

THE DARKNESS OF PHYSICALITY

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

"And Korach, son of Yizhar, son of Kehas, son of Levi, and Dasan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, together with Ohn, son of Peles, sons of Reuvain." – *Bamidbar* 16:1

Korach was not chosen for a position as head of his *shevet*. He felt entitled to it, and his jealousy drove him to rebel against Moshe and HASHEM. Recognizing that he couldn't stand alone, he gathered two hundred and fifty leaders of the nation, and they swore their allegiance to Korach and his cause. The plan was to depose Moshe as leader of the Jewish people, and in his stead appoint Korach. In the end, their rebellion failed, and every man, woman, and child was swallowed by the ground.

Of this group, only one man survived: Ohn, son of Peles. The *Medrash* explains that it was his wife who saved him. She said to him, "What do you gain from all of this? If Moshe wins, you are but a lackey. And if Korach wins you are still but a lackey."

Her logic penetrated his heart. "You are right," he said, "but what can I do? I took an oath to remain loyal to the group. They will come tomorrow to get me, and I will be forced to join them."

His wife said, "Listen to my advice. I will stand outside our tent and uncover my hair. These are all holy men. When they see a woman not properly attired, they will run away."

She then gave him enough wine to drink till he fell asleep drunk, and she tied him to the bed. Early the next morning, she went outside, uncovered her hair, and waited. When the first members of Korach's party came to bring Ohn to the demonstration, they saw a woman with her hair uncovered outside his tent. They immediately walked away. She remained there throughout the day. No man dared come to the tent. Then the time came for the standoff. When Korach's men were standing together, they were swallowed up alive, but Ohn was not amongst them. This is a fulfillment of the verse, "A wise woman builds her house..." (*Dos Zakainim*)

How Could They Have Been So Foolish?

This *Dos Zakainim* is very difficult to understand. Korach's group were men of great piety. The Torah calls them "leaders of the nation, men of reputation." And here we see an example of how careful they were in regards to *mitzvah* observance. Even though Ohn played a pivotal role in their cause, the mere sight of a woman with her hair uncovered made them run away. So how could these great people do something so egregious as to rebel against HASHEM and His chosen representative?

The answer to this question can best be understood when we focus on the impossibility of free will.

When HASHEM took the *neshama* and put it into this world, it was to give man the opportunity to make himself into what he will be for eternity. The essence of our purpose here is to choose what is right and proper and to turn away from what is wrong and evil.

The problem, however, is that those options are set far apart and leave little choice. No thinking person would deliberately choose for himself a path of destruction. Every *mitzvah* helps us grow. Every sin damages us. HASHEM warned us to do this and not to do that because it is good for us and will benefit us for eternity. So how does man have free will? He will choose good and only good — because it's so clearly in his best interest.

To allow for free will, HASHEM put the brilliant *neshama* into a body that clouds its vision and darkens its sight. The desires and inclinations of the body don't remain separate from me. They are mixed into my very essence and play out in my conscious mind. When I open my eyes in the morning, it isn't my body that wants to just lie there unmoving – I am lazy. At lunch, it isn't my stomach that cries out for food – I am hungry. I am both the brilliant *neshama* and the base animal instinct. And so, I want to live a life of meaning, and I want to live completely for the moment. I want to be good, proper and noble, and I just don't care. I want this and I want that. Which one is the real me? The answer is both. And I am constantly changing, constantly in flux. Because these desires come from within me, they also distort my vision. When I desire something, my vision can become so blinded that I can hotly pursue something damaging to me, and not only fail to see the danger involved, but even begin to see it as an ultimate good.

The Darkness of Physicality

The *Mesillos Yescharim* (*Perek* 4) explains this with a parable.

Imagine a man walking at night on an unlit country road. Because of the darkness, he is in danger of tripping. There are, however, two types of hazards he faces. The first is that he won't see the pit in front of him, and he will fall in without even realizing the peril. The second danger, however, is more severe. The darkness can fool him so that he sees an object, but mistakes it for something else. He may look at a pillar in the distance and see it as a man. Or he might see a man and mistake him for a pillar. This menace is more severe because even if he were to alert to the risk, he would ignore the warning signs because he sees with his own eyes that there is no danger.

Physicality is like the darkness of night. It blinds a person and doesn't allow him to see the danger in front of him. There are two types of mistakes that it causes. The first is that it doesn't allow him to see the hazard. He will continue on a path of life that is self-destructive, and he won't even recognize where he is headed until he is too far down the road to change course. The second mistake, however, is far more dangerous. It is when man is so fooled by the darkness of physicality that he sees the good as if it were bad and the bad as if it were good. At this point, warning a man about the

danger is useless. He sees it, but views it as something virtuous. And so, he will clutch to evil against all warnings and against all wisdom because in his blindness, it appears as good.

Korach and His Congregation

This seems to be the answer to Korach and his people. They were Torah scholars, and they were holy Jews. And yet, they were blind. Korach was blinded by jealousy. He then presented arguments and proofs to the two hundred and fifty men that Moshe was making up his own set of rules. He was dynamic and convincing. Once the group accepted Korach's version of reality, they held fast to it. And then even the threat of a gruesome death didn't faze them. It wasn't that they didn't see the danger. They did. But they saw it as scare tactic, a way of getting them to abandon that which they knew was right. So it didn't matter how pious they were; they were now on a new holy mission to depose the power-hungry Moshe. And sometimes the truth is even worth dying for. The problem was that they had accepted falsehood as truth.

This concept is very applicable to us as we too are human, and we too must be ever aware of the danger of ideologies that justify that which is evil and self-destructive. The difficulty is that when we are caught up in them, we don't recognize them for what they are.

A person's convictions can drive him to greatness or bring him to the abyss — the only distinction being whether or not those convictions are correct. HASHEM wants us to succeed, and in every generation He provides Torah leaders to guide us. The only way that a person can know whether his ideologies are right is by consulting with the accepted Torah leaders of his time. When a person puts away his agenda and his bias and asks guidance on the Torah approach, HASHEM directs him to the truth.

Rabbi Shafier is the founder of the Shmuz.com – The Shmuz is an engaging, motivating shiur that deals with real life issues.

All of the Shmuzin are available free of charge at www.theShmuz.com or on the Shmuz App for iphone or Android. Simply text the word "TheShmuz" to the number 313131 and a link will be sent to your phone to download the App.