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## KORACH'S SONS: THE POWER OF A THOUGHT

From the Talks of  
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## 1.

## The Ambiguity of Their Repentance

On the verse, “And the sons of Korach did not die,”<sup>1</sup> Rashi comments:

“They were originally involved in the conspiracy, but during the dispute they contemplated repentance; therefore, an elevated area was fortified for them in Gehinnom, and they stayed there.”<sup>2</sup>

The commentaries explain<sup>3</sup> that Rashi’s intention is to resolve a contradiction in the straightforward meaning of the verses. How is it possible to say that “the sons of Korach did not die”? It is explicitly stated earlier in *Parshas Korach*,<sup>4</sup> “And [the earth] swallowed... and **all the people that belonged to Korach**” (which simply understood, includes — and primarily refers to — the sons of Korach).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Rashi explains that they were indeed swallowed into the earth, but they did not die, because “a high place was fortified for them in *Gehinnom*, and they sat there.” And the reason they “did not die” is because “during the dispute they contemplated repentance.”

However, Rashi’s lengthy wording — “They were originally involved in the conspiracy, but during the dispute they contemplated repentance” — still requires explanation. Seemingly, it would have been sufficient to state briefly: “Because they repented, therefore [an elevated area] was set aside, etc.” This would be similar to **Rashi’s** wording earlier in *Parshas Korach*.<sup>6</sup> {There, Rashi explains why Korach inserted himself into a dispute with Moshe:} “He saw [prophetically] a chain of great people descended from him: Samuel, who is equal [in importance] to Moses and Aaron... twenty-four watches [of Levites] emanating from his grandsons....” {And Rashi concludes: “Therefore, he participated [in the rebellion] to reach that prerogative, for he had heard from Moshe that they would all perish and one would escape [death]... He erred in thinking that it referred to him.} He, however, did not ‘see’ properly, for **his sons repented** [and thus did not die at that time].” {Here too, Rashi could have simply said they repented.}

1) *Bamidbar* 26:11.

2) *Megillah* 14a. *Sanhedrin* 110a. *Tanchuma, Korach* 11. *Bamidbar Rabbah* there (18:20). — See footnote 18.

3) *Sifsei Chachamim; Maskil LeDavid*. See also *Chiddushei Agados Maharsha, Sanhedrin* there. — In *Gur Aryeh* (and others), it is explained that Rashi resolves why the verse says “did not die” rather than simply “lived” (similar to the phrasing in *Shelach* 14:38).

4) *Bamidbar* 16:32.

5) See *Ramban* there, who explains that “all the people” refers to his servants and maidservants (and not his sons). And *Sforno* there explains that they are “those who were drawn after him in his dispute.” However, from Rashi’s ambiguous wording there, it is understood that in his view, “all the people that belonged to Korach” means exactly **as it sounds: everyone** associated with him.

6) *Bamidbar* 16:7.

Simply put, one could argue that {Rashi's lengthy wording} is intended to explain why the sons of Korach were punished in the first place (to be among those swallowed into the earth) — after all, they repented!<sup>7</sup> Therefore, {Rashi} writes that “they were originally involved in the conspiracy.” Furthermore, their repentance was not a complete repentance,<sup>8</sup> since they only “contemplated repentance.” Consequently, they deserved this punishment (of being swallowed into the earth). However, since they at least contemplated repentance, they “did not die,” but rather “an elevated area was fortified for them in *Gehinnom*, and they stayed there.”

But this still does not explain the precise nuances in Rashi's commentary:

- a) From the fact that he writes “they were **originally involved in the conspiracy**” (and not “they were in the dispute,” or something similar), it implies that they did not merely **join** the dispute once it erupted. Rather, they were among the conspirators whose counsel initiated the dispute of Korach.<sup>9</sup>

This raises the following questions:

(1) According to the straightforward meaning of the verses, it is perfectly understandable why one is compelled to say that the sons of Korach initially joined the dispute against Moshe. (It is worth noting that *Targum Yonasan* and *Targum Yerushalmi*<sup>10</sup> explain that indeed they were not part of Korach's counsel). For it is explicitly stated in the verse, as mentioned above, that “all the people that belonged to Korach” were swallowed into the earth, and it is logical that this was due to their participation in the dispute.<sup>11</sup> But from where does Rashi derive that “they were **originally involved in the conspiracy**”?

(2) Even if we find a compelling reason for this in the straightforward meaning of the verse,<sup>12</sup> what is the practical relevance **here** to emphasize the magnitude of their sin — that (not only did they participate in the dispute of Korach and his congregation, but) they were “originally involved in the conspiracy”? [Even without this, they were deserving of punishment since they did not execute a complete repentance!]

7) See *Mishmeres HaKodesh, Be'er Yitzchak*, and others here. Note that this question seemingly arises earlier in *Parshas Korach*, since **Rashi explains there** that the sons of Korach repented, and Rashi should have resolved **there** why they were swallowed.

8) See similarly *Gur Aryeh* here.

9) Similar to “in the counsel initially” found in **Rashi** on *Va'eira* (7:28).

10) On our *Parshah*.

11) Note that the **little children** of Dathan and Aviram also perished (Rashi, *Korach* 16:27).

12) We can say this is based on Rashi's commentary on *Korach* 16:7, that the cause of Korach's dispute was that “he saw a great lineage emerging from him,” so it is logical that his sons were also part of this counsel.

- b) What {compels Rashi to} say that, “**During the dispute** they contemplated repentance” — that they repented specifically **during the dispute itself**, rather than afterwards as a result of Moshe’s words? Seemingly, it is far more intuitive that their repentance occurred after Moshe declared,<sup>13</sup> “By this you shall know that the L-rd has sent me... If these men die the death of all men...”<sup>14</sup> and therefore their repentance was ineffective **at that point** to completely annul their punishment, leading to them being swallowed.
- c) Seemingly, the phrasing “they **contemplated** repentance” does not emphasize that their repentance was **incomplete**,<sup>15</sup> but rather that it was merely a **thought in the heart**, without verbal confession, etc.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.

### A Paradoxical Punishment

The explanation is that Rashi’s intention is to clarify the reason they were punished and subsequently saved in such a bizarre (and miraculous) manner — an occurrence unparalleled in the entire Torah. They were swallowed together with (Korach<sup>17</sup> and) Dathan and Aviram and their families, yet on the other hand, there itself “an **elevated** area was **fortified** for them (in *Gehinnom*) **and they stayed there.**” (This is especially true since there is room to say that with the words “and they stayed there,”<sup>18</sup> Rashi means staying in

13) *Korach* 16:28 ff.

14) Note *Maskil LeDavid* here, who writes “that they were swallowed, but **at that hour** they entertained thoughts...” (and similarly in *Midrash Tehillim* 45:2) — for Rashi explicitly states “**at the time of the dispute.**”

15) Since a complete repentance is possible in the **heart**. Note *Kiddushin* (49b), “If one entertains thoughts of repentance... he is a completely righteous man” (according to the version of the *Or Zarua*, sec. 112, and so it is in *Tanya*, ch. 1).

16) See *Midrash Tehillim* cited in footnote 14.

17) Assuming Rashi holds that [Korach] was among those swallowed. See the *Sichah* of *Shabbos Parshas*

*Korach* 5733. But this is not the place {for further discussion}.

18) Seemingly, these words are superfluous. And in *Bamidbar Rabbah* (18:20) this phrase is omitted. Even though it appears in the other sources cited in footnote 2, this alone is no reason for Rashi to transcribe it into his commentary (just as he did not transcribe the continuation in *Sanhedrin* there, “**and they sang a song.**” since it does not relate to the straightforward meaning of the verse). Based on the explanation in the text, it is understood why Rashi chose the version “and they stayed (*vayeshvu*)” rather than (as in *Megillah* there) “and they stood (*ve’amdu*).” See footnote 28.

**tranquility**,<sup>19</sup> similar to Rashi's commentary<sup>20</sup> {on the verse} "And Yaakov settled (*vayeshuv*) — Yaakov sought to settle in tranquility"). What is the concept behind such a punishment, which is an inherent contradiction? They are in the earth (in *Gehinnom*), yet within that very spot, they are situated in an "elevated" place, in a manner of being "fortified" (and staying in tranquility)?

To resolve this, Rashi is exact in his wording: "And during the dispute they contemplated repentance... **therefore**, an elevated area was fortified for them, etc." Meaning: The flaw in the repentance of the sons of Korach was that it was merely **contemplated in the heart** and not spoken openly, in a way that no one knew about it. On the contrary, their repentance was during the dispute, meaning that to all outward appearances they still continued in the dispute, and simultaneously a **thought** of repentance arose in their hearts.

[In Rashi's commentary on *Tehillim*,<sup>21</sup> he indeed writes, "And at the time of the dispute they **separated** themselves." But from the fact that in his commentary on the Torah he writes unspecifically, "And during the dispute they **contemplated** repentance" (and did not write that they "separated themselves"), it is understood that from the straightforward meaning of the verses (in the *Chumash*), it implies they did **not** separate themselves from the dispute. (The straightforward reason for this is that had they separated themselves, they would not have been swallowed into the earth.<sup>22</sup>) Rather, they only contemplated repentance in their hearts.<sup>23</sup>]

Therefore, their punishment was bizarre, as mentioned above, for it was measure for measure: Just as their conduct was a contradiction — in actual practice and openly it was not recognizable that they separated from the dispute, but in the privacy of their thoughts

19) We can say this is also Rashi's intention in his words, "was **fortified** (*nisbatzar*) for them..." Meaning, as its simple definition suggests, from the root *mivtzar* (fortress), as in "fortified cities" (*arim betzuros*) (see Rashi to *Sanhedrin* there) — it is a term of strength. (Similarly written in *Re'em* and *Be'er Mayim Chaim* here). This means that this "elevated area" itself served as a strong, fortified city for them, which further emphasizes how they "stayed" there in total tranquility (allowing them to live there for a long time). This is unlike Rashi's commentary in *Megillah* there, where he explains *nisbatzar* as "a term of height." Note that this aligns with the view of the *Re'em* elsewhere, that sometimes Rashi explains a concept according to one opinion in one place, and according to a different opinion elsewhere. However, it has been

explained many times that seemingly, this approach contradicts the straightforward methodology of Rashi's commentary.

20) *Bereishis* 37:2, s.v. *Eileh*.

21) 42:1.

22) Note the statement of our Sages (*Sanhedrin* 109b ff.) regarding Oin ben Peles: Even though he was in the **counsel**, he was saved by his wife (though Rashi does not cite this. See the *Sichah* of *Shabbos Parshas Korach* 5733).

23) As for Rashi's wording in *Parshas Korach*, "they **repented**" — we can say he abbreviated his wording there (since it is not its primary location), and his intention is as he writes here, that they contemplated repentance in their hearts.

and contemplations they separated from the rest of Korach's congregation — so too their punishment followed this exact measure. All of Israel saw that they were punished similarly to Korach and his congregation, as they too were swallowed into the earth; but there, swallowed in the earth, they were separated from the rest: “An elevated area in *Gehinnom*, and they stayed there.”

## 3.

### The Misplaced Narrative

We can say that with this {explanation}, Rashi incidentally (as is his typical method) resolves a **general difficulty** with this verse: What is the entire verse, “And the sons of Korach did not die,” doing here? The narrative that the sons of Korach did not die because they repented belongs earlier, in *Parshas Korach*, when the Torah recounts the actual event itself.

Simply put, one could say that here, in our *Parshah*, the Torah needed to inform us that they did not die so that we would not be puzzled when the “family of the **Korchites**” is counted among the families of the Levites.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the verse prefaces that “the sons of Korach did not die.”<sup>25</sup> Since **they did not die** when they were swallowed, and “an elevated area was fortified for them... and they stayed there,” it stands to reason that over time they emerged from there.<sup>26</sup> And from them descended (as Rashi explains earlier in *Parshas Korach*, as mentioned above) the prophet Shmuel and the twenty-four priestly watches, etc.

[Several commentaries on Rashi<sup>27</sup> write that Rashi's statement “an elevated area was fortified... and they stayed there” means that the sons of Korach remained there forever.

However, their words require great examination. Since Rashi **explicitly** writes that the prophet Shmuel and the twenty-four watches descended from the sons of Korach because they repented, we are perforce compelled to say that they ultimately emerged alive from the earth.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, from the fact that in our *Parshah* — which takes place during

24) *Bamidbar* 26:58.

25) And regarding why this is stated here (in the census of the families of Reuven), and not in its proper place — see below, Section 5.

26) Note that Rashi clearly writes “**in Gehinnom.**” But see *Rabbeinu Bachya* and others here, that the place of swallowing is called *Gehinnom*. *Rashba* in *HaKosev* to *Ein Yaakov*, *Megillah* there.

27) See *Re'em*, *Sefer Zikaron*, *Kitzur Mizrachi*, and others.

28) As written in *Nachalas Yaakov*. See also *Imrei Shefer*, *Tzeidah LaDerech*, and others. And so Rashi writes in *Tehillim* 42:1, “and they ascended from there” (and in *Divrei David* here and others, “that they were in *Gehinnom* for a period of time and afterwards emerged upon the face of the earth”). Based on this, Rashi's phrasing “**and they stayed** (*vayeshvu*) there” does not connote settling (and permanence), but rather a term of **delay** (as Rashi explains on *Tazria* 12:4. See Rashi to *Shemos* 2:15, and elsewhere. See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 7, p. 80 ff.,

the lifetime of Moshe — the “family of the Korchites” is counted, it is proven that they were already living a family life during Moshe’s time.]

But this still does not provide a resolution to the aforementioned question: Why did the Torah not write earlier, **in its proper place** in *Parshas Korach*, that the sons of Korach did not die, and that the “family of the Korchites” survived?

Some commentaries explain<sup>29</sup> that this omission was “due to the honor of Moshe. For Moshe had declared,<sup>30</sup> ‘But if the L-rd creates a creation,’ and ‘They, and all they possessed, descend[ed] alive into the grave.’<sup>31</sup> If it had been mentioned **here** {in *Parshas Korach*} that his sons did not die, it would have been a disgrace for Moshe that his prayer was ineffective, since a remnant of them remained on earth.”

However, this answer requires clarification: The fact that “the sons of Korach did not die” does not contradict Moshe’s prayer, “If the L-rd creates a creation... and they descend,” at all! In actual practice, his prayer was fulfilled, and they too descended alive into the pit. It is just that afterwards, “an elevated area was fortified for them in *Gehinnom*.” If so, there is no disgrace to Moshe here. On the contrary, since Moshe wanted and tried to get them to repent,<sup>32</sup> it is a credit to Moshe that he succeeded, at least, in getting the sons of Korach to repent.

#### 4.

### Disappearing from the Assembly

We can explain this by first analyzing the precise wording of the verse in *Parshas Korach*<sup>31</sup> regarding the punishment of being swallowed: “They... descended alive into the grave, the earth covered them over, and **they perished from the midst of the assembly.**” Seemingly, what is the significance of the specific phrase “and they perished **from the midst of the assembly**”? It should have simply stated “and they perished,” or “and they perished from the earth,” or the like.<sup>33</sup>

Based on what was explained above regarding the {two-sided} sin and repentance of the sons of Korach, we can say that their punishment was exclusively that they perished

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and the footnotes there) — that they were delayed there for a period of time until they emerged.

29) *Sifsei Kohen* on the Torah, *Korach* (16:32), and here in our *Parshah* explains the reason it is stated in the middle of the census of the Jewish people. See there.

30) *Bamidbar* 16:30.

31) *Ibid.*, 33.

32) See Rashi to *Bamidbar* 16:8; *ibid.*, 12; *ibid.*, 25.

33) Furthermore, these words are seemingly entirely superfluous. See *Ibn Ezra*, *Ramban*, and others there.

“from the midst of the assembly” — meaning, from **that specific assembly**<sup>34</sup> who had witnessed their participation in the dispute with their own eyes, but had not witnessed their repentance. Therefore, they perforce had to perish from the midst of that assembly. However, regarding a different assembly (who were not witnesses to the matter), there is no reason for them to perish from their midst.

This is the reason why it was not stated earlier in *Parshas Korach* that “the sons of Korach did not die.” It was only after the assembly that existed during the time of Korach’s dispute was no longer present — **as Rashi explains earlier** (in *Parshas Chukas*<sup>35</sup>) that in this congregation “There was not among them even one of those upon whom the decree had been pronounced, for all those destined to die in the desert had already perished,” — that the sons of Korach were able to emerge from their place. Thus, only then was it revealed to the Jewish people that “the sons of Korach did not die.”

## 5.

### The Contrast of the Conspirators

However, the matter is still not sufficiently resolved. This verse, “And the sons of Korach did not die,” appears (at the conclusion of the census of the families of Reuven) as a continuation of the narrative regarding Dassan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav (the son of Pallu, {who was} the son of Reuven):

*“These are the same Dassan and Aviram, the chosen of the assembly, who incited [the people] against Moshe... when they incited against the L-rd. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them...”*<sup>36</sup>

Seemingly, it would have been more appropriate to place this detail {— that “the sons of Korach did not die” —} where the verse counts the families of the Levites,<sup>37</sup> among which is “the family of the Korchites.”<sup>38</sup> {Why quote it near the discussion of Dassan and Aviram, which revolves around lineage to the Tribe of Reuven?}

Simply put, one could argue: Since the verse recounts here the swallowing of Dassan and Aviram, it concludes the topic of the swallowing briefly {by adding} that “the sons of Korach did not die.” (Whereas, had it been written in the portion detailing the families of the Levites, the verse would have had to **repeat** the entire matter of the dispute and the swallowing).

34) Even though the other men perished completely, the verse modified its wording because of the punishment of the sons of Korach.

35) *Bamidbar* 20:22. And similarly before this, 20:1.

36) *Bamidbar* 26:9–10.

37) *Ibid.*, 26:57 ff.

38) See *Ibn Ezra*, *Chizkuni*, *Or HaChaim*, and others here.

But thematically, this is somewhat difficult. Since the verse comes to hint at the **repentance** of the sons of Korach, which is the very reason they **did not** die, it is highly inappropriate to mention them in the exact same continuation as the narrative of those wicked men, Dassan and Aviram, who perished along with all they possessed.

To resolve this question, Rashi prefaces {his commentary with the phrase}: “They were **originally involved in the conspiracy**.” The fact that the verse juxtaposes the survival of the sons of Korach with the narrative of Dassan and Aviram comes to teach us the **comparison** and similarity between them regarding the severity of the dispute. Just as Dassan and Aviram were the ones “who **incited** against Moshe” — and as **Rashi explains**: “they **incited** Israel to quarrel with Moshe” — meaning they did not merely insert themselves into the congregation of disputants, but they actively “incited” and stirred up a quarrel with schemes and counsel to dispute Moshe and the Almighty. [This was the severity of Dassan and Aviram’s sin for which they perished along with all they possessed, as we do not find explicitly in the *Chumash*<sup>39</sup> such a punishment throughout the entire forty years that the Jewish people were in the desert (nor even with the two hundred and fifty men of Korach’s congregation<sup>40</sup>)]. So too with the sons of Korach: They as well “were **originally involved in the conspiracy**.”

And this highlights the tremendous wonder in the matter of the sons of Korach: Even though they were originally involved in the conspiracy exactly like Dassan and Aviram, nevertheless, because “they contemplated repentance in their hearts,” they escaped the pit, to the point that from them descended the prophet Shmuel, the twenty-four watches {of Levites}, etc.

We can say that this matter — the distinction between Dassan and Aviram and the sons of Korach — aligns perfectly with the overall theme of this census of the Jewish people, which took place “**after the plague**,”<sup>41</sup> and as **Rashi explains**, the census was “to ascertain the number of the survivors.” Continuing this theme, the verse recounts regarding the congregation of Korach, that even from among those upon whom total annihilation was decreed (who perished with all they possessed without leaving a remnant), there were indeed “survivors” — “the sons of Korach did not die.”

39) Only in Rashi to our *Parshah* (26:13, and 24 at the end) is it mentioned regarding families that perished. See there. But even this is not **at all** comparable to the punishment of Dassan and Aviram, simply put.

40) Because they [the two hundred and fifty men] at least sought the priesthood, unlike Dassan and Aviram, whose entire intention was merely to incite, quarrel, and dispute for its own sake.

41) *Bamidbar* 26:1.

## 6.

## The Transformative Power of Repentance

From all the above, we can learn a lesson regarding the tremendous power of *teshuvah* (repentance) — that it has the ability to change and transform a person from one extreme to the other.

The sons of Korach initially found themselves at the absolute lowest extreme. As mentioned above, “they were originally involved in the conspiracy,” meaning they did not merely stumble into the sin of dispute, rather they fell into the category of those who cause the masses to sin, inciting a dispute against Moshe and against the Almighty.

Furthermore, their repentance was not an open, revealed repentance. On the contrary, it was merely that they **contemplated** repentance in **their hearts**, while outwardly their behavior remained “during the dispute” — their contemplation of repentance was not strong enough to compel them to publicly separate themselves from the dispute.

And nevertheless, not only did they escape the punishment that befell Korach’s congregation in the merit of this contemplated repentance, but moreover, even during the punishment itself, while they were swallowed in *Gehinnom*, they “stayed” there in a state of tranquility, in an “elevated” area that was “fortified.”

{This transformation continued} until they reached the highest possible extreme: they “sang a song,”<sup>42</sup> and what is more, their words of song and praise were incorporated into the Book of *Tehillim*,<sup>43</sup> including the song<sup>44</sup> which declares, “Its foundation is **in the holy mountains.**”

From this, it is understood *a fortiori* regarding the future Redemption: The Rambam rules<sup>45</sup> that “Ultimately, Israel will repent... and immediately they will be redeemed.” After the abundance of Torah and *Mitzvos* {performed} with self-sacrifice throughout the long duration of the exile, it is absolutely sufficient for the Jewish people merely to **contemplate** repentance in their hearts to bring about the immediate redemption of Israel — “And of Zion it shall be said, ‘Man after man was born in her,’ and He will establish it on high,”<sup>46</sup> in the true and complete Redemption through our righteous *Moshiach*.

(From a *Sichah* delivered on *Shabbos Parshas Pinchas* 5737 [1977])

42) *Sanhedrin* 110a.

43) *Bava Basra* 15a.

44) *Tehillim* 87:1. Note that this Psalm begins, “By the sons of Korach, a psalm, a song” (unlike some other Psalms recited by the sons of Korach {which begin differently, e.g the following psalm (88): “A song, a psalm, by the sons of Korach.”}). We can say

this follows the teaching of our Sages (*Pesachim* 117a), The order of wording “By David, a psalm’ teaches that the Divine Presence (*Shechinah*) rested upon him and subsequently he uttered a song.”

45) *Hilchos Teshuvah* 7:5.

46) *Tehillim* 87:5.