

נִיקָחָהּ קֹרַח. *Now there betook himself Korah.* Translators and commentators admit that they have a difficult time with the first two words of this parasha. Usually when we see the word נִיקָחָהּ it means, *and he took*. Here are the first three instances of נִיקָחָהּ in the Torah:

וַיִּקָּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם	And the Lord God took the man... (Gen. 2:15)
וַיִּקָּח אֶחָת מִצְלָעָיו	And he took one of his ribs (Gen. 2:21)
וַיִּקָּח לוֹ לְמֶדָה שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים	And Lemekh took for himself two wives, (Gen. 4:19)

In these and in all other cases the text specifies *an object that is taken*. But in the case of Korah, it doesn't. Korah just *takes*. And that prompts a first observation about him: For people who divide the world into *givers* and *takers*, Korah *is a taker*. He's the kind of guy who, because of his lineage, thinks that everybody else owes him something. In this case, he thinks that Moses owes him a



Resh Lakish	שָׁלָחָהּ מִקַּח רָע לְעַצְמוֹ	He acquired a bad acquisition for himself.
Rashi	לָקַח אֶת עַצְמוֹ לְצַד אֶחָד	He betook himself on one side
Bahya	לָקַח טְלִיתוֹ	He took his tallit
Natziv	לָקַח לֵב וְנַפְשׁ בְּנֵי אָדָם	He took the heart and soul of people...
Shadal	לָקַח הַשָּׂעָה	He took advantage of the hour

position of leadership, if not the place at the top. Nevertheless, because the sentence נִיקָחָהּ קֹרַח lacks a direct object, it inspired a spandex of speculations such as these, in answer to our **first question: What did Korah take?** לָקַח also means *to buy, to acquire*. Resh Lakish is relying on that meaning of the word. In doing so he is letting the words נִיקָחָהּ קֹרַח serve as a headline or title to the story. This story is about a man Korah *acquiring* a rotten reputation, and being forever known as the self-serving, narcissistic loser that he is. To Resh Lakish, he paid a huge price, his life, and got something *bad* in return. Rashi bases his comment on the Aramaic translation Onkelos: וַיִּתְפָּלֵג קֹרַח - *Korah divided* ie. he divided the community and took himself and his followers to one side. The English, *Betook himself* is a translation influenced by Rashi and Onkelos. Bahya ben Asher (13th century Spain) is referencing a midrash which connects the end of last week's parasha, the commandment of tzitzit, to the beginning of this week's parasha, Korah's rebellion. *What did he take?* asks the midrash. *He took his tallit*, except in Korah's case his tallit was a four cornered garment that was *entirely made up of blue/tekhelet cloth!* And, with defiance and annoyance, he asks Moses: *Does a garment that is completely dyed in blue/tekhelet require the special tekhelet string in the tzitzit?* Which is, on the one hand, a great halakhic



question, but on other hand, a totally annoying question! Its purpose is not to get an answer but to stump Moses. In the midrash, Moses answers that yes indeed, that garment requires tzitzit. But now all of us are interested in the rationale. Why is that so? Why does a totally *tekhelet* garment need a blue fringe? Korah's question actually makes total sense. Moses' answer can be summed up as, *Because I said so*. But if that's the only reason he gives for this requirement, then even we are likely to conclude somewhat cynically, that Korah is right: it all boils down to authority. And if that's the case, Korah's real question is, *Why do you have authority and not me? I'm just as entitled as you are!* The tallit then, is a stand-in for a much larger political question. The Natziv (R. Naphtali Tzvi Hersh Berlin d. 1893, Volozhin), connects נִיקָחָהּ קֹרַח to yet another interpretation of the word נִיקָחָהּ implied by a phrase in Proverbs 11:30, וְלֵאמֹן נִפְשׁוֹת חָכָם - *A wise man captivates people* which here would mean that he had the ability to sway people to his opinion. What made him compelling was that he was so persuasive. And finally Shadal, (Shmuel David Luzzatto, d. 1860 Padua) affirms the absence of a direct object in the text by providing a compelling explanation. Korah took? Korah took advantage! And what specifically were the circumstances? Well, this episode comes directly after the debacle of the spies. The morale of the people was at its lowest. They have just been sentenced to 40 years of wandering. They have just been told that they are going to die in the desert. They are in despair. No stranger to charlatans, dema-gogues, Shadal sees Korah in that mold. Such a person has an uncanny ability to hone in on the vulnerabilities of the masses. He provides himself as the solution to the predicament that they are in. *Moses, in other words, has been a failure, and I, I alone can save you.* Moses response to Korah's challenge was to issue his own challenge:

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בְּקֶרֶב יוֹדַע ה' אֶת אֲשֶׁר לוֹ וְאֵת הַקְּדוּשָׁה וְהַקְּרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר בוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו. בַּמִּדְבָּר טִזָּה:	At daybreak God will make known who is his and who is holy and he will bring-near to him; the one that he chooses, he will bring-near to him. (Numbers 16:8)
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They were all to show up in the morning each with fire pan and incense, and God would *choose* - in some demonstrative way, who was holy, ie. who had supreme authority.

This prompts a **second question: Why would Korah agree to such a challenge?** Wouldn't he have known that he had no chance? To this we can offer at least three possible answers.

1. You never know what can happen when you're dealing with religion, mystery, and the power of God. God is sometimes erratic and here, the results could have ended up in Korah's favor. In other words, he so convinced himself and deluded his followers that he thought he had a chance. After all, *Nobody knows what's in the mind of God, and if I'm being driven to do this, perhaps it is God himself that is driving me. And if it is obvious to me that there needs to be a change of*

leadership here, then wouldn't it be obvious to God as well? Korah proves that self-deception has no bounds. He showed up because he so deluded himself and his followers, that he actually thought he had a chance at victory. And judging from the results, self-delusion has catastrophic consequences.

2. He showed up to save face. After all, here he was with his band of followers. If he capitulated to Moses before going out to the incense show-down the following morning, he would have betrayed the people who had already invested their allegiance to him. In this vein, Korah is no different from any cult leader who, having captivated the minds and souls of his followers, will do anything to keep them attached to him, even if it costs them their lives. Jim Jones (1978) and David Koresh (1993) come to mind. Sabbatai Tzvi's masquerade (17th century) lead to wide despair and apostasy among his followers.

3. The Korah incident is a perfect example of asymmetrical conflict. Korah was outnumbered and had no legitimacy, and yet, by drawing Moses into a challenge, he gained an equal footing with him even if it resulted in his death. He may have lost the conflict, and his life, but he succeeded at the very least, in drawing attention. And he succeeded in getting a parasha named after him and having endless sermons and interpretations written about him! His name is not lost to history, rather, he is forever remembered as a failure and as a totem of arrogance, demagoguery, and self-promotion.

וַיֵּרְדוּ הֵם וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וְתָכַס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל. בַּמִּדְבָּר טו:מג	So they went down, they and all theirs, alive, to Sheol; the earth covered them, and they vanished from the midst of the assembly. Numbers 16:43
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Our third question: What on earth is Sheol?
Sheol makes numerous

appearances in the Bible (66 to be exact) and though it is never precisely defined, it is usually understood to be a kind grave or netherworld, or more precisely, what other cultures label as Hell. In later Judaism, the term Gehenna (Gehinnom) replaces *Sheol*. But a careful examination of all of the different passages in which *Sheol* is located yields a very interesting observation: only certain kinds of people end up there, namely, wicked people and people, who because of their evil, whose lives are shortened. How then, do we explain what Jacob says when he sees Joseph's torn coat: *I will go down to my son in mourning, to Sheol!* (Gen. 37:35)? Why does Jacob invoke *Sheol* as his "reward" in this instance of terrible grief? Because he is consumed by a terrible and unrelenting guilt. After all, he is the one who dispatched Joseph in the first place, and his sense of responsibility for his son's presumed death only exacerbates the simmering guilt that he must have had upon the death of his beloved Rachel. We sense that guilt when, over a half century later, he recounts the episode of her death to Joseph in his blessing of Ephraim and Menashe *While I, when I came back from Paddan, Rahel died on me, in the land of Canaan* (48:7). What does that mean? *On me* means - more likely, *because of me*. A more audacious instance of *Sheol* is located in Jonah's prayer from the belly of the

whale: *From the belly of Sheol I cried out* (Jonah 2:3). Why would Jonah have thought himself in *Sheol*? Because he fled from fulfilling what God had asked of him, and he perceived himself to be guilty and unworthy of being rescued. As in many cases of *Sheol*, he thought he was going to die in an unnatural way, and only when he was coughed up did he realize that he was kept alive so as to fulfill the mission that God had charged him with in the first place. Finally, Psalm 6, (which is part of the daily Tahanun-penitential prayers) includes this line (v. 6): *in Sheol, who can acclaim You?* Here the supplicating penitent is beseeching God for forgiveness, and while he still has the chance to avoid divine punishment, he proffers that he will not be able to offer God any praise or thanks from the depths of *Sheol*. With Jacob, Jonah, and Psalm 6, as well as many other instances, the understanding is that only the wicked go to *Sheol* and they end up there because their lives are cut short by an untimely and often violent death. Which brings us to the presence of *Sheol* in the story of Korah. Notice that *they went down alive to Sheol*. Despite the assumption that they died upon being *swallowed up* the idea that one could actually live out one's eternal existence in an enclosed subterranean pocket of hell piqued fantastical allegories among our sages, such as this one in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 110a):

אָמַר רַבָּה בַּר בַּר חַנָּה: וַיֵּמְנָא חֲדָא הוּוּ קְאָלִינָא בְּאוּרְחָא, אָמַר לִי הָהוּא טַיִעָא: "תָּא, וְאַחֲרֵי לָךְ בְּלוּעֵי דִּקְרַח". אָוִיל, תּוּא תְרֵי בּוּעֵי דִהָהּ קָא נַקַּךְ קִטְרָא מִפְּיֵיהּ. שְׁקַל גַּבְבָּא דְעֵמְרָא, אִמְשִׁייה מֵיָא, וְאוֹתְבִיהּ בְּרִישׁ רּוֹמְחִיהּ, וְאַחֲלִפִיהּ הַתָּם, אִיתְרַךְ. אָמַר לִי: "אַצִּית מַה שְׁמַעְתָּ." וְשִׁמְעִית דִּהּוּ קְאָמְרֵי הָבִי: "מִשָּׁה וְתוֹרְתוּ אִמְת, וְהֵן בְּדַאִים".	Rabba bar bar Hana said: One time I was walking on the path, and a certain Arab said to me: Come and I will show you those from the assembly of Korah who were swallowed. I went and I saw two fissures in the ground from which smoke was emerging. That Arab took a woolen fleece and dampened it with water and placed it on the tip of his spear and passed it over the fissures there. The fleece was singed, indicating the level of heat there. He said to me: Listen; what do you hear? And I heard that this is what they were saying: Moses and his Torah are truth, and they, referring to themselves, are liars.
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So, according to Rabba bar bar Hana (a great storyteller if there ever was one!) Korah and his cohort are still alive in the desert (to this very day!). And for thousands of years, they have had to admit that they were wrong. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the true definition of *Sheol!*

Last question: Why is incense the substance that they use in the showdown? Good question. Incense is the most powerful substance in the sacrificial system. In the words of R. Beni Lau, *Incense is the non-conventional weapon in the Temple arsenal*. This is demonstrated by, among other things, the location of the altar of incense just outside of the Holy of Holies (mega-powerful), unlike say, the sacrificial altar which is located in the outer court (*meh*-not as powerful). Everywhere incense appears in the Bible it is associated with God's great power. Thus, later in this parasha, Aaron takes incense, the non-conventional and seldom-to-be-used ultimate power of God (life) to beat back the plague (death) that is raging in the camp. The right blend of incense is to the sanctuary what the proper level of purification of uranium is to a nuclear reactor. The right persons with the wrong incense (Nadav and Avihu) are incinerated; the wrong persons with the right incense (Korah and his cohort) are swallowed up alive.

אִישׁ נָר and *אִשׁ נָרָה*. Nadav and Avihu were incinerated because they brought an *אִשׁ נָרָה*-*strange fire (wrong incense)* to the sanctuary. Here, Korah goes to *Sheol* because, even though he had the right incense, he was an *אִישׁ נָר*-*the wrong person*.

SHABBAT SHALOM!