

Today's sedrah begins:

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן־יִצְחָר בֶּן־קֵהָת בֶּן־לֵוִי
וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֶלְיָאָב
וְאֹן בֶּן־פִּלֵּת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן:

The rebellion begins with four leaders: Korach, Datan, Aviram, and On. But we never hear about On again following this pasuk. Why not? What happens to him?

The Gemara, Masechet Sanhedrin daf kuf-tet amud-bet (109b), relates a medrash about what happened:

Rav said: On ben Pelet's wife saved him. She said: Why does this matter to you? If this one is the master, you are a disciple; if that one is the master, you are a disciple. He replied: What can I do? I have conspired with them, and they made me swear to be one of them! She said Stay here, and I will save you. She gave him wine to drink, and got him drunk, and laid him down inside the tent, and sat just inside the entrance and let down her hair. Everyone who came to fetch him saw her and retreated.

We see from this that although the rebellion started with four ringleaders, they didn't all see it through to the end.

So, what was the end?

In the cases of Datan and Aviram, there was complete destruction. The second half of verse 27 reads:

וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם יָצְאוּ נָצְבִים
פֶּתַח אֹהֲלֵיהֶם וּנְשֵׁיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם וְטַפָּם

Datan and Aviram went out, and stood in the opening of their tents with their wives and children and babies.

Rashi comments on this: *Come and see how severe the rebellion was, for an earthly court does not punish anyone before puberty, and the heavenly court until twenty years of age, and here even suckling babies were destroyed.*

Their fathers were so unwilling to admit that they were in the wrong that they decided to put their infant children in destruction's way.

As for the 250 followers, **they** were consumed by fire, but their families and dwellings were never threatened.

So what happens to Korach's family? We know that Korach's children survive; in Chapter 26 it says וּבְנֵי־קֹרַח לֹא־מָתוּ:

Sanhedrin 110a explains: *Tana, mishum rabeinu am'ru: makom nitbatzer lahem b'geihinom* a fortified place was set aside for them in gehinnom; Rashi there explains that *nitbatzer* means “fortified” as in *ir b'tzeirah* -- a fortified city. *Hitkin lahon HKB"H* God made for them *makom gavoah* a high place *shelo haamiku kaw lach gehinnom* that they should not plummet all the way to gehinnom *v'lo metu* and they should not die.

Homiletics aside, Rashi seems to be explaining the logistics of how the *makom nitbatzer* would save them. Many of us are familiar with the aggadah on 110a of the voices rising from the mouth every thirty days, saying “Moshe v'torato emet”, Moshe and his Torah are true. The midrash Tanchumah on our parsha says “*Yesh omrim chayyim n'dunin ad achshav*” there are those who say they were sentenced to live until now; that is, their punishment was an eternity of bearing witness. **However**, there are also those who interpret the *makom nitbazer* as being a place from which they were then able to climb back out of the pit before the earth’s mouth closed.

The Gemara continues: *v'yash'vu alav v'am'ru shirah* and they dwelt upon it (the fortified place) and recited shirah -- songs of praise and thanksgiving. The Raybatz explains: “To praise Hashem because he made a miracle like this for them -- that as we say in the midrash that they initially opened the rebellion, in any case they did teshuvah, and they atoned for themselves.”

Recall from the laws of Hallel at the seder that there’s a distinction made between *hallel*, which are psalms recited to commemorate our salvation, and *shirah*, the song that one is inspired to sing at the moment one is saved. Perhaps their *shirah* is what we have as Psalms 42 and following, the tehillim “livnei Korach.” The Yalkut explains the incipit of Psalm 45 homiletically thus:

לְמִנְצָה עַל־שֹׁשָׁנִים לְבְנֵי־קֹרַח מְשָׁכִיל שִׁיר יְדִידוֹת:

Anyone who does teshuvah from the sin that is in his hand, HKB"H adds on and calls him by the name "chaviv" (beloved friend). Go and see in the case of the sons of Korach: when they did not do teshuvah they were not called "shoshanim vididim" (roses and precious ones); once they did teshuvah they were called "shoshanim vididim", as it is said: (prooftext from our verse) "A song for the shoshanim, for the sons of Korach, a Psalm, a song of the yedidot"

So let us review: The conspiracy started with Korach, Datan and Aviram, and On. On was saved by the wisdom of his wife. Datan and Aviram’s obstinacy led to the annihilation of their entire families. Korach’s children survived because they did teshuvah. Why?

Well, there’s another textual oddity. Let us read closely verses 23 through 25 of our text: First:

וַיִּדְבֹּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
דְּבַר אֶל־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר הִעָלוּ מִסָּבִיב לְמִשְׁכַּן־קֹרַח דָּתוֹ וְאַבְיָרָם:

God tells Moshe to speak to the congregation --- perhaps all of Israel, perhaps here “haeidah” means “the conspirators” -- and to tell them to arise from around the *mishkan* of Korach, Datan, and Aviram.

But then, the very next verse, what does Moshe do?

וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם וַיִּלְכּוּ אַחֲרָיו זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Moshe arises and, accompanied by the elders of Israel, he goes to --- Datan and Aviram. Where's Korach? Recall that a moment before, Korach gave a speech challenging Moshe's leadership of bnei Yisrael, Moshe defended his leadership, and Korach did not respond. Unlike On, who realized his folly right away, but also unlike Datan and Aviram, who could never bring themselves to admit that they were wrong, perhaps Korach looked into the abyss (so to speak) and saw. Perhaps Korach told his children, "It is too late for me, but save yourselves."

So what happened to Korach? Our sugya in Sanhedrin can't make up its mind. *Amar Rabi Yochanan, Korach lo min hab'lu'im v'lo min ha-s'rufin*. Rabi Yochanan says Korach was neither swallowed by the pit nor burnt up; he cites as his prooftext our sedra: those who were swallowed by the pit were *kawl haadam asher l'korach* -- "all the men who were **for** Korach" but not Korach himself; and those who were burnt were the 250 fellow travelers.

But a Tanna taught, using the same prooftexts, *Korach min ha-s'rufin umin hab'luin*. Korach was one of the burnt and one of the swallowed. Rashi explains that first his soul was burnt, as with Nadav and Avihu, and then his hollow body fell into the pit.

But according to Rabi Yochanan, did Korach survive? Rashi, on Rabi Yochanan's explanation, adds: *elah bamageifah met*, he died in the subsequent plague. But it's an interesting question whether that's a necessary conclusion. Perhaps Korach did teshuvah and was allowed to survive, albeit in historical obscurity.

Which brings me to my last point. When I first read over the parsha, what jumped out at me was one word. Moshe says, describing the fate that will befall the rebels: וַיֵּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה If they descend **alive** into the pit. And that same phrase is exactly what happens to them: וַיֵּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה -- and they and all that was theirs descended **alive** into the pit.

Why this stress on "alive"? Why a mode of death that is not instantaneous? Rabbi Moshe Bogomilsky writes:

Moshe loved all the Jewish people, including Korach and his followers. These people were sinning terribly, since by quarreling with him, they were actually defying Hashem's will. Had they died immediately, they would have left this world without doing teshuvah, and they would thus have lost their share in Olam Haba -- the World to Come. Therefore, he prayed that they descend alive to the pit, hoping that while still alive, they would regret their wrongdoings and do teshuvah.

Four men arose and challenged Moshe and, by extension, Hashem. It would have been so much simpler a story if those four were immediately struck down for their sin. But they are given a

chance to understand the severity of their course of action. Moshe refused to deny anyone, no matter how grave his sin, a chance of redemption. Datan and Aviram apparently were too far gone to grasp that moment of grace, but perhaps Korach understood, and did teshuvah, As our Mishna ends:

Rabi Eliezer omer: Aleihm hu omeir: Hashem meimit umchayeh morid sh'ol v'aya'al.” Rabi Eliezer said that it was alluding to the family of Korach that the verse in Shmuel aleph says, “Hashem sends death and grants life, sends down into the pit and rises up.

Let us be alert, not only for personal opportunities to do teshuvah, but for the opportunity to create moments when others can redeem themselves.

Shabbat Shalom