
DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

KORACH

Saving On

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח... וְאֹן בֶּן פִּלֵּת

*Korach took... and On, son of Peles.*¹

One of the most enigmatic members of Korach's team is On, son of Peles. After being mentioned by name in the opening verse of our parsha, he is never mentioned again. In explanation of this phenomenon, the Gemara informs us that his wife convinced him to withdraw from his participation in Korach's dispute:

She said to him: what difference does it make for you? If the one [Moshe] is the leader, you are a follower, and if the other [Korach] is the leader, you will be a follower!

Having convinced On that he had nothing to gain from being involved with Korach, his wife proceeded to extricate him from Korach's assembly, thereby saving his life. The question is: what was it about On's wife's words that caused him to change his mind? What exactly did she say that he had not already considered? Did he originally think that if Korach succeeded then he, On, would be the leader?

Apparently, On was of the understanding that if Korach succeeded, it *would* better his situation. After all, Korach's claim to Moshe was: "For the entire assembly are holy, and Hashem is in their midst, and why do you lord over the congregation of Hashem?"² It sounds as if Korach was claiming that there should be no leaders *or* followers in the Jewish people, only equals! If so, then to side with Korach could potentially bring about an improvement in On's status.

To this end, his wife enlightened him: Do not be fooled into thinking that if Korach wins there will be no more leaders. If he wins, and becomes the "first comrade", he will effectively be the new leader. Either way, you will remain a follower, and will have gained nothing. On's wife thus has the distinction of realizing centuries ago that even when everyone is equal, some people will be more equal than others, and no one more so than the one who preaches that equality.

¹ Bamidbar 16:1.

² Bamidbar 16:3.

On the morrow of Korach's uprising, during which he and his men were killed, the people once again complain. In response to this, a plague breaks out, which is only stopped by Aharon taking *ketores* (incense) and running into the midst of the assembly. There are some verses describing these two days which are quite similar to each other in theme and content, but which nevertheless contain some differences in their phraseology.

1. On day one of Korach's rebellion, Moshe and Aharon are told: “הַבְּדִלוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה – *separate yourselves from amid this assembly.*”³ On day two, the verse says: “הֲרִמּוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה – *remove yourselves from the assembly.*”⁴ What is the difference between “הַבְּדִלוּ” and “הֲרִמּוּ”?
2. In both of the above verses, the offending assembly is called “עֵדָה – *an assembly,*” whereas when Aharon takes the *ketores*, the verse says, “וַיָּרֶץ אֶל תּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל – *he ran into the midst of the congregation.*”⁵ Why does the reference change from “עֵדָה” to “קְהָל”?

After the plague had been halted, the verse says:⁶

וַיְהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר אֶלֶף וּשְׁבַע מֵאוֹת מִלִּבְד מֵאֵלֶּיךָ עַל דְּבַר קִרְחַת

Those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, aside from those who died on account of the matter of Korach.

Why does the verse need to emphasize that the number who died on the second day was aside from those who died on the first day? Isn't it obvious?

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin reveals an entirely new dimension in these verses. We know that on account of Aharon bringing the *ketores* among the people, the plague stopped. Now, we are not told exactly how many more people would have died had Aharon not stopped the plague, but perhaps we can find out...

On the first day, the entire Jewish people were under the decree of being wiped out, but this was rescinded when Moshe pleaded for mercy on their behalf. On the second day, when the complaining persisted, the original decree of destruction was brought back. Here, too, however, there was a measure of mercy, whereby instead of the entire people being wiped out, they would be represented by a core group of people. The smallest representation of an entity in Torah is Terumah (תרומה). In this instance, in order to take the place of the entire nation, the Terumah had to be the most desired amount, which is one fortieth. This is why, on the second day, Hashem did not use the original term “הַבְּדִלוּ” to denote separation, but rather the term “הֲרִמּוּ”, which is related to the word “תרומה”.

How much is “Terumah” of the Jewish people? The counting of the people in Parshas Bamidbar tells us that they numbered 603,550. A fortieth of that number is 15,088. From whom was this number comprised? The verse informs us that those who died in the plague were 14,700. This leaves 388. However, since this was essentially the same decree as that of the first day, those who died on that day are also reckoned in this amount. This is why the verse specifies that those who died in the plague were “aside from those who died relating to the matter of Korach.”

3 16:21.

4 17:10.

5 17:12.

6 17:14.

And how many people died on the first day? There was Korach himself, Dasan and Aviram and the 250 men, totaling 253. Adding this to the 14,700 of the second day gives us 14,953. However, this still does not give us the total of 15,088, for there are still 135 missing. What happened to them? The answer is, *these men* were the ones who were spared by Aharon taking the *ketores* and running into the midst of the people. We noted that, unlike the earlier verse which uses the term “עדה”, this verse says that he ran into the midst of the “קהל”. Why the shift in phraseology? Because the numerical value (*gematria*) of the word “קהל” is 135, indicating the number of people who were saved by this act.

A different level!