התורה כולם אנשים ראשי בני ישראל, שאם התורה מכנה

לחטא נורא כזה להרוג את אחיו. ואח"כ היה דור המבול שהפגם שלהם היה בתאוה, שכל הדור נפל בתאוות, כדכ' ותשחת הארץ לפני האלקים. ואח"כ בדור הפלגה היה הפגם של כבוד, כמד"כ ויאמרו הבה נבנה לנו עיר ומגדל וראשו בשמים ונעשה לנו שם. והתחלת עולם התיקון היתה ע"י אברהם אבינו שהיה תכלית האין, כמו שאמר ואנכי עפר ואפר, שעד שבא אברהם אבינו שהיה בבחי' עפר ואפר לא הותחל עולם התיקון. וכן הוא בפרשות אצל כל יהודי, בחי' אין היא ראשית התיקון בעולמו של יהודי שממנה הוא מתחיל לעלות ולפרות,

אותם בתואר ראשי בני ישראל הרי הכוונה שהיו במדרגה רוחנית גדולה מאד, ולשם מה התורה מציינת מעלתם, להורות שאפילו אדם כזה שהוא מראשי בני ישראל עלול הוא ליפול לשאול תחתית בענינים אלו. כי פגמים אלו הם חמורים מאד לפי שהם בתכלית הניגוד לרצון ה'. ולכן כתבה התורה את כל עניני החטאים הללו באריכות גדולה, כדי ללמד שאפילו האנשים הגדולים ביותר עלולים להכשל בג' דברים אלו של ישות שהם השרשים לכל עניני הרע. ועוד בזה שעל ידי שנכתבו בתורה הר"ז נתון כח ליהודי להתגבר בדברים אלו שיוכל לקיים את תכלית הבריאה לבטל כל ישותו להשי"ת בבחי' אין.:

17 Rashi comments on the opening words of the *sedrah*, "Korach took — He took himself off to one side." Korach separated himself. He did not see himself as a part of the *klal*, but rather as a detached, isolated individual. His sense of separation caused his jealousy of Elizaphon ben Uziel, when the latter was appointed as the family head, and led to his lust for the glory of the *kehunah gedolah*. His attitude was the very antithesis of *shalom*, which depends on each Jew fulfilling his unique role without jealousy or selfish motivations.

Reb Zusya was asked if he would accept the opportunity to switch places with Avraham Avinu. He replied, "What would HaKadosh Baruch Hu gain? There would still be one Avraham Avinu and one Reb Zusya." Each individual has to aspire to achieve the maximum he can in his individual role and not to duplicate the role entrusted to another. There can be only one *Kohen Gadol*. Had Korach taken the attitude of Reb Zusya it would have made no difference to him whether it was Aharon or himself, as long as the duties of the office were performed in accord with God's will.

18 ויקח קרח. איתא בזוה"ק דקרח אויל במחלוקת וכו', מחלוקת פלוגתא דשלום. לבאר ענין קרח דפליג על שלום, וכי סבר שיש לאחוז במחלוקת, י"ל דהנה שלום ומחלוקת שהיא פלוגתא דשלום יש להם שורש פנימי מדת הישות. האדם שהוא בבחי' יש שתופס מקום בעיני עצמו, נדמה לו שחבירו מפריע לו ועומד בדרכו, ואף כשלא הרע לו בשום דבר מתוך מדת הישות שלו יש לו את ההרגשה כי הוא מפריע לו ותופס את מקומו, ומזה בא

למחלוקת. והשלום שהוא היפך המחלוקת בא ממדת אין שהוא ביטול הישות, שכאשר מכניע את עצמו לגמרי להשי"ת, ומשבר ומבטל ישותו, אז איש אינו מפריע לו ואינו עומד לו בדרכו, וחי עם כולם בשלום. והנה מדת הישות היא השורש פורה ראש ולענה של כל המדות הרעות. הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד המוציאין את האדם מן העולם שורשם במדת הישות. קנאה נובעת מישות ותאוה נובעת מישות, אך בעיקר נובעת מדת הכבוד מישות, שעיקר הישות מתבטא בענין הגאות. ובוזה היה פגם קרח במדת הגאות ממקור מדת הישות. וע"כ היה פליג על שלום,

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של מחלוקת. ועוד י"ל דהנה השורש פורה ראש ולענה המביא לכל המדות הרעות היא מדת הישות, כאשר ישותו של האדם תופסת אצלו את המקום המרכזי ומבקש תמיד להשביע את רצון עצמו, זה השורש פורה ראש ולענה של כל ענפי הרע. וכמו שיש ישות בגשמיות שייך גם ישות ברוחניות שהיא ג"כ בגדר ישות. וזה היה הפגם של עדת קרח, שהרי לא היו סבורים ששם שמים יתקדש יותר אילו תהיה להם הכוונה מאשר אם אהרן הוא הכהן, ולא היתה כוונתם שיהיה יותר נחת רוח לפני הקב"ה מזה אלא שהם יתקרבו יותר להשי"ת ע"י שיעלו לגדולה, והם אשר ישיגו את הדיקות בה' ואת כל המדרגות והגדלות שמשגיג מי שעולה לגדולה, והרי שהיה כאן בשורש פגם של ישות ברוחניות ומזה נבע החטא הגדול של מחלוקת שנפלו בו לבסוף.

19 - והנה השל"ה הק' כתב בפרשה זו, שהמאתים וחמשים איש, שבתוכם היו גם הנשיאים, כל כוונתם היתה לשם שמים, שהאמינו בה' והאמינו במשה עבדו וידעו נאמנה שכל מה שמשם רבנו עושה הוא מפי הגבורה, אבל הם סברו כי מחלוקתם היא לשם שמים.

ומחלוקתם היתה מפני שסברו כי משה רבנו רצה שכל הגדולה תהיה רק ממשפחתו, והוא התפלל על זאת להקב"ה שלא יזוז הכבוד מביתו וממשפחתו, והקב"ה רצון יראיו יעשה וממלא בקשתו. ועל כך התרעמו, כי הם רדפו אחר הכבוד, לא אחר הכבוד המדומה אלא לשם שמים, כי כל מי שעולה לגדולה מתקרב להשי"ת וכבוד השכינה חופף עליו, ע"כ בקשו את הגדולה לעצמם כד' שהם יתקרבו להשי"ת ויגיעו לדבקות בהשי"ת. ולדבה"ק תגדל הקושיא, אם כל כוונתם היתה לשם שמים מדוע איפוא נענשו בעונשים נוראים כ"כ על המחלוקת.

Chazal called Korach an *apikorus* for denying the validity of the Oral Law. That denial was a direct consequence of his stirring up contention. Torah is based on *shalom* and harmony among the Jewish people. A commitment to the totality of Torah is impossible on an isolated, individual level. No individual can fulfill 613 *mitzvos*; there are *mitzvos* that only a *Kohen* can perform and others that require a *Yisrael*. There are *mitzvos* that apply only to men and other *mitzvos* that apply only to women. Torah in its totality requires the united community of *Klal Yisrael*. Only as one individual with one heart can we accept the Torah and fulfill it.

Argument for the sake of Heaven, the collective quest for truth, is the essence of the Oral Torah. But one whose contentiousness is not for the sake of Heaven negates the foundation upon which the Oral Torah stands. Thus Korach was labeled an *apikorus* (heretic).

23 Korach's punishment perfectly reflected his sin. He who sees his fellow men only as objects of jealousy or lust or as means of obtaining honor, will in the end swallow others alive to advance his own goals. Korach was such a person, and the earth swallowed him alive — *middah keneged middah* (measure for measure).

The very capacity of the earth to serve as a firm base for man depends on the unification of the individual grains of sand into *terra firma*. One who denies the necessity of unity, who fails to see that the fulfillment of God's will is a collective enterprise, causes those grains to break apart, and finds himself cast down alive into the netherworld.

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דמינו אלהים חסדך בקרב ה' ב'לה. בשמך אלהים בן תהלתך על קצו ארץ צדק מלאה ימינה.
We imagined, O God, that Your kindness was in the midst of Your Sanctuary. [But] Like Your Name, O

God, so is Your praise — to the very ends of the earth; righteousness fills Your right hand. (Psalms 48:10,11)

These verses offer direct testimony that opportunities for growth are not place-specific and that no situation is inherently negative — both powerful bases for positive thinking.

It is noteworthy that the verses appear in a psalm composed by the sons of Korach while they were tottering on the brink of *Gehinnom*. Had they not repented at that point, they would have descended into purgatory together with their rebellious father. This most unlikely location for the composition of a psalm warrants some explanation. R. Shneur Kotler, Rosh Yeshiva of the Beis Midrash Govoha in Lakewood, offered a classic interpretation of these verses.

We all know that Korach was a very great man, one of the most distinguished Levites, who enjoyed the unique privilege of carrying the Holy Ark when it was transported from place to place. Why, then, did he dare to rebel against his first cousin, Moses, who was God's chosen leader? In truth, Korach's motives were righteous. He coveted leadership not for the sake of his own glory or power, but for the privilege of serving God and praising Him in the most intense way possible. Therefore, he complained of the seeming unfairness of the leaders' exclusionary privileges. Moses was able to speak to God on Mt. Sinai, face to face; Aaron alone had the right to enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle on Yom Kippur. Korach, too, desires close proximity to God.

24 But this was his mistake. God is in charge. He decides where to position each and every one of His creations, and God alone knows in which capacity they will serve Him best. Even a soldier serving under a flesh-and-blood commander has no right to question why his superior places him in a certain position; certainly then, man cannot question God's assignments.

27 נחמה ונחמה 21

יִרְחַק קרח והחטני דחיה נחמה ונחמה לשיט
קוים להקיים. כי נחמה עוהיו בקרחת
עלמה דפרודח שכל הנבראים יש לכל אחד נח
לעלמו ולכן כולא קטטה. לכל נרי זוכין אל ששלוס
נחם חסודם וכל עובד ה' לשמו יח' כדי להיזה בעמ
רשע יח' צעולם אם ומחיון נחמה לשיט אין צו
סוס קחאם על חבירו. כי מה האדם ס' ה' נחשו
ומחנלים בשמים רק וכלל ישראל בעמ רטמי יח'
נעולם. ולכן לרד כל אחר לנאור חלקו יסם יסם
לנבור. ומחילא אין הפרש אללו ניט לבין חבירו. חס
ה' עמם חסדן חסדן ששלוס ורודף ששלוס. לכן נחם צו
הקניס לכתו. ולכן חסדו וחסדו מה סוד כי לא
ה' נפרד כלל לעלמו וכל מנשטו נפרד לנבור. חכל
נקרה כח' רקח לעלמו. וחפילו יח' גדול סנגודליס
כסודו לעלמו מה סוד. וכח' חסדו לרעד כמור
ח' ה' וחננו זס כלל גדול בחסדו רש"י פ' רעד
זס סקביס. והיינו כסנגוד ה' לשמו יח' מחילא חסד
אח חבירו העובד ה' כסודו. חס כלל גדול בחסדו
רעד הקניס ורעד נחמה חכל אחד כריל. והנה ססודו

25 Thus, Korach's sons, who sincerely repented, found themselves singing God's praises in the most unlikely of places — at the very gateway to damnation and purgatory. They proclaimed: "Come and see! Our father thought that he must sing God's praises in the Holy of Holies. We have learned from our harrowing experience that we can sing God's praises just as well at the entrance to hell!" And this is precisely the psalm that they composed: "We imagined, O God, that Your kindness was in the midst of Your Sanctuary, i.e. we thought at first, like our father, that the only way to praise God's kindness was in close proximity to You, in the

very heart of Your Sanctuary. [But] like Your Name, O God, so is Your praise — to the very ends of the earth — Since Your name describes You as Omnipresent it makes no difference where I am standing. I can praise You at the very ends of the earth, even at the gates of hell!"

26 Although Korach's sons were in a potentially dangerous position, they did not see their location as an impediment to *teshuvah* and did not hesitate to offer words of praise to God. Their reaction is a strong lesson in positive thinking; it reminds us not to dwell on perceived disadvantages but to look for opportunities at every turn, even — God forbid — under the worst possible conditions.

Shabbat Shirata - R. Miller

27 Rash, in his short but classic work 'Orchoth Chaim,' offers advice to those who are involved in litigation: it is wiser not to interfere in the disputes of others—since ultimately they will be reconciled, while the outsider will remain angry in a cause that is not his own.² We see in practice that when children quarrel, they cry, rage, and make it up—but their fond mothers sometimes never get over their resentment and maternal partisanship, and are involved in family feuds that may last much longer than the original quarrel. Rash implies that, on an adult level, this is what very often happens to those who intervene in a dispute in which they are not personally concerned: they may become more impassioned, and for longer, than the principals themselves. But why should it be, after all, that these outsiders should continue to feel violently over an issue, even after it has been resolved? Surely such a tenuous connection with the dispute should not lead to such a passionate involvement?

28 Both these questions will be clarified, when we have glanced at the passage in Gemara, where the fate of the slanderer is set forth in parable form :

ואמר ריש לקיש מאי דכתיב (קהלת י) אם ישוך הנחש בלוא לחש ואין יתרון לבעל הלשון, לעתיד לבוא מחקבצות כל החיות ובאות אצל נחש ואומרות ארי דורס ואוכל, ואב טורף ואוכל, אתה מה הנאה יש לך ואמר להם וכי מה יתרון לבעל הלשון.

Resh Lachish said: It is written, "Shall the serpent bite without hissing?—the man of evil tongue has no gain" In the world to come, all the wild beasts will be gathered and will come to the serpent, and declare: "The lion tramples its prey and consumes it; the wolf tears its prey and consumes it. But you—what pleasure do you gain from your kills?" Then the serpent will reply: "And has the man of evil tongue any gain?"

The answer of the serpent is at first surprising: there seems to be no comparison on this point between a man of evil tongue and a serpent—since surely a slanderer does derive pleasure from his activity—a malicious and perverted pleasure, it is true, but to him no less satisfying for that? Why then does the Gemara compare his vice to the non-sensual bite of the serpent?

29 On this subject of slander, Rambam declares: 'Three people are slain by slander: the slanderer, the one who listens to him, and the subject of his talk—and the one who listens to him is the most affected of all.'

According to this, there can scarcely be imagined anything more powerful than the tongue—the faculty of speech that can kill, at one stroke, three human beings. The harm that the tongue can wreak is immeasurable: if one is approached for an opinion on the question of someone's suitability, for example, for a Rabbinical post, and one merely grimaces slightly—without saying one derogatory word—then one has killed a man—one has deprived a man of his livelihood. The effects of a slandering tongue can extend beyond the range of the heaviest artillery. It is a lethal weapon that can kill from one end of the earth to the other.

30a It is clear, then, that the slanderer can be incurring a death-penalty by his act; and that the victim of the slander may be hurt, to the point of death by an evil reputation: but it remains difficult to understand why one who merely listens to such talk should be considered worthy of a worse fate than the others? In the Midrash, we find a statement about this type of person, the recipient of slander :

כל מי שהוא מקבל לשון הרע אע"פ שאחיה הולך ומפייסו הוא מתפייס עדין הוא בורח מבפנים.

* One who listens to slander—even if afterwards you re-assure him, and he is re-assured—even so, he will remain angry, within himself.*

What the Midrash tells us of the recipient of slander, is that even if he refuses to believe what he is told, and even if the slanderer afterwards assures him that his report was not true—even so, once having listened to such an evil report, something will cling in his mind, some seed of suspicion and criticism of the victim of the slander.

* This subconscious effect of evil speech is very deeply ingrained in human-nature, and cannot easily be plucked out by an exertion of will. David, that pointer'

30b This, too, is the case of slanderers: the slanderer himself may not seem to gain any direct benefit from his evil talk, but he derives a perverse pleasure from the sheer destruction he is effecting. All the same, one could try to excuse him, by saying that he possibly has some reason for his reports: he may have been directly affected in some way by the subject of his slander, and he is therefore venting a hatred that is, at least partly, motivated.

31 The man who listens to such slander, however, can have no possible reason to find it pleasurable: he is not directly connected with the subject of the slander; and his enjoyment, therefore, is a sheer enjoyment of the evil itself, of the sensation of degrading and harming another human being. It is in this sense that Rambam brands the recipient of evil talk as the worst of all its three victims.

32 One who listens to evil talk, then, is in the worst position of desiring, purely, to hear evil of others, without any rational cause, or personal benefit: even if the report is proved untrue, the impression that is left on him is so deep that it cannot be erased with the simple proof of its falsehood. This is, then, the reason for the advice of Rash—not to meddle in the disputes of others, since even after they are reconciled, one will remain angry. The original disputants have some concrete issue over which they are struggling; once that is cleared away, they will come to terms with each other. But the outsider who interfered not out of any personal interest in the matter, but simply out of a propensity for quarrels and disputations, will remain impassioned and resentful after the original bone of contention is removed: his sickness is not caused by some localised injury, but is an infection, caught from others, without traceable cause: a motiveless, irrational passion not easily to be eradicated.

33 Now, the verses of the Portion, with which we began, become clearer. Why were Dathan and Aviram punished with a different death from the rest of the two hundred and fifty rebels, who were burned? To this, Maharal answers: 'Dathan and Aviram, in their rebellion against Moses, had no ambitions for the Priesthood. This was the aim and desire of the other two hundred and fifty rebels: it was for this that they joined in the quarrel. But Dathan and Aviram, joined in the dispute out of a sheer love of mischief, out of the will to humiliate Moses and Aaron, out of no reasonable, personal motive. For this reason, Dathan and Aviram were swallowed up in the pit: for the pit is the Valley of Nothingness, which was created on the second day (after which there is no mention of כי טוב—that God found the day's work 'good'). And contentiousness is a creation of the second day, as the Midrash says: "These two things, the Valley of Nothingness and contentiousness, were created on one day. They fit well together."

34 In this dispute, the part played by Dathan and Aviram was an expression of no desire except the sheer love of contention. And for this reason they and their whole families were swallowed alive into the pit.

According to this account, contentiousness is seen as an instrument of division; and the Valley of Nothingness is the destination of the wicked, known in Western terminology as Hell. In other contexts Maharal explains the concept of Gehinom as a place of Nothingness; the negation of all existence. This nullity is conceived of as resulting from the separation of what is essentially one: by such division, the true essence of any entity is lost—a kind of vacuum is created. And therefore, those who cause such division, the lovers of contention and dispute, are destined for this Pit of Nothingness: the punishment fitting the crime. The Pit was created on the same day as the very concept of Division—the separation of the upper waters and the lower waters to reveal the earth: there is an integral connection between the two concepts.

35 Dathan and Aviram, who split the people out of a sheer delight in mischief, in degrading the great, in denying value to any other human being, were punished by being swallowed up into the Pit—the ultimate retribution. Theirs was a hatred that was caused by no real grudge: it was not that human ambition for the Priesthood that motivated the other two hundred and fifty rebels and that was punished only by a temporal death. It was a love of evil for its own sake: such a hatred falls into the category of the type of man who listens to slanderous talk: he desires no personal benefit or relief from it—only the unadulterated joy of hearing the denigration of others. And his case is the worst