

KORACH GOT A BAD DEAL

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #993 – Pidyon Habein Without A Bris Milah? Good Shabbos!

Korach Got A Bad Deal

The first two words of the *parsha* -- *Vayikach Korach* [and Korach took] -- are problematic. There is no indication whatsoever throughout the entire *parsha* of what exactly Korach took. It is a strange way to begin a story with an ambiguous action by the main "actor" in the narrative. Chazal themselves struggle to interpret the meaning of this phrase. The Talmud [Sanhedrin 109b] elaborates: Reish Lakish interprets "Korach took a bad deal for himself" (*Korach lakach mekach rah l'atzmo*).

This begs the question. If someone purchases a car which turns out to be a lemon, that is a bad purchase (*mekach rah*). If someone purchases real estate that has just been flooded, that is a bad deal. In these cases, at least a person received something in exchange for his money -- a car that is always at the mechanic or a piece of land that is under water, so we can call it a "bad deal." However, Korach did not receive anything here. He did not wind up with a bad purchase or a bad deal. He lost everything he had and received nothing in exchange!

The sefer Be'er Yosef cites an idea from a sefer Zayis Ra'anan, which attempts to explain the teaching of Reish Lakish. Rashi here quotes a Medrash: "Korach, who was a clever individual, what did he see in this foolish scheme?" Korach was not a fool. Far from it -- he was a very intelligent individual. Why did he agree to this deal? There were 250 people, only one of which could be Kohen Gadol. Those are terrible odds. It is the worse than playing Russian roulette. Russian roulette is a "game" involving a gun with six slots for bullets. The person puts in one bullet and spins the cylinder. He puts the pistol to his head and pulls the trigger. There are at least five chances out of six that he will walk away alive. Even so, someone who plays the game is foolhardy, to put it mildly. Even more so, if someone changes the odds such that instead of having a 5 out of 6 chance of surviving the competition, the person has a 250 to 1 chance against surviving the competition, certainly the person must be suicidal to participate in such an endeavor. What did the wise Korach see that tempted him

to take part in this crazy experiment?

The Medrash continues, "His eyes mislead him. He saw a chain of great lineage descending from him. He prophetically saw that the great Shmuel HaNavi would descend from him, about whom the Torah writes, 'Moshe and Aharon among his priests, and Shmuel among those who invoke His Name.' [Tehillim 99:6] Karach assumed 'In his (Shmuel's) merit I will escape.'" The Medrash says that Korach further foresaw through *Ruach HaKodesh* [Divine spirit] that he would have among his descendants 24 families (*mishmaros*) of descendants who would participate in the Bais Hamikdash service, all of whom would possess *Ruach HaKodesh*.

Korach concluded from this prophetic vision that he himself was a world class righteous individual (*Tzadik yesod olam*) and therefore he was willing to take his chances with the "*Ketores* challenge." He went ahead with the wager and lost his life.

The Medrash said that his prophetic vision was imperfect. The Zayis Ra'anani asks -- why in fact did the merit of having such great descendants not save Korach?

Before sharing his very interesting answer, I would like to preface it with the following thought. The Alter of Kelm once asked why is there such a thing as "the sanctity of the first born?" What is the source of this sanctity? The Alter explains that the source is the fact that the first-born participated in one of the greatest manifestations of *Kiddush HaShem* in the history of mankind. The *Ribono shel Olam* came down to Egypt, saved the first-born Jews, and killed out the first-born Egyptians. This was a sanctification of G-d's Name. The Almighty rewards participation in a *Kiddush HaShem*. He does not withhold reward from any creature. Although they were completely passive, the Jewish firstborn were the vehicles for accomplishing a *Kiddush HaShem* and even passive participation in a *Kiddush HaShem* generates reward.

The Zayis Ra'anani explains Korach's mistake. Korach saw that Shmuel was going to come out from him. He saw that 24 *mishmaros* were going to come out from him. However, his mistake was that he did not realize that he merited the reward of having such great descendants because he created a *Kiddush HaShem*. Korach's *Kiddush HaShem* was that he challenged the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu and caused a public validation of Moshe Rabbeinu's authenticity through a miracle from Heaven such that the entire nation arose to proclaim, "Moshe is true and his Torah is true." Korach caused all this to happen.

Korach's mistake was that he did not know which came first -- the chicken or the egg. He thought, "I must be special, because Shmuel will be my great grandson." However, the only reason Korach merited having Shmuel as a descendant is because he caused a *Kiddush HaShem* (albeit not the way he intended). Never again would anyone question the authenticity of Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership. Korach's intentions were malevolent and he did what he did for the worst reasons in the world but the bottom line is that a *Kiddush HaShem* is a *Kiddush HaShem* and the Almighty does not withhold reward from anyone who participates in the sanctification of His Name.

Korach thought, "I earned this reward (of great descendants) because of who I am." He was wrong. He earned the reward because of what he (unexpectedly) did. This is what Rashi means when he says, "his eyes deceived him." A person sometimes sees cause and effect, but he mistakes effect for cause and cause for effect because "his eyes deceive him."

Thus far, we have quoted the idea of the Zayis Ra'anani. Based on this teaching, the Be'er Yosef says, we can understand the words of Reish Lakish ("Korach took a bad deal for himself.") We asked, "What kind of deal did Korach make, he was left with nothing?" The answer is, no -- he made a deal. The deal was " Shmuel haNavi comes from me; 24 families of descendants of Kohanim who possess *Ruach HaKodesh* come from me." It was a great deal. Would we not all love to have a grandson like Shmuel haNavi?

Sure. It was a great deal. However, what price did he pay for this deal? The price is that he stews in *Gehinnom* [Hell] and every thirty days they reissue his sentence. He gave up his "This World". He gave up his "Next World". He burns in *Gehinnom*. Was it worth the price? No. It was not worth the price. Losing all of your material and spiritual wealth in this life and in the afterlife is a bad deal regardless of what the person receives in exchange.

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