

WHAT KORACH'S SONS REALIZED

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Korach's sons did not die.

Be'er Yosef: The pasuk begs for more information. Having been spared from death, what happened to them? Rashi gives us the fuller picture. "Initially, they took part in Korach's counsel. At the time of the dispute, their hearts entertained thoughts of teshuvah. A place was created for them at a high place of Gehinom, and they took up residence there." The gemara² from which Rashi takes his comment adds that from the place that they are installed, they sing shirah.

The sons of Korach directly appear in Tehilim.³ "For the conductor, on the shoshanim, by the sons of Korach: My heart stirs with a good thing; I say, 'My works are for the King.'" A midrash elaborates. Seeing the Gehinom open beneath them, and surrounded by fire on all sides, Korach's sons could not utter the words of these pesukim. The thought merely stirred within, i.e. took shape in their minds, but had not made its way to their lips. Yet HKBH accepted that thought as teshuvah.

Putting it all together, Chazal's message seems to be that the teshuvah of Korach's sons took the specific form of this perek of Tehilim. Furthermore, we the message of that perek shows the precision of measured, weighed teshuvah, including insights of the authors that directly addresses the source of their sin.

What had they done? According to yet other midrashim, they had been part of a campaign to unseat Moshe by mocking and deriding him. They sought to instill hatred of Moshe into the hearts of the nation, by reframing him as a cruel and power-hungry tyrant.

They now switched courses. In a moment of clarity, they composed an unspoken paean to the character of the true talmid chacham. Thus the reference to shoshanim, to roses. By this they meant, says a midrash, that the talmid chacham is soft like a rose, pleasant like a rose, and redolent with good deeds. In other words, they now sought to praise Moshe, the consummate talmid chacham, and to endear him to the people.

We must ask ourselves, however, what they meant by soft as a rose. Does not the gemara⁴ take an antipodal position, when it says that a talmid chacham must be hard as iron?

The resolution is as follows. In general, a talmid chacham should be soft and pleasant, with the exception of those scholars who occupy public positions of authority. Those who lead, and those

who judge, must ensure that their words are heeded. They must speak with strength, and not bend to unworthy opposition. All others, however, should be seen by people as agreeable, pliable and giving, as a consequence of the Torah they acquired.

Furthermore, the distinction between the two groups is not absolute. Every talmid chacham must be at his core soft and pleasant. At times, he may have to assume a persona of unyielding toughness - but drop it in all interactions with people in which that strength does not have to be deployed.

R. Yochanan Ben Zakai was lauded by his students. ⁵ "Our master, lamp of Israel. The pillar of the right, strong hammer." We could explain this along the lines of our discussion. R. Yochanan ben Zakai was a leader, a nasi - the guiding light of Israel. As such, he was forced to assume the role of a strong hammer. Nonetheless, he remained the pillar of the Right, i.e. of chesed, which is often called the "right," or fundamental midah relative to din on the secondary left.

Returning to our pasuk, the sons of Korach, unable in the briefest moment available to them to do complete teshuvah, could not manage more than a thought of contrition. Remarkably, not only did Hashem accept this as teshuvah, but He rewarded it with the clarity and vision needed to formulate shirah that would be used far into the future.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bamidbar 26:11
 2. Sanhedrin 110A
 3. Tehilim 45:1-2
 4. Taanis 4A
 5. Berachos 28B
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