

## And Korach took. (16:1)

Was Korach a fool? Absolutely not. Did he lack *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven? No. indeed, *Chazal* teach that Korach was a *chacham gadol*, very wise man, a *pikeach*, clever and astute person. He was among those *Leviim* who carried the *Aron HaKodesh*, Holy Ark. What happened to all of this *chochmah*, *pikchus* and *yiraas Shomayim*? His eye deceived him. He saw a great and distinguished lineage descending from him. Shmuel *HaNavi*, the great prophet, was one of his descendants. Such lineage can turn anyone's head.

First of all, Korach was correct in what he saw. He was the progenitor of an illustrious lineage. His mistake was in not noticing what should have been the most salient point of this image – that his sons would repent and reject their father's miscreant ways. Otherwise, Korach's picture would have been quite definitive. So, if Korach was wise, smart and basically a *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing person, how did he have the audacity to confront Moshe *Rabbeinu*, and to entice *Klal Yisrael's* spiritual elite to join him in rebellion and slander of Moshe, Aharon and ultimately Hashem? *Chazal* say *eino hitiso*, his eye deceived him. He figured, if Shmuel could be his grandson, how could he go wrong? He was dead wrong.

**Horav Nissan Alpert, zl**, offers an alternative explanation which has great practical meaning. Korach, indeed, had the qualities that under most circumstances should have stimulated his development as a righteous, upstanding, and virtuous person. Like all men, however, he was drawn to arrogance and petty jealousy. These two character traits have destroyed many a potential leader among men.

*Rav Shimon ben Lakish* says (*Sukkah* 52b): "Man's *yetzer* (inclination) tries to overpower him, trying to kill him, as it says, 'The evil one gazes upon the *tzaddik* and attempts to kill him'" (*Tehillim* 37:32). **Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl**, comments that the "evil one" referenced in the *pasuk* is not some sinister person, some evil individual who attempts to kill the *tzaddik*; rather, the "evil one" is actually man's subconscious. Thus, for all outward appearances, a person could portray himself as a *tzaddik*, but, within him, he is a *rasha*, evil person. If it were not for Hashem's help, we would all succumb to the *yetzer hora's* evil manipulation of our lives.

Hashem's help is not guaranteed. It is accessible to the individual who seeks to move in a positive direction. On the other hand, *Haba l'tamei poschin lo*, "One who wishes to contaminate himself will be granted the opportunity to do so." What is the line of demarcation which divides *tumah*, spiritual defilement, from *taharah*, spiritual purity? One who acts inadvertently, who acts like a human being with his foibles and urges, will not deliberately cross the line. He is only acting human, and human beings are imperfect. When one acts audaciously, however, with malice aforethought, then his actions place him beyond the pale, beyond the parameters of human imperfection. It is then that he has declared that he is *haba l'tamei*, seeks to contaminate himself. Sadly, he, too, will be assisted along the path of infamy which he has chosen for himself.

Korach crossed that line of demarcation. This occurred when he impugned the integrity of Moshe's leadership. By challenging our quintessential *Rebbe* and leader, he indicated that the *rasha*, evil one, from within had taken over and was now in charge. The external *tzaddik* was now an external *rasha*.

*Chazal* present us with ammunition for dealing with the "evil one" which resides within us. "Should that disgusting one meet up with you, drag him into the *bais hamedrash*" (*Sukkah* 52b). How does studying Torah serve as the antidote to protect from the effects of the *yetzer hora*? *Rav Alpert* explains that this occurs when one studies Torah analytically, with sincerity, ruminating over every word, carefully examining everything that he learns, turning it over and over, to be certain that he has viewed all sides and aspects fairly and honestly. He questions himself: "Is this side correct? Perhaps the other side makes greater sense? Do I really understand what the sage says, or could I have misunderstood his position?"

One who takes such an approach, questioning back and forth, clarifying the issue until he has removed as much ambiguity as he can, such an individual can be called *ha'ba l'taheir*, one who wishes to purify himself. He has an open mind in the sense that he seeks only the truth. He is assisted from Above.

Honesty is a prerequisite for religious life. While it is imperative that one deal honestly with others, it is especially vital that he does so with himself. He must acknowledge the three *avos ha'tumah*, primary categories of spiritual defilement: excessive pride, excessive drive for honor, petty jealousy. These are the very same forces that took down Korach, and they are, indeed, a part of himself – as well.

One must question his personal motives: Why am I doing this? What is motivating me to perform the *chesed*, kindness? Do I want attention, acclaim, honor? Am I jealous of others? Are my actions the result of *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, or the consequence of seeking aggrandizement?

*Rav Alpert* presents us with a litmus test for determining the source which is motivating our actions. Does he have any doubt, any misgiving concerning his actions, or is he totally convinced that what he is doing is correct? One who commences a project or endeavor with absolutely no self-doubt should be acutely aware that he is probably acting on behalf of the *yetzer hora*, which has caused him to delude himself.

This is what happened with Korach. *Vayikach Korach* – "and Korach took." What did he take? He took himself – lock, stock and barrel. He convinced himself that what he was doing was appropriate, even laudatory. He did not humbly deliberate and analyze whether his intentions were *l'shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven. He believed in the lie that the "evil one" helped him to conjure up in his mind. He told himself that everything was fine. By crossing the line, he was no longer a candidate for Divine assistance. He had chosen the path leading towards *tumah*.