

On the Sons of Korah – Between Thought and Deed
Mois Navon

One of the most prominent aspects of Jewish life – perhaps the defining aspect – is the focus on the deed, the mitzvah according to halacha, as opposed to simply the thought. We find this notion expressed in a subtle yet powerful way through the experiences of the sons of Korah.

The altercation between Korah and Moshe culminates with the following description:

And it came to pass, as he [i.e., Moshe] made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was under them. And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit; and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly.

(Num. 16: 31-33).

The description that everything related to Korah, including his “household” is at odds with the verse several chapters later which states explicitly:

And the sons of Korah didn't die.

(Num. 26:11).

While the Ramban (Num. 16:32) resolves this discrepancy by explaining that the text of the punishment didn't state that “his sons” went down, nevertheless Rashi (Num 26:11), quoting the midrash, explains the circumstances differently:

The sons of Korah didn't die [for] they were involved in the conspiracy at first, but during the dispute, they had thoughts of repentance – “*birhurei teshuva*” – in their hearts. Therefore, an elevated area was secured for them in *gehinom*, where they remained.

Rashi's super-commentator, R. Eliyahu Mizrahi, writes that this midrash comes at odds with another midrash which seeks to explain our initial difficulty a bit differently: “And the sons of Korah didn't die, rather they came up on to the face of the earth and came to the land of Israel where they were prophets.” He brings proof for this from the fact that sons of Korah were the progenitors of Shmuel,¹ as well as the composers of many Psalms.²

R. David Halevi (better known as “the Taz”) in his Divrei David commentary to Rashi, offers to reconcile these two midrashim, explaining that at first, “they were in *gehinom* for a period of time and after that they came up.”

¹ See Chronicles I (6:7-23) for genealogy of Shmuel from Korah. Also noted by many commentators, see for example R. Hirsch (Haftarot, Korah).

² Psalms 42; 44-49; 84; 85; 87; 88.

So there were actually two phases to their adventure, which begs the question: why? I believe the answer lies in the quality of their repentance. The Rambam (Hil. Tesh. 2:2) codifies that for one to be transformed from some iniquity he must do three things: (1) resolve to not commit the act; (2) express remorse over his having committed the act; and (3) verbally confess that which he resolved in his heart.

This last point reminds us of Rashi's explanation of the sons of Korah who "had thoughts of repentance – *"birburei teshuva"* – in their hearts." Clearly, they did not confess their sin verbally but only resolved it in their hearts. If so, why should this earn them a stay of execution?

The reason is that while full teshuva requires the fulfillment of all three components, including verbal confession, the halacha does recognize the value in *"birburei teshuva"* – thoughts of repentance. The Gemara (Kid. 49b) explains that if a man proposed marriage to a woman on condition that he is righteous, "even if he is completely wicked, she is betrothed, for perhaps he had *birburei teshuva* – thoughts of repentance." The Rambam (Hil. Ishut 8:5) brings these words as practical halacha.

As such, there are actually two types of repentance, one in thought and one in deed. R. Soloveitchik (Halakhic Man, p. 111) elucidates the practical difference between the two:

Halakha has posited two separate laws, two distinct principles, with reference to repentance and its function. (1) Repentance may serve to divest the sinner of his status as a *rasha*. (2) Repentance may serve as a means of atonement ... The lack of verbal repentance prevents only from serving as a means of atonement, but it does not prevent it from divesting a sinner of his status as a *rasha*.

This then explains how the two midrashim, as Divrei David proposed, refer to two different stages of the sons of Korah. The *birbur teshuva* – thought of repentance - was enough to remove from them the status of *rasha* such that they were not considered wicked enough to be destroyed in the bottom of hell; nevertheless it was not enough to get them out of the pit either.³ For that, they would have to complete their repentance by expressing "verbally what they had resolved in their heart."

But when did that happen? The Gemara (San. 110a) explains:

"And the sons of Korah didn't die" – it was taught in the name of Rabbeinu: an elevated area was secured for them in *gehinom*, where they remained and said song poetry. Said Rabba Bar Bar Hanna: Once I was traveling in the desert and an Arab guide said, "Come and I will show you where the earth swallowed Korah, et. al." We came to a place where there were two cracks in the earth and smoke rising from between them. He took a piece of wool, soaked it in water, placed it on the end of his spear, and passed it over the cracks – the wool became burnt. He then said "Listen. What do you hear?" I heard [voices] saying: Moshe and his Torah are true and we are falsifiers.

³ In consonance, R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Gur Aryeh, Num. 26:11) explains that because they only "thought" and didn't actualize in deed: "Therefore, they remained suspended in *gehinom*, neither dead nor alive."

Here we have explicit evidence that the sons of Korah completed their repentance after having gone down to the pit, whereupon they verbally confessed what they had resolved in their heart.⁴ Now that their sin was atoned they could join humanity again.

But there is another layer to their repentance which is critical to understanding the message of their story, and that is the actual sin for which they repented. Their sin was in joining their father's dispute against Moshe, a dispute the midrash depicts as follows:

Korah came to Moshe and said, "Moshe, does a talit that is all tekhelet require tzitzit?" Moshe answered him, "It requires tzitzit." Said Korah to him, "A talit that is all tekhelet [made of hundreds of tekhelet threads] doesn't fulfill the requirement, but four threads [of tekhelet] do fulfill the requirement? ... Korah said to him, "You were not commanded this but rather made it up in your heart."

R. Yekutiel Yehuda Halerstam (the Sanz-Klausenerger Rebbi) in his *Divrei Yatziv* (Hoshen M. 52) explains the dispute according to the midrash as being over whether thought is sufficient or actual deed is required. Korah argued that "God requires the heart" and thus it is sufficient that one understand the purpose of the command, it is enough to have this in mind to fulfill God's will. The color tekhelet symbolizes heavenly thoughts whereas white symbolizes positive actions. Moshe taught that one needs tzitzit combining both tekhelet and white, for only via thought of God and the act of man does one fulfill the Torah. Korah, on the other hand, argued that tekhelet alone is sufficient, that is, by thought alone one achieves the divine will.

R. Soloveitchik (*Halakhic Man*, p.57) explains that taking the subjective thoughts of man and translating them into objective acts is what halakhic Judaism is all about:

The fundamental tendency of Halakhah is to translate the qualitative features of religious subjectivity – the content of religious man's consciousness, which surges and swells like the waves of the sea, then pounds against the shore of reality, there to shatter and break – into firm and well-established quantities "like nails well fastened" (Eccles. 12:11) that no storm can uproot from their place.

Furthermore, explains R. Soloveitchik, while subjective religiosity may sound appealing, perhaps even "logical", as Korah tried to argue, it will eventuate nihilism.

... Subjective religiosity cannot endure. And all those tendencies to transform the religious act into pure subjectivity negate all corporeality and all sensation in religious life and admit man into a pure and abstract world, where there is neither eating nor drinking, but religious individuals sitting with crowns on their heads and enjoying their own inner experiences, their own tempestuous heaven-storming spirits, their own hidden longings and mysterious yearnings – will in the end prove null and void.

⁴ Of course Rabba Bar Bar Hanna (c. 250 CE) lived many years after the sons of Korah (c. 1300 BCE) were to have gone to Israel and fathered the children that were the progenitors of the prophet Shmuel as noted in *Chronicles I* (6:7-22); indeed, Rabba Bar Bar Hanna lived long after Shmuel himself (c. 930 BCE). I believe it is fair to say, within the context of midrashic analysis, that the voices that Rabba Bar Bar Hanna heard were not those of the sons of Korah themselves, but echoes of their voices way back when they were first pulled into the pit.

Interestingly, this description of subjective religiosity sounds strikingly like what the sons of Korah achieved in their limbo between earth and hell. R. Soloveitchik explains that it is precisely the opposite of this ephemeral spirituality that halachic Judaism seeks to define. Furthermore, the very power of Judaism lies in its ability to mold action, for it is only thus that man takes part in the real world:

The power of religion which seizes hold of man, that subjects and dominates him, is in force only when the religion is a concrete religion, a religion of the life of the senses, in which there is sight, smell, and touch, a religion which man of flesh and blood can feel with all of his senses, sinews, and organs, with his entire being...

In conclusion, the dispute between Korah and Moshe can be understood as one of subjective religiosity versus concrete religion. The midrashim gave expression to this disagreement through the repentance of the sons of Korah. By “resolving in their heart” that their father was wrong, they were able to elevate themselves above the status of *rasha*, but not up to the status of the real world. For that, they had to perform concrete action, well defined objective halakhic action. As such, their verbal confession was necessary not only to effect complete atonement but to demonstrate their repentance over the sin of subjective religiosity. In other words, their verbal attested to their recognition that thinking “good” is simply not good enough. True religiosity must be concretized into true action; and thus they sang, “Moshe and his Torah are true”.