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*With  
Rabbi Hillel Eisenberg*



ב"ה

Parshas Korach

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## The Don't Mess Policy

Throughout the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert, there have been many a time when a Jew or group of Jews sinned and were subsequently punished. Whether it was those Jews that complained about the lack of water or the lack of food variety or lack of meat; whether it was those that committed the chet haegel (the Golden Calf), or the Meraglim (spies). Or whether it was those that committed adulterous acts with the women of Midyan during the Bilaam episode. They all committed sins. All were punished. Some were even killed.

But not a single punishment allotted to any Jew by G-d in the entire Torah comes close to the uniqueness and unusually unnatural punishment that was handed to Korach. The very earth standing beneath Korach's feet opened up and swallowed him whole! He and everything he owned. The earth did something it had never done prior and has never done since.

Why the strange death? Why were virtually all other Heavenly decreed punishments actualized in a more "run-of-the-mill," natural, form, while Korach had a bizarre, earth-splintering one? What made him different than all the other power-hungry, misguided or lust-seeking sinners? What did he do differently that made him the recipient of the strangest death?

To add to the question, Moshe's response in almost all instances in the Torah involving those who sinned was to beseech Hashem and daven for Him to spare their lives. Moshe would often take an unapologetically defensive stance while defending the Jewish people, advocating for even those who were clearly in the wrong. In that light, Moshe's behavior in the Korach episode seems awfully strange. He deviates from his normal mode of operation and instead of defending Korach, he does the opposite. He actually calls upon his demise.

What happened to the boundlessly compassionate Moshe who, with endless mercy on his fellow Jews, lovingly calls for their safety and welfare time and time again? Why did Moshe suddenly shift from being the ultimate advocate in G-d's court for anyone who sinned, to playing the role of harsh prosecutor?

### **The Goodness Conveyor Belt**

Reb Moshe Sternbuch, a leading rabbinic figure in Israel, formerly in Johannesburg, beautifully articulates an answer that several give. Hashem is often referred to as the *erech apayim*, remarkably patient and forgiving. Every creature on earth is the constant beneficiary of Hashem's infinite patience and love, and a sinner is no different. But there is one sin that stands out. There is one sin that Hashem has no patience for. There is one sin that merits quick and harsh punishment from G-d. That sin is the public attack on the validity of the Torah sheba'al peh, the Oral Torah.

Why is this? Because Hashem created the world as a medium to give goodness to humanity. The Torah is the roadmap to attain that goodness. Hence, it is entrusted to the rabbis and teachers of each generation to safeguard it and ensure that the goodness is attained by all. Those who publicly attack its authenticity aren't merely sinning, they are clawing other Jews away from the Torah world of unparalleled beauty. They are causing scores of people to miss out on the goodness the world has to offer. Hashem does not have patience for that. Hashem will stop that in its tracks. To disregard the Oral Torah and label it as replaceable, unreliable rabbinic folklore is sinful. But to attack it publicly is a whole different thing. It makes the world's creation pointless.

The world split open in dramatic fashion. Why? To teach a lesson: you don't mess with the validity of the Oral Torah, and those who do will have to deal with G-d's wrath. Wrath that can do anything. Wrath that can split the world in half.

Earth is like one big hard drive. The Torah is the computer chip that gives it functionality. To take the real Torah away from people is like handing someone a phone without a SIM card. Worthless and insignificant. The very earth would not tolerate this.

Therefore, a normal death would not suffice. It would not drive the message home enough. Hashem wanted drama to show us that this is serious. The heritage of the Torah rests squarely on our belief in our teachers that teach us. Hashem will do whatever it takes to ensure that those who start up with it are shot down.

## **The Odd Commandment**

The ten commandments were split between the two luchos (tablets). The common explanation for the two separate groups is that the first five are bein adam laMakom (between man and Hashem) and the second five are bein adam lachaveiro (between fellow men). The odd one out is kibud av v'eim – honoring our parents. It is seemingly a commandment between fellow men, and yet it finds itself on the first set of five. Why?

Reb Shmshon Rafael Hirsch explains that when we honor our parents, we are doing more than merely giving back to them by serving them coffee and tea. We are ensuring that the heritage and Torah that they received from their parents and teachers are internalized in us. We are ensuring that the link connecting us to Sinai remains firmly in place.

Without proper respect towards our parents and teachers, the magnificent oral tradition we hold so dear will be lost. Therefore, more than a commandment between man and his fellow, kibud av v'eim is between us and Hashem, for through honoring our parents we are in turn standing up to the authenticity of the Torah, which is the ultimate bond between us and G-d.

Moshe was the most compassionate and selfless leader possible. Time and time again he would attempt to defend the defenseless. He would knock on Heaven's doors, beseeching Hashem to show pity on the wrongdoers. He dug up mercy when it was buried under a heap of sin.

Yet Korach was different. He wasn't a mere sinner. He wasn't like the others. He was threatening to throw water on the oral Torah's fire. He was threatening to dismantle the heritage of Torah that Moshe so painstakingly built. Korach had to be disposed of before other Jews lost their trust. Korach had to be rid of, for the preciousness of our sacred Torah was too important not to. Precisely because Moshe was so compassionate, he refused to allow the rest of his brethren to be potentially led away from the beauty that is Torah.

## **December 1988**

In December of 1988, a delegation of thirty-three chassidim traveled from Brooklyn to London to attend the wedding of their Rebbe's son. After spending several days in the chassidic enclave of Stamford Hill, learning, dancing and singing with the Rebbe, they packed their bags, ready to board their flight back home the following day.

The next morning, although short on time, the chassidim decided to say one last goodbye to the Rebbe and receive a final blessing to bring back with them to America. They walked into the house the Rebbe was staying in, and the

Rebbe's secretary asked what he could do for them. They said they wanted to wish the Rebbe farewell and were wondering if the Rebbe had a moment or two for them to do so.

The secretary said, "Of course. The Rebbe has nothing scheduled for this morning, let me go and tell him you are here." A moment later the secretary returned and said, "The Rebbe is free now but would like to wait a few minutes before seeing you."

The chassidim said, "No problem," and took a seat. After a few minutes passed, the chassidim asked the secretary again to go in and ask if they could see the Rebbe now, being that they needed to catch a flight.

The secretary went to the Rebbe and came back saying, "The Rebbe said you should wait several more minutes and that there is no need to worry about missing the plane."

Ten minutes passed and there was no word from the Rebbe. The chassidim began getting nervous. They were running out of time to make their flight. Should they leave despite the Rebbe telling them to stay? With families to return to and businesses to attend, how could they miss their flight? But then again, how could they disobey the Rebbe? They decided to stay.

Ten nerve-racking minutes later, the Rebbe called them in. He looked up at them with tremendous warmth. He told them that he understood that he had made them wait, but assured them that it would all work out. He shook their hands, giving them warm blessings, and walked them out to their waiting, chartered bus.

Anxious to try and still make their flight, the chassidim wanted to jump in and speed off. The Rebbe didn't allow it. He calmly walked them to the car and almost deliberately slowly gave each one a lengthy and time-consuming beracha.

When he was finally finished, they hopped onto the bus, sped to the airport, and ran through the terminal directly to their gate ... only to learn that their plane had left without them. The last flight to New York had lifted off and left, leaving them stranded behind. Flustered and aggravated, they sat down in the airport, wondering what to do next.

A few minutes later, there was a commotion in the airport. Hundreds of passengers began running to the small TV screens broadcasting horrific breaking news. A Pan Am airplane flying from Heathrow Airport had just blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all on board as well as 11 people on the street at the site of the crash. The chassidim ran to get a closer glimpse of the screen. They squinted to make out what the flight number was. What they saw made their

hearts stop beating. The flight number was Pan Am 103, the exact plane the chassidim were supposed to travel on. The very same plane the chassidim had been intent on boarding. The same plane that the 33 chassidim were supposed to be on at that very moment, but had missed by a few minutes.

A terrorist named Mohammad Kheir Al-Marimi had convinced an unwitting passenger to carry a suitcase onto the plane. In it was a bomb. The plane had 243 passengers. All died. Yet in the back of the plane, there were exactly 33 seats that had remained empty. Empty, because their would-be occupants chose to listen to their Rebbe. Empty, because the people who should have been sitting in them bowed to the greatness of their leader. Empty, because the chassidim who had reserved those seats humbled themselves to the link in their chain that connected them to Sinai.

The word rabbi, rebbi, rav, and rebbe all share the same etymological root: r-a-v. The word rav means to increase or make great. Our rabbis, rebbes and spiritual leaders take, with their holy hands, the heritage their teachers gave them and delicately give it to us. With it, they make us great. With it, they increase our sacredness. Those who disparage them live with a heavenly target on their backs. On the other hand, those that revere them with the respect they properly deserve have heavenly angels protecting them. To those who respect G-d's word, Hashem looks out for them. But to those who don't, they should watch out; the punishment is immense, as we see from Korach's demise.