

## Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital*

Parashat Korach  
June 24, 2017

פרשת קרח  
ל' בסיון תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 16:1-18:32

In this *parasha*, Korach and his followers rebel against Moshe's and Aharon's leadership and are killed; Hashem instructs Aharon regarding laws of the priesthood.

Korach rebelled against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. He and his followers were "swallowed up by the earth" [16:28-33]:

כח ויאמר, משה, בזאת תדעו, כי-ה' שִׁלְחָנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה: כִּי-לֹא, מִלְּבִי. כֹּט אִם-כְּמוֹת כָּל-הָאָדָם, יָמָתוּן אֵלֶּה, וּפְקֻדַּת כָּל-הָאָדָם, יִפְקֹד עֲלֵיהֶם--לֹא ה', שִׁלְחָנִי. לֹא-אִם-בְּרִיָּאָה יִבְרָא ה', וּפְצָתָהּ הָאֲדָמָה אֶת-פִּיהָ וּבָלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם, וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים, שְׁאֵלָה--וַיִּדְעֻתָם, כִּי נִאֲצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת-ה'. לֹא וַיְהִי, כַּכֵּלָתוֹ, לְדַבֵּר, אֶת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה; וַתִּפְקַע הָאֲדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם. לֵב וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת-פִּיהָ, וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת-בְּתֵיהֶם, וְאֶת כָּל-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לָקָרָח, וְאֶת כָּל-הָרֶכָוֶשׁ. לֹג וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם, חַיִּים--שְׁאֵלָה; וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ, וַיִּאבְדּוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקֶּהֶל.

**28** And Moshe said: 'Hereby you shall know that Hashem has sent me to do all these works, and that I have not done them of my own mind. **29** If these men die the common death of all men, and be visited after the visitation of all men, then Hashem has not sent me. **30** But if Hashem make a new thing, and the ground open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you shall understand that these men have despised Hashem.' **31** And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was

under them. **32** And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained to Korah, and all their goods. **33** 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.

The earth opening up and swallowing Korach's assembly can be viewed as a natural event, an earthquake of sorts, or it can be seen as something supernatural. *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Sages, describes it as something created at the beginning of time specifically for this purpose. Chapter 5, *Mishnah* 6 reads:

עשרה דברים נבראו בערב שבת בין השמשות ואלו הן פי הארץ ופי הבאר ופי האתון והקשת והמן והמטה והשמיר והכתב והמכתב והלוחות ויש אומרים אף המזיקין וקבורתו של משה ואילו של אברהם אבינו ויש אומרים אף צבת בצבת עשויה

Ten things were created at twilight of Shabbat eve [of the seven days of creation]. These are: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach]; the mouth of [Miriam's] well; the mouth of [Bilam's] donkey; the rainbow; the manna; [Moshe's] staff; the *Shamir* [an insect that could cut stone by walking over it]; the writing, the inscription and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments]. Some say also the spirits of destruction, the burial place of Moshe and the ram of our father Avraham. And some say also the original tongs, for tongs are made with tongs.

This *mishnah* teaches us a number of things. First of all, these items were created just before Shabbat when all of creation was being rendered complete. In other words, God put the finishing touches on the world by making these items and saving them for use in future episodes which the Divine already foresaw.

The Meiri [13<sup>th</sup> Century Catalonia] maintains that each of these items was created in order to strengthen and deepen one's belief in God: the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach was to create belief in the punishment of the wicked, and the mouth of Miriam's well was to create belief in reward for the righteous. According to the Meiri, these are the two fundamental principles of belief.

As for the other items, the mouth of Bilam's donkey was created to show that everything having to do with Bilam was directed by God; the rainbow was to show that the flood was caused by Divine intervention; the manna, that without a doubt, Hashem provided the Bnei Yisrael with food for the 40 years in the wilderness; Moshe's staff alludes to the wonders that God did in Egypt; the *Shamir* alludes to the building of the Temple [as no metal was allowed to be used in its construction, the stones were cut using the *Shamir*]; and the writing, that is, the Hebrew language; the inscription, that is, how the letters were constructed, and the tablets of the Ten Commandments allude to the giving of the Law, the central aspect of our belief system. Some say also the spirits of destruction, that is, the evil inclination without which the world cannot exist; the burial place of Moshe, which is hidden to prevent it from becoming a shrine; and the ram of our father Avraham, which saved Yitzchak's life, replaced child sacrifice, and created blessing among the people. And some say also the original tongs, for tongs are made with tongs, that is, tongs are welded in fire, and one needs tongs to retrieve the newly-minted tongs from the fire.

Whether one takes this *mishnah* literally or figuratively, the point the Rabbis may have been making is that God thought out all of human existence before we were set upon this earth to make our own way. The belief that God "has our backs", so to speak, is comforting in that it sets us upon solid ground rather than shifting sands.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Do you think this *mishnah* should be taken literally or figuratively? Why?
- Do you think it is possible for a *Shamir* to actually exist? Why or why not?
- What do you think of the Rabbis' statement about Hashem having made the first tongs? What do you think they meant to convey by this almost absurdly trivial detail?