**PARASHAT KORACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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In memory of Alice Stone, Aida Bat Avraham, z"l & Fred Stone, Yaakov Ben Yitzhak, z"l

whose yarzeits are 2 Tammuz and 25 Tammuz,

beloved parents and grandparents

Ellen and Stanley Stone and their children

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Korach tells of the tragic consequences of Korach’s uprising against Moshe and Aharon, including the death of the revolt’s leaders when the ground miraculously opened beneath them. Moshe proclaimed to the people before the ground opened, “If these [people] die like all people die…then the Lord did not send me. But if the Lord will create a new creation and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them…then you shall know that these men have angered the Lord” (16:29-30).

A classic chassidic insight into this verse is cited in the name of Rav Avraham of Tchechnov, who took note of the word “*eileh*” (“these”). The Rebbe of Tchechnov explained this word as emphasizing that the natural death of Moshe’s opponents would prove them correct only if it were these people themselves who die – meaning, if they die in their current condition of revolt. If, however, they repent, then they would become new people, and therefore a natural death would not show anything about their claims against Moshe.

It would seem that the intent of the Rebbe of Tchechnov is to clarify that Moshe did not desire any revenge against his opponents, and truly believed until the end in their capacity for change and repentance. Indeed, as the Gemara (Sanhedrin 110a) famously teaches, Korach’s sons, who were full participants in his uprising, harbored thoughts of repentance at the final moments and were rescued by God as the rest of the revolt’s leaders fell to the underworld. Moshe recognized this possibility even as he warned of the supernatural death that God was going to bring upon the rebels, and he sincerely hoped that this would happen. It is worth noting as well Rashi’s comments to the beginning of the *parasha* (16:5), based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explaining why, after the rebels first confronted Moshe, he instructed them to return the next morning with firepans, rather than have them bring incense immediately. Rashi explains that Moshe hoped that the delay would allow Korach and his followers time to reconsider their plan, and thereby save their lives. Moshe of course knew that those who offered incense in a futile attempt to prove their worthiness for the high priesthood would be killed instantly. He hoped to avoid this tragedy by stalling and allowing the rebels the opportunity to change their mind. Similarly, the Rebbe of Tchechnov emphasized that even at the very end, Moshe still hoped and wished that his adversaries would repent and thus be saved. Although Moshe was angry, and offered a special prayer that God should not accept his opponents’ offerings (16:15), nevertheless, he was not vengeful. His hope was not that they should perish, but that they should have a change of heart.

If so, then Moshe sets for us an inspiring example of *ahavat Yisrael* (love for fellow Jews), and of belief in each Jew’s potential and capacity for goodness. Even after Korach and his cohorts hurled the most hurtful and absurd accusations against him, Moshe’s desire was not to see them hurt, but to see them change. He believed that all people – even the villains who rose against him – were capable of abandoning their sinful conduct and improving. He was not ready to despair and to give up on anyone, even in the moment before the ground was about to open and devour the leaders of the revolt. This shows us the importance of recognizing and believing in every person’s capacity to change and achieve, and trusting in their ability to change from the evil path they currently follow to the path of repentance.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Korach of God’s command to Moshe after Korach’s tragic revolt against him to collect the staffs of the leaders of all the tribes. In order to prove His designation of Aharon as the *kohen gadol*, and of the tribe of Levi as ministers in the *Mishkan*, God performed a miracle whereby Aharon’s staff blossomed overnight while his and the other tribal leaders’ staffs were kept inside the *Mishkan*. The next day, the Torah tells, Moshe brought the staffs out of the *Mishkan*, and the tribal leaders “each saw and took his staff” (17:24). Seforno explains the word “*va-yir’u*” (“saw”) to mean that each tribal leader checked carefully for his staff’s unique properties to ensure that it was his. This guaranteed that the blossomed staff was indeed Aharon’s staff, such that the proof of his selection as *kohen gadol* could not be challenged. In a similar vein, *Targum Onkelos* translates this word as “*ve-ishtemoda’u*,” which means that the tribal leaders “recognized” their staffs, each looking for his staff’s distinguishing features.

The *Imrei Emet* (the third Rebbe of Ger) notes the symbolism of this process, of the tribal leader’s recognizing their staffs and then taking them. This represents the recognition of our individual roles that we need to fill, each of which is unique and distinct, dissimilar to anyone else’s. The overarching theme and message of the story of Korach is that we are not all meant to serve as *kohen gadol*. Each and every person is given his own “staff,” his own special role and mission. Just as Korach and his followers made a grievous mistake by assuming that they should perform the special rituals in the *Mishkan* like Aharon did, we, too, make a mistake if we assume that the path chosen by our peers is the one that we also need to take. The message of this tragic story is precisely “*va-yir’u va-yikchu ish machtato*” – that we must all “recognize” our own “staff” and then “take” it – meaning, we must embrace our unique role and commit ourselves to it without any hesitation and without feeling jealous of our peers. The tragedy of Korach began with “*Va-yikach Korach*” – when Korach attempted to “take” a role that was not meant to be his. The final correction of Korach’s mistake was achieved through “*va-yir’u va-yikchu ish machtato*,” by each person recognizing his unique, special role, and happily embracing it.

Monday

The final section of Parashat Korach discusses the various gifts that *Benei Yisrael* are required to give to the *kohanim* and the *Leviyim*. In the *parasha*’s final verses, the Torah introduces the law of *terumat ma’aser*, which requires a Levi to tithe the tithes he receives. *Benei Yisrael* are required to give one-tenth of their produce to a Levi, and a Levi who receives this tithe is then required to take one-tenth of what he receives and give it to a *kohen*. Just as the rest of the nation is required to give *teruma gedola* – a portion of their produce to a *kohen*, a Levi is required to give *terumat ma’aser* – one-tenth of the tithes he receives to a *kohen*.

The Torah emphasizes that *terumat ma’aser*, the portion given by a Levi to a *kohen*, is similar to the *teruma gedola* given to a *kohen* by the rest of the nation: “Your donation shall be considered like grain from the granary and like ripe produce from the winery” (18:27) – meaning, their donation is akin to the donations made by the rest of the nation to a *kohen*. Rashi explains this to mean that all the restrictions that apply to *teruma gedola* apply also to *terumat ma’aser*. Namely, it may be eaten only by a *kohen* and his household, and may not be eaten in a state of *tum’a* (ritual impurity). Additionally, violation of these restrictions constitutes a capital offense, just as in the case of *teruma gedola*.

The Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (30b-31a) cites Elazar ben Gamla as deriving additional *halakhot* from this verse, applying other properties of *teruma gedola* to *terumat ma’aser*. First, he infers from this verse that *terumat ma’aser* is designated “*be-omed*” – via an estimation, and does not need to be precisely measured. Normally, when one is required to separate a specific percentage of produce, this process should be done through a precise measurement, in order to ensure proper compliance with the obligation. In the case of *teruma gedola*, however, the situation is different, because the Torah does not specify any required percentage, and as far as Torah law is concerned, even a single stalk of grain suffices for a large heap of grain. The Sages, however, enacted that one should preferably give one-fortieth of his produce for *teruma* (or at least one-sixtieth). This amount should be separated “*be-omed*,” imprecisely, by estimation, because one will then likely increase the amount in order to ensure to comply with the minimum percentage. Elazar ben Gamla surprisingly applies this provision even to *terumat ma’aser*. Although *terumat ma’aser* must constitute one-tenth of the amount received by the Levi, nevertheless, this amount may be estimated, and not precisely measured, as indicated by the Torah’s association between *teruma gedola* and *terumat ma’aser*. Already Tosefot note that in the Talmud Yerushalmi, this issue is subject to debate among the *Tanna’im*. Indeed, the Rambam, in Hilkhot Terumot (3:10), and the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 331:24), rule against Elazar ben Gamla, and maintain that *terumat ma’aser* must be precisely measured. (For a more detailed discussion, see [this article](http://asif.co.il/?wpfb_dl=1434) by Eliezer Sariel.)

Secondly Elazar ben Gamla applies to *terumat ma’aser* the rule that it can be designated “*be-machashava*” – through thought, even without a physical act of separation. If a Levi designates a portion of his produce as *terumat ma’aser* in his mind, that portion attains the status of *teruma* with respect to all *halakhot*, as in regard to *teruma gedola*. There is considerable discussion among the *Rishonim* as to whether this ruling of Elazar ben Gamla represents the consensus, or if the other *Tanna’im* disputed his position, and maintained that *terumat ma’aser* cannot be designated through thought alone. (See, for example, Tosefot, Bekhorot 51a; Rambam and Ritva, Gittin 31a.)

Finally, Elazar ben Gamla inferred from this verse that the original owner of the produce may separate *terumat ma’aser* before giving the tithe to the Levi. Just as he separates *teruma gedola* from his produce and gives it to a *kohen*, he may likewise separate *terumat ma’aser* from the portion he designated as his tithe to the Levi, and give it to the *kohen* of his choice. He then gives the remainder of the tithe to the Levi, who is thus absolved of the *terumat ma’aser* requirement. This ruling is accepted as normative *Halakha* (Rambam, Hilkhot Terumot 3:12).

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the Torah’s formulation in Parashat Korach in presenting the obligation of *terumat ma’aser*, which requires a Levi to donate to a *kohen* one-tenth of the produce he receives as tithes from *Benei Yisrael*. God told Moshe to tell the *Leviyim*, “Your donation shall be considered like grain from the granary and like ripe produce from the winery” (18:27). Meaning, when they donate their *terumat ma’aser* to a *kohen*, this donation will be no different from the *teruma* which the rest of the nation gives to a *kohen* from their produce. As we saw, this comparison between a Levi’s *terumat ma’aser* and other people’s *teruma* to a *kohen* has been understood as establishing a degree of halakhic parity between the two donations, the precise details of which are subject to some debate.

Rav Tzvi Hersh of Ziditchov offers a creative reading of this verse, suggesting that it alludes to the perspective people of stature should have on their positions of distinction. The word “*terumatkhem*” (“your donation”), the Rebbe of Ziditchov commented, may be read to mean, “your elevation,” a distinguished position to which a person has risen. The Torah here urges such people to view their positions of honor as no different than the position of “honor” conferred upon a portion of produce designated as *teruma*. When a farmer consecrates a percentage of his produce as *teruma*, that portion quite obviously did not do anything to deserve its hallowed status. Similarly, the Rebbe of Ziditchov explained, if a person has succeeded in achieving a status of distinction, he should not gloat or pride himself over his accomplishment. He should view himself as a portion of *teruma* that was chosen by Providence for reasons neither he nor anyone can know to be special and sacred.

The laws of the mandatory gifts to the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* were presented in the aftermath of Korach’s uprising, when the special status of the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* was challenged. These laws, as Rashi (18:8) comments, were communicated at this point in order to confirm the designation of the tribe of Levi as servants in the *Mishkan*, with all the responsibilities and privileges this entailed, including the support of the rest of the nation through various mandatory gifts. The Rebbe of Ziditchov reminds us that just as commoners must not envy or resent people of stature, the people of stature must not look down upon the commoners. As important as it is to respect those whom God had chosen for special stature of greatness, it is equally important for those with special stature to respect the people under their charge. All individuals must recognize and embrace their position and role, which means that we must neither envy those with roles which seem more impressive, nor look condescendingly upon those whose roles seem less impressive. We are all equally beloved children of the Almighty, and we must therefore neither envy those who seem above us nor disrespect those who seem beneath us.

Wednesday

Earlier this week, we noted the view of Abba Elazar ben Gimmel, cited in several contexts in the Gemara (including Gittin 30b-31a, and Bekhorot 59a), that *teruma* – the portion of produce given to a *kohen* – may be designated “*be-machashava*,” through thought. This means that even before one actually separated the designated the portion from the rest of the produce, the portion attains the status of *teruma* and is thus subject to all the restrictions that apply to *teruma*. Additionally, the rest of the produce becomes permissible, since *teruma* has been taken.

There is considerable discussion among the *Rishonim* as to whether “*be-machashava*” refers to silently designating the portion in one’s mind, or a verbal declaration. Rashi in Masekhet Bekhorot assert that the term “*be-machashava*” in this context does not refer to mere thought, but rather is intended to exclude the physical act of separation. In Rashi’s view, simply thinking in one’s mind that a certain portion of grain should be designated as *teruma* does not suffice for the designation to take effect; the thought must be accompanied by a verbal declaration. Although the Gemara uses the term “*be-machashava*” (“through thought”), the intent is to exclude physically separating the hallowed portion, not to allow a purely mental process. Many other *Rishonim*, however, disagree, and claim that the Gemara actually refers to an exclusively mental process, bereft of any thought or action. These include Tosefot (there in Bekhorot), the Ramban, the Rashba and the Ritva (in their respective commentaries to Masekhet Gittin). This is the position accepted by the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 331:46).

Among the proofs presented by Tosefot for this latter view is the Mishna’s ruling in Masekhet Terumot (1:6) that an *ileim* – a person incapable of speaking – should preferably not separate *teruma* from produce, but if he did separate *teruma*, his act is effective and the designated portion attains the status of *teruma*. The Talmud Yerushalmi, as Tosefot cite, explains that an *ileim* should preferably not separate *teruma* because he is incapable of reciting the *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *teruma*. It is clear that otherwise, were it not for the *berakha*, the designation of *teruma* by a mute is not halakhically inferior to the designation of *teruma* by any other person. Tosefot seek to prove from the Mishna’s ruling that a verbal proclamation is not necessary for the designation of *teruma*, as this can be done even by a person who is biologically incapable of speaking.

A number of later writers noted the obvious difficulty in Tosefot’s comments, as it is entirely possible that the Mishna speaks of an *ileim* physically removing a portion of produce to designate it as *teruma*. Physically separating a portion is certainly an effective means of formally designating it as *teruma*, and thus this Mishna does not prove that designating a portion exclusively in one’s mind, without any action or verbal declaration, is effective.

Tosefot also draw proof from the Gemara’a discussion elsewhere, in Masekhet Shavuot (26b), where the Gemara points to *teruma* as one of two exceptional contexts in which silent thought is halakhically effective, the other being *kodashim* – the consecration of an item. The Gemara establishes that the designation of something as *teruma* and *kodashim* can be accomplished silently, through mere thought, whereas in respect to other *halakhot*, verbalization is required.

Rashi, consistent with his view in Masekhet Bekhorot, explains the word “*teruma*” mentioned by the Gemara there in Masekhet Shavuot differently. In his view, the Gemara there speaks of *terumat ha-Mishkan* – *Benei Yisrael*’s consecration of materials for the construction of the *Mishkan* at Mount Sinai. This consecration, Rashi interprets the Gemara as saying, was effective the moment a person thought that he would be donating the item in question, even if he did not verbally declare it hallowed. Not coincidentally, Rashi does not accept the simple meaning of the word “*teruma*” there in Masekhet Shavuot, presumably because of his view taken in Masekhet Bekhorot, that the purely mental designation of *teruma* is ineffective. He was therefore compelled to arrive a creative reading of the word “*teruma*,” explaining that it refers to the donations for the construction of the *Mishkan*.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Korach of the two hundred and fifty distinguished figures who joined Korach when he confronted Moshe and Aharon and protested their rights to leadership over *Benei Yisrael*. Moshe responded by inviting the group to assemble at the *Mishkan* the following morning together with Aharon, and to offer incense to determine who among them earned the rights of religious leadership. Tragically, the two hundred and fifty men agreed to this “contest,” and were all consumed by fire, as only Aharon’s incense offering was accepted (16:35).

Rashi (16:7) raises the question, “Were they not fools, in that he warned them such and they nevertheless agreed to come forward?” Meaning, these two hundred and fifty men knew what the stakes were, and realized that they would be killed if God did not approve of their serving in the *Mishkan*. Why, then, did they agree to this challenge? Rashi answers, ambiguously, “They sinned against their souls.” He then references the verse later (17:3) in which God refers to these two hundred and fifty men as “­­*ha-chata’im ha-eileh be-nafshotam*” – “these sinners with their souls.” What exactly does this expression mean, and how does it explain how these men acted so foolishly?

The *Ketav Sofer* insightfully suggested that Rashi refers to the fact that these men acted out of religious conviction, firmly believing that they needed to serve in the *Mishkan* in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment. When it comes to sins involving temptation and human weakness, people commit forbidden acts because they foolishly ignore the consequences. Such sins are committed, as the Gemara (Sota 3a) famously teaches, only when one is overcome by a “*ru’ach shetut*” – by a “foolish spirit” that leads him or her to turn a blind eye to the repercussions of the act. But when a person mistakes a misdeed for a noble, virtuous act, then he is capable of committing even the most grievous sins, and even without experiencing a “*ru’ach shetut*,” without foolish, willful blindness. Once a person is convinced that a certain forbidden act is actually a *mitzva*, a righteous deed, he does not have to be a fool to commit the act. This, the *Ketav Sofer* suggests, is the meaning of Rashi’s comment, that Korach and his followers were prepared to offer incense because their mistake was one of “*be-nafshotam*,” mistaking a forbidden act for a virtuous one. Once they assumed that performing the rituals in the *Mishkan* was a righteous endeavor, there was no limit to their determination to persist, even to the point of risking their lives.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Korach introduces the *mitzva* of *teruma* – the requirement to give a portion of one’s produce to a *kohen*. God instructs Moshe to tell Aharon that “all the choice oil, and all the choice wine and grain – their first portion that they give to the Lord, I have given to you” (18:12). In other words, *Benei Yisrael* are required to give a portion of their “oil,” “wine” and “grain” to a *kohen*. The simple reading of this verse suggests that the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies only to these types of produce – *yitzhar* (oil), *tirosh* (wine) and *dagan* (grain, generally defined as the five principal grains). The *Sifrei Zuta*, however, explains the Torah’s intent differently, noting the word “*kol*” (“all”) that appears twice in this verse – once in conjunction with oil, and a second time in conjunction with wine. The first instance of “*kol*,” the *Sifrei Zuta* explains, extends the *teruma* obligation to all fruits that grow on trees, beyond just olives, and the second instance of “*kol*” indicates that the obligation applies to all other fruits.

Based on the *Sifrei*, the Rambam famously rules in Hilkhot Terumot (2:1-6) that all fruits and grains are subject to the requirement of *teruma* on the level of Torah obligation. Only vegetables are excluded, and require *teruma* only by force of Rabbinic enactment.

Many other *Rishonim* disagree, and maintain that the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies only to wine, oil and grains. This is the view taken by the Ramban, in his commentary to Sefer Devarim (14:22), where he mentions that “*mi-gedolei ha-mechaberim*” (“one of the greatest authors”) – referring to the Rambam – made the mistake of applying the Torah obligation to all fruits. The Ramban insists that the passages in the *Sifrei* and other sources that interpret the Torah’s command as incorporating all fruits must be taken as an “*asmakhta*” – a subtle allusion found in the Biblical text to a law enacted by the Sages. This is also the position taken by Tosefot, in several contexts (Rosh Hashanah 12a, Bava Metzia 88a, and elsewhere).

The Ramban, in the aforementioned passage in his Torah commentary, further asserts that the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies to oil and wine, but not to olives and grapes. That is to say, if olives and grapes are grown and harvested to be eaten in their current state, and not for the purpose of producing oil and wine, then *teruma* must be separated only by force of Rabbinic enactment, and not on the level of Torah obligation. Rav Avraham Danzig, in the *Sha’arei Tzedek* volume of his *Chokhmat Adam* (p. 20, in *Binat Adam*), writes that this view of the Ramban is not accepted by other *Rishonim*. Citing several sources, he contends that according to the consensus of *Rishonim*, the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies to olives and grapes even if they are never used for the production of oil and wine.

Yet another view is cited by the Ritva (Bava Metzia 88b) in the name of the Ra’avad, claiming that the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies to all seven of the special species of *Eretz Yisrael* (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates). This view is based upon a textual parallel between *teruma* and the obligation of *bikkurim* – bringing the first fruits that ripen to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, a requirement that applies to the seven species. The Torah refers to *teruma* with the word “*reishit*” (Devarim 18:4), the same term used in reference to *bikkurim* (Devarim 26:2), suggesting a degree of parity between these two *mitzvot*.

All the aforementioned sources draw no distinction in this regard between *teruma* and *ma’aserot* – the various tithes that one must give from his produce. However, the Rash Mi-Shantz (commentary to *Torat Kohanim*, Parashat Bechukotai, 12) suggests distinguishing between these two requirements, claiming that the Torah obligation of *teruma* applies only to grain, wine and oil, whereas tithes are required on the level of Torah law from all produce. Another variation of this view is the position of the *Semag* (*asin* 136, 161) and *Sefer Ha-yerei’im* (147), who make an exception for *ma’aser sheni* – the requirement to bring one-tenth of one’s produce to Jerusalem every third and sixth year of the *shemitta* cycle. According to these *Rishonim*, *teruma* and other tithes apply on the level of Torah obligation only to grain, wine and oil, whereas the obligation of *ma’aser sheni* applies on the level of Torah law to all produce.

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