

“Moshe heard and fell on his face.” (16:4)

What did Moshe hear that agitated him so? In the Talmud Sanhedrin 110a, Chazal say that he heard that rumors were being spread about him. They suspected him of infidelity, of having relations with an eishes ish, a married woman. Indeed, as Chazal continue, it was not just a married woman, it was many married women. Every man suspected his wife of being with Moshe. We must attempt to grasp this utter foolishness. How could intelligent human beings conjure up such an absurd claim against an individual whose devotion to them – whose piety, virtue and spiritual status – was beyond characterization?

Horav Yechiel z.l., m'Ozrov cites the Sabba Kadisha z.l., m'Shpol'e who derives a profound remez, allusion, from the last of the Aseres HaDibros, Ten Commandments. We are admonished, “Lo sachmod eishes reiacha”, “You shall not covet your fellow’s wife.” Eishes means “the wife of.” It also means “the fire of,” since eish means fire. The Sabba interpreted this pasuk as an enjoinder against being envious of and coveting the eish, fire and spiritual passion, that our friend is able to expend in his service to the Almighty. What our friend has merited to be granted from Heaven is the result of his spiritual ascension. When we apply ourselves as well, when we devote ourselves to our spiritual quest with as much devotion as our friend, we will also be the recipient of the fiery passion that is his hallmark.

This explains the underlying meaning of “they suspected Moshe of being with an eishes ish.” Korach was under the erroneous impression that Moshe’s spiritual distinction was due to his role as leader of Klal Yisrael. To this end, he claimed that the source of the “eish” within Moshe was the people. As leader, he was “living off” the people’s inherent kedushah. His mistake was, as the pasuk previously states (12:3): “The man Moshe was exceedingly humble.” Moshe’s distinction was his own. He took nothing from others. He was “the man,” Moshe. He was an ish, man, in his own right.

This idea is to be understood from Moshe's response to Korach (16:7): “Then the man whom Hashem will choose, he is the holy one.” True distinction is to be found by he who is chosen by Hashem as a result of his own inherent character and quality – not in the merit derived from others. Aharon was the man selected by Hashem to be the Kohen Gadol. Moshe was the man chosen to be the quintessential leader of Klal Yisrael. Korach was not selected. This misunderstanding was at the root of his error.