

To Hell and Back

The virtue of a guilty conscience

By Mendel Kalmenson

Three rabbis were talking about life and death when the question came up: “When you’re in your casket, and friends and congregants are mourning over you, what would you like them to say?”

The first rabbi said: “I would like them to say I was a wonderful husband, a fine spiritual leader and a great family man.”

The second commented: “I would like them to say I was a wonderful teacher and servant of G-d who made a huge difference in people’s lives.”

The third rabbi thought for a moment and remarked: “I’d like them to say, ‘Look, he’s moving!’”

Surviving the Odds

There’s a verse in the Book of Numbers that at first glance appears straightforward enough, if slightly random, but upon closer analysis proves puzzling.

The Torah is recounting the genealogy of the tribe of Reuben and, in passing, mentions the infamous pair of Biblical troublemakers, Dathan and Abiram, great-grandchildren of Reuben. Their mention sets the Torah off on a tangent:¹

Dathan and Abiram, the same Dathan and Abiram who were summoned by the assembly, who contended against Moses and Aaron among the assembly of Korach when they contended against G-d. Then the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korach with the death of the assembly, when the fire consumed two hundred and fifty men—and they became a sign. But the sons of Korach did not die.

The final verse is the verse in question, as it matter-of-factly contradicts a previous verse: “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach.”²

This account states unequivocally that *everyone* in Korach’s camp was swallowed alive, including Korach’s sons. Unless there’s a way to remain alive even after being sucked into the earth, the Bible presents us with two irreconcilable reports. Fortunately for us, the classic Bible commentator, Rashi,³ depicts just such a scenario:

The [sons of Korach] 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 and elevated area was set apart for them in Gehinnom [purgatory], and they settled there.

*Nachalat Yaakov*⁴, a commentator on Rashi, fills in an important detail, namely, that the “settling” of Korach’s children in Gehinnom was temporary. They didn’t live out the rest of their lives underground, but eventually emerged to rejoin society some time after the commotion died down and their peers died off.⁵

Not Fair

While it’s nice to know that some people survived the earth-shattering showdown between Moses and Korach, we wonder why Providence chose specifically Korach’s sons to outlive their fellow mutineers.

“The [sons of Korach] were the first to get involved in the conspiracy,” says the Talmud.⁶ These men, it turns out, didn’t just join an existing revolt against Moses; they were its creators. And in Judaism, the ultimate sinner is one who instigates communal sin.

Indeed, according to Maimonides,⁷ this type of sinner “who causes the many to sin . . . does not have a portion in the world to come; rather, their [souls] are cut off and they are judged for their great wickedness and sins, forever . . .”

How does that square with the happy ending to the story of Korach’s children? They not only escaped spiritual death, but they lived to tell the tale!

In fact, according to the Sages, these men went on to have families whose descendants boasted such spiritual giants as Samuel the Prophet and twenty-four watches of Levites in the Temple.⁸

And that’s not all. According to the Talmud,⁹ while sitting in the “special place in hell” reserved for them, Korach’s sons “sat and sang praises [to G-d],” which, astonishingly, were included and immortalized in King David’s Psalms.¹⁰

Take the opening verse to Psalm 87, for example: “Of the sons of Korach, a song with musical accompaniment, whose foundation is in the sacred mountains.”

What merit brought Judaism’s arch-violators out of the depths of Hell to grace the tops of “sacred mountains”?

Jewish Guilt

Despite the extent of their iniquity, the sons of Korach, as opposed to their co-conspirators, still managed to retain one virtue: “During the dispute they had thoughts of teshuvah [repentance] in their hearts.”

There it is, their saving grace: a guilty conscience.

Now it's true that Judaism in general has little patience for unrealized lofty thoughts and feelings, and even less for empty feelings of remorse.¹¹ "Action is paramount"¹² is a basic Jewish teaching. And it's also true that nothing practical came of the regretful feelings harbored by Korach's sons.

But that's precisely the lesson here: Do not underestimate the power of feeling contrite.¹³ Do not discount those sentiments, even when they keep coming up short of action, for they are the only real link between transgression and repentance. Without them the sinner doesn't stand a chance of reform. In the words of our Sages,¹⁴ "Once a person becomes accustomed, to a certain transgression, it becomes permissible to him."

Conscience is the safeguard of proper human behavior.

Consider the following revealing quotes from Adolf Hitler, may his name be erased, arguably the most despicable human monster to have ever lived:

"Providence has ordained that I should be the greatest liberator of humanity. I am freeing man from the restraints of an intelligence that has taken charge, from the dirty and degrading self-mortification of a false vision called conscience and morality, and from the demands of a freedom and independence which only very few can bear."¹⁵

"The Ten Commandments have lost their validity. Conscience is a Jewish invention; it is a blemish like circumcision."¹⁶

"They refer to me as an uneducated barbarian. Yes, we are barbarians. We want to be barbarians, it is an honored title to us. We shall rejuvenate the world."¹⁷

And then there's this stanza of a song sung by the Hitler Youth:

"We are the joyous Hitler Youth,
We do not need any Christian virtue
Our leader is our savior
The Pope and Rabbi shall be gone
We want to be pagans once again."

Unfortunately, we do not have to look far for examples of what happens to human beings devoid of conscience . . .

It was the functioning inner moral compass possessed by Korach's sons that distinguished them from the others, making only them worthy of redemption. The others had completely identified with the revolt against G-d and Moses, in deed and in heart.

Korach's sons, on the other hand, remained in touch, if temporarily not in line, with right and wrong. What they lacked at crunch time was courage, not conviction, which meant that at least at heart they had never left the bosom of righteousness.

What's in it for me?

One Jewish teaching¹⁸ has it that “there is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.” Shortcomings, then, are only human. How we respond to unfortunate flings with sin is a different matter.

Even if our remorseful feelings continuously prove incapable of producing action, we must hold on to those sentiments for dear life, lest we become desensitized or immune to wrongdoing and eventually begin to identify with our foolish behavior.

In one of his discourses, the founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, paints the tragic scene of a man whose infected arm was just amputated, and who breaks down in bitter tears. Why does the man cry? Rabbi Schneur Zalman asks. He no longer feels his hurting arm! Ah, but that's precisely why he cries; *because* he doesn't feel his hurting arm . . .

Hurting is a sign of connectivity; letting go of the pain of disconnection, however uncomfortable it makes our life, sadly means letting go of connection.

*Based on a talk given by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Shabbat Parshat Pinchas 5737 (1977)*¹⁹

Guilt

Parshah

Pinchas

FOOTNOTES

1. [Numbers 26:9–12](#).
2. *Ibid.* 16:32.
3. *Ad loc.* His comment is based on the Talmud, [Sanhedrin 110a](#).
4. *Ad loc.*
5. See the Rebbe's talk for an elaboration on this idea.
6. Talmud, [Sanhedrin 110a](#).
7. Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuvah 3:6.
8. See Rashi to [Numbers 16:7](#).
9. *Sanhedrin loc. cit.*
10. See Talmud, [Bava Batra 15a](#).
11. Consider these words of Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance (2:1): “[Who has reached] complete *teshuvah*? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned, when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and nevertheless abstains and does not commit it because of his *teshuvah* alone, and not because of fear or a lack of strength.”
12. See Ethics of the Fathers 1:17.
13. So effective were the remorseful feelings of Korach's sons, that they defied a different teaching that “whoever leads the masses in the right path will not come to any sin, but whoever leads the masses astray will not be able to repent for all the wrong he commits” (Ethics of the Fathers 5:18).

14. Talmud, Sotah 22a.

15. Rauschnig, *Hitler Speaks*, p. 222.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

18. Ecclesiastes 7:20.

19. Published in *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 33, pp. 170–175.

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