

Buried Alive and Surviving

Adapted by Chaim Miller; From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Korach's sons, however, did not die.

Classic Questions

What happened to Korach's sons? (v. 11)

Rashi: They were the first to get involved in the conspiracy, but during the dispute they had thoughts of teshuvah (repentance) in their hearts. Therefore, a secure, elevated area was set apart for them in Gehinom (underground purgatory), and they settled there.

Sifsei Chachamim: Rashi was troubled by an open contradiction. Above it is written, "The earth opened its mouth, swallowing them and their houses, all Korach's people and all their property" (16:32), and yet here we read that Korach's own sons did not die? Therefore, Rashi explains how both statements are true: The earth did indeed swallow up Korach's sons, but they did not die, because "a secure, elevated area was set apart for them in Gehinom," since they did teshuvah.

Gur Aryeh: Since they only contemplated teshuvah in their hearts, and did not do complete teshuvah, which requires verbal confession, they were still punished by being swallowed up. But due to their partial teshuvah they did not lose their lives.

Sefer Hazikaron: They are still in Gehinom to this day.

Nachalas Ya'akov: How could Korach's sons still be in the underground Gehinom? Rashi writes explicitly that Korach saw prophetically "a chain of great people descended from him: Shmuel... the twenty-four watches [of Levites in the Temple]" (Rashi to 16:7). Clearly, then, Korach's sons did eventually come out of Gehinom and father children.

Why is the fact that Korach's sons survived not mentioned in Parshas Korach? (v. 11)

Shach al Hatorah: Because this would have been an affront to Moshe, who said that if "the earth opens its mouth and swallows them... then you will know that these men have provoked God" (Shach al Hatorah to 16:32).

The Rebbe's Teachings

The Fate of Korach's Sons (v. 11)

Sifsei Chachamim and Gur Aryeh explain why Rashi concluded that, when the earth swallowed up Korach's sons, "a protected, elevated area was set apart for them in Gehinom."

However, they do not explain what led Rashi to conclude that "they were the first to get involved in the conspiracy." What is the proof for this point, at the literal level?

A further, more general problem is why the fate of Korach's sons is mentioned here, amid the census of Re'uvain's descendants, and not in Parshas Korach itself? Shach al Hatorah argues that it would have been an affront to Moshe if we would have discovered in Parshas Korach that some of those who stood against him had survived.

But ultimately, all Korach's men were swallowed up exactly as Moshe had predicted, so why would it weaken Moshe's position if Korach's sons then survived because they had thoughts of teshuvah? And was it not Moshe's wish that Korach's assembly should do teshuvah?

A final question here concerns the offspring of Korach's sons. As Nachalas Ya'akov proves, Korach's sons must have been released from Gehinom at some point, since they produced descendants that included Shmuel the prophet and the twenty-four watches of the Temple. But when, at the literal level, did Korach's sons escape?

The Explanation

Rashi did not clarify when Korach's sons were released from Gehinom, or why their fate was recorded here in the account of Re'uvain's descendants, as he felt that the reader was in possession of enough information to understand the matter for himself:

In Parshas Korach we learn the fate of Korach's sons: "They descended alive into the grave.... The earth covered them up, and they were lost to the congregation." At first glance, after reading that "they descended alive into the grave," the statement that "they were lost to the congregation" appears to be superfluous. However, when we read in our parsha that "Korach's sons did not die," we can appreciate, in retrospect, that with the words "they were lost to the congregation," the Torah was actually fixing a time limit to their sentence in Gehinom. Namely, that Korach's sons were only lost to that congregation, i.e., the congregation of Jewish people living at that time, but when "the congregation" would pass on, Korach's sons would be released.

Thus, in Parshas Korach, nobody knew that "Korach's sons did not die," because they were still below the ground. But when the census was carried out in our parsha, after "all those destined to die in the desert had already perished" (Rashi on 20:22, above), Korach's sons would have already been released, so it had become public knowledge that "Korach's sons did not die." Therefore, this fact was recorded in the census.

However, this only explains why Korach's family were mentioned in this census in general. Why, though, were they mentioned among Re'uvain's descendants, and not below, with the Levite families (v. 57ff.), being that Korach was a Levite?

At first glance, we might argue that since the Torah mentions here the fate of Dasan and Aviram (who were from the tribe of Re'uvain), it is logical to also mention Korach's sons, who were swallowed up by the earth at the same time as Dasan and Aviram.

In truth, however, associating Dasan and Aviram with Korach's sons appears to be unfair, since Dasan and Aviram were the primary instigators of Korach's rebellion, who lost their lives, whereas Korach's sons disassociated themselves from the rebellion by doing teshuvah, and lived. Thus, the fact that they are placed together with Dasan and Aviram led Rashi to conclude that Korach's sons were also "the first to get involved in the conspiracy," like Dasan and Aviram, but that, nevertheless, their lives were later saved because of their thoughts of teshuvah.

And this brings to light the power of teshuvah: Even an incomplete teshuvah was sufficient to save the instigators of Korach's rebellion.

(Based on Likutei Sichos vol. 33, p. 170ff.)

Census of the Israelites

Teshuvah

Korach's Mutiny

Parshah

Pinchas

Adapted by Chaim Miller; From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson of righteous memory; adapted by Chaim Miller.

An excerpt from the *Gutnick Chumash* published by *Kol Menachem*, New York.

The Chumash incorporates a flowing English translation of the Torah which is loyal to the commentary of Rashi and includes 'Classic questions' that are drawn from a range of commentators and are then ingeniously brought together by the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory.



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