

## Korach gathered the entire assembly. (16:19)

Without a doubt, Korach was as powerful as he was charismatic. Nonetheless, he was going up against Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *HaKohen*, *Klal Yisrael's* leaders, who certainly were greater than he. He succeeded in gathering a group of distinguished followers, heads of the *Sanhedrin*, men of erudition and discernment. He did not go to a bar and preach to ne'er-do-wells. He went to the elite of *Klal Yisrael* and succeeded in swaying them to support him. For this, they paid dearly. How did Korach pull this off? *Leitzanus*, cynicism, sarcasm, scorn, whatever name we call it; the result is the same: it degrades the subject and belittles the one who is the focus of their scorn.

*Leitzanus achas docheh meah tochachos*, one bit of sarcasm voiced by a cynic can undo (literally push away) one hundred rebukes. How? Imagine a prolific orator speaks passionately to a crowd. The people sit on the edge of their seats to listen to him, absorb and digest every word that he articulates. They are mesmerized, moved like never before. They are prepared to alter their life's trajectory, until one person, a *leitz*, cynic, makes a crack about the speaker. He does not malign him. He only belittles his stature, "Who is he to speak to us in such a manner?" He makes a joke about his appearance, the organization he represents, his *yeshivah*, etc. It is over! The entire speech had become meaningless. The cynic has just destroyed everyone's mood. Is it any wonder that *leitzanim* are not allowed to see the *Shechinah*, Divine Presence?

What sin did he commit? He was fully observant, righteous, honest, charitable, studied Torah. Yet, he is not granted entry into *Gan Eden*. Why? He belittled people, made them feel insignificant, and, in some instances, worthless.

Amalek did that to us. We left Egypt liberated, excited, infused with a new spirit, challenged with the opportunity to turn our backs on 210 years of slavery and looking forward to a bright future of serving Hashem in the Promised Land. Every nation of the world feared us. After all, we survived Pharaoh and watched as Hashem dealt with the Egyptians. We miraculously passed through the Red Sea and watched our enemies drown. We were one with Hashem. Suddenly, out of the blue, comes Amalek, bent on destroying us. While he could not triumph, he succeeded in dispelling our self-confidence. Everything that we believed in was placed on hold because Amalek put us in our place. Our visions, aspirations, and self-esteem were yanked from under us. Our passion, our very positive emotion, was soured by this nothing whose animus toward Hashem and His chosen people was the legacy he received from his ancestor, Eisav, which he bequeathed to his future biological and ideological offspring.

Rarely does the cynic's first salvo begin maliciously. It is usually offhand and thoughtless – but mean-spirited, as if he just does not care who you are or what you represent. You mean nothing to him. The initial remark might be insignificant, but give it some time and it will domino into a violent firestorm that destroys everything in its wake. Cynicism invites others to join and incites comments and actions that go beyond the harmless and insignificant. A parent can make a remark at home about a *rebbe*/teacher, student, family, and within a few days, it has passed hands from their child

to another, to another, back to their respective homes; and, before one realizes it, an innocuous remark has destroyed a person and a family.

Cynicism need be neither true nor accurate. A simple remark that has no basis, if it is “well-placed” and “well-timed,” will mushroom and destroy. It is difficult to overcome. The *Mesillas Yesharim* compares the destructive force of cynicism/mockery to a leather shield smeared with oil that deflects and repels arrows from upon it – not allowing them to strike the body of the individual it is protecting. Likewise, with one cynical remark, a person repels from himself enormous amounts of inspiration, which would have otherwise influenced him.

In the opening *pasuk* of *Sefer Tehillim*, David *Hamelech* says: *Ashrei ha'Ish*; “Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked; or taken the path of the sinners, *u'v'moshav leitzim lo yashav*, or joined/sat in the session of scorners.” The order of verbs seems to emphasize the increasing order of strength with regard to the deleterious behavior of these individuals. Thus, “Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked”; who has carefully avoided even a passing or temporary connection with people who wantonly and intentionally do evil. This person is on the lowest level (so to speak) of sinful behavior. He simply follows – does not stop to talk. The next level is he who takes the path/stands in the path of sinners. His contact is more lingering. He has a *shmuess*, conversation, with the sinner. Last, is what appears to be the most egregious of the three, he who sits with scorners. This implies that he has settled down for a considerable amount of time. He has an entire session with the scorners, whereby he chose to listen and impart his own “wisdom” to the conversation. This is a *moshav leitzim*.

*Chazal* (*Pirkei Avos* 3:3) describe this ignominious gathering as what we might construe to be a simple gathering of friends to *shmuess* about anything and everything, with no malice intended. Over time, however, remarks are made, statements spoken, and images conjured. In fact, it is even more innocuous that *Chazal* speak about two men that sit together and Torah is not spoken between them. These men have the time and opportunity to study or speak Torah, yet choose to ignore it. They are scorners, because they indicate by their behavior that the Torah means very little to them. They would rather talk about something foolish than share a Torah thought. This attitude disgraces and belittles the Torah and is a classic example of a *moshav leitzim*.

The idea goes one step further. It is not only about belittling the Torah. *V'ein beineihem divrei Torah*, “No words of Torah are spoken between them.” Quite possibly, both men are engrossed in their studies – one is sitting on one side of the *bais hamedrash*, while the other one is sitting across the room. No Torah is passing between them. Neither one considers the other one worthy, or he is just not interested in sharing his thoughts with the other fellow. He probably does not consider him his equal in learning. He looks down on him. Such learning is the antithesis of what learning Torah is all about. *Derech erez kadmah laTorah*, human decency, proper manners, respect precedes Torah study. One who studies Torah and does not become a *mentch* has not benefitted from his study.

Some people are compelled to navigate the sea of life in rough waters, and, as a result, are very much alone – not even in a crowd. Sadly, as if these sorry individuals are not sufficiently suffering, we – either by ignoring them, or by making crude, unconscionable remarks to them (for no reason other than self-assertiveness) – make their lives more miserable. When we measure the greatness of man, his scholarship and G-d-fearing observances aside, his attitude toward those who deal with challenges, who are less fortunate, whose portion in this world is not as full or nice as ours, who are alone, should be factored in. One person whose sensitivity toward the broken-hearted was in a league of his own was *Horav Moshe Aharon Stern, zl, Mashgiach Kaminetz Yerushalayim*.

His acts of kindness were more than mere acts; they defined his essence. He truly felt that he was no better than the next person. An elderly, childless man, alone in the world, did receive much kind treatment from many people. He once commented, “Everyone speaks kindly to me, because they pity me. Only one person enjoys speaking with me – *Rav Moshe Aharon*.”

He addressed everyone with respect – adding the prefix “*reb*” to everyone’s name. He would listen to their *chiddushim*, novellae, regardless of their quality. If it made a person feel good; if it elevated his self-esteem – he listened, questioned, added and repeated it to others. He felt a sense of humility before every man. He had a special “guest” every *Shabbos*. A dejected, unbalanced woman, who more than once would disrupt the meal, demanding that all the children leave the table. *Rav Moshe Aharon* could have overruled her, but, in her unhinged state, it might provoke her unnecessarily and engender a not so welcome reaction. He just moved his children to a different table.

One would think that when they moved to the Shaarei Chesed neighborhood, he would leave no forwarding address. *Rav Moshe Aharon* remembered on Friday night after *davening* that he had forgotten to give the new address to the woman. She would not know where to go for her meal. He immediately ran to her apartment and invited her to join them – which she did, for several years.

In summation, *leitzanus* is often silent, appears innocuous, but is actually far from benign. It is painful, insidious and has the power to destroy people’s lives. What makes it so lethal is its benign nature. The word *leitz*, *lamed*, *tzadik*, backwards is *tzeil*, shadow. I think this is essentially what the *leitz* accomplishes. He undermines and compromises an issue, a statement, a rebuke – a person, by casting a shadow of ambiguity and aspersion. As I said, a silent saboteur.