

Korah: The Fate of the Rebels and those who are Irredeemable
Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 6, 2024 30 Sivan 5784

The most dramatic moment of the story of Korah occurs when the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the rebels:

וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר
 לְקֶרֶחַ וְאֶת כָּל הָרִכּוּשׁ. וַיֵּרְדוּ הֵם וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַתִּכַּס
 עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיִּאָּבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקֶּהֱל. (במ' טז:לד-לד)

*The earth opened its mouth and swallowed up them and their households, all the human beings who belonged to Korah and all the property. So they went down, they and all theirs, alive, to **Sheol**; the earth covered them, and they vanished from the midst of the assembly.*

Was this an earthquake? A sinkhole? Where did they go? What happened to them? What is **Sheol**? Is it Hell? The Netherworld? What does it mean that they went down there **alive**? The first mention of **Sheol** in the Bible is in the story of Joseph. When **Jacob** receives Joseph's bloodied tunic, he refuses to be comforted and declares:

כִּי אֶרֶד אֶל בְּנֵי
 אָבִל **שְׂאֵלָה**! *I will go down to my son
 in mourning, to **Sheol**!* (Gen. 37:35)

Jacob is in such inconsolable agony, that he imagines that he will reside in **Sheol** forever. It is as if he is saying: *My life is a living Hell! I don't have to go to Sheol! I'm there while I'm still alive!* Where else do we see the term?

After years of childlessness, **Hannah** gives birth to Samuel. In her prayer of thanksgiving she says (1 Sam. 2:6):

ה' מָמִית וּמַחְיֶה,
 מוֹרִיד שְׂאֵלָה וְעֹלֵל. *God deals death and gives life,
 Casts down into **Sheol** and raises up.*

Hannah is offering a general observation that God redeems those who suffer. But it is also a specific reference to her years of suffering in the **Sheol** of her childless anguish.

When **Jonah** gets swallowed up by the **large fish** he says:

קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי
 אֵל ה' וַיַּעֲנֵנִי
 מִבֶּטֶן שְׂאֵלָה שָׁמַעַתִּי
 שְׁמִעַת קוֹלִי. (יונה ב:ג) *In my trouble I called
 to GOD, Who answered me;
 From the belly of **Sheol** I cried out,
 And You heard my voice. (Jonah 2:3)*

To **Jonah** the **belly of the large fish** is the **belly of Sheol**, a place of impossible confinement. However, he is very much alive there. Among many other references to **Sheol** is this one from **Psalms 30**, which we recite daily (Psalms 30:4):

ה' הֵעֲלִית
 מִן שְׂאֵלָה נַפְשִׁי
 חַיִּיתִנִּי
 מִקִּרְדֵּי בּוֹר. *O LORD, You brought me up
 from **Sheol**,
 gave me life
 from those gone down to the Pit.*

In that Psalm, the sojourn in **Sheol** is temporary; and the **Psalmist** is looking back at his experience, exalting in his rescue, redemption, or recovery. For **Jacob**, **Hannah**, **Jonah**, the **Psalmist**, the descent to **Sheol** happens while they are still alive. In each of those cases, **Sheol** exists as

a real place of awfulness, but also as a metaphor for their condition of deprivation, destitution, and spiritual devastation.

Jacob	Sheol is the misery of tragic loss.
Jonah	Sheol is the destitution of confinement
Psalms 30	Sheol is the state of catastrophic illness.
Hannah*	Sheol is the despair of childlessness.

We could say, using a contemporary example with which we have been consumed now for 274 days, that the hostages, those who are still alive, exist in a living Hell, their own personal literal and figurative **Sheol** as they are assumed to be held captive in underground tunnels in Gaza, unable to see the light of day. That would be the closest analogy to **Sheol** that we can think of. Thus, when the text says that Korah and the rebels descended to **Sheol** **alive**, **שְׂאֵלָה**, it makes sense from the perspective of the biblical imagination. **Sheol** is a place to which you descend, a confining place underground, where one nevertheless, remains alive, imprisoned, and unable to leave. The rabbis comment on this:

(וַיֵּרְדוּ הֵם וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם) חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה, יֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים חַיִּים וְקַיָּמִים עַד עַכְשָׁיו.	(So they went down, they and all theirs) alive , to Sheol ; There are those who say that they are still alive and endure until this day! (Bemidbar Rabbah 18:19)
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Which would be odd, to say the least. But it does inspire the imagination, as Rabbah bar bar Hana claimed to have actually heard the rebels screaming that Moses was right and that they were wrong! When you have to admit that you are wrong - for eternity! - you are really in a kind of **Sheol**! Assuming though, that they did die in the desert, would they yet be entitled to reside in the world to come? Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, weigh in on this:

Korah and his company will not be granted eternal life, and will not even be given a trial, as it says (Num. 16:33), The earth covered them, and they vanished from the midst of the assembly. These are the words of Rabbi Eliezer.

The rebels' crime was so serious and thus, they were so irredeemable, that they forfeited their right to a trial and their place in the World-to-Come, their **eternal life**. But **Rabbi Joshua said: בָּאֵין הֵן**-They will indeed have to



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. (San. 110a)

¹ 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

come to a trial! He tries to prove this by connecting the story of Korah to the verse in Hannah's prayer. Both use the word **Sheol**.

Here, (in the story of Korah) it says "**Sheol**": *They went down alive into "Sheol", with all that belonged to them* (Num. 16:33), and there (in the prayer of Hannah) it says "**Sheol**": *God casts down into Sheol and raises up* - If God can raise those who suffer up from **Sheol** as Hannah said in her prayer, God can also raise the rebels up from **Sheol** here in this story!² Contrary to R. Eliezer, R. Joshua thinks that a sojourn in **Sheol** is only temporary. When Hannah offered her prayer of thanksgiving she was making a general claim about God's salvation, even for those - like the rebels - who may have initially been undeserving of that salvation: *whenever God casts someone down to Sheol, he will eventually raise them up*. Thus, according to R. Joshua, when the rebels served out their punishment in **Sheol** they were eventually invited to the World-to-Come. The midrash continues with R. Eliezer's rebuttal:

If that is the case, then how do you interpret what is stated clearly in the text: *the earth covered them, and they vanished from the midst of the assembly?* That is, forever. Here is R. Joshua's response: *They may have vanished from the midst of the assembly of the Israelites in the desert in this world, but they did not vanish from the World-to-Come.*³ (Avot de-Rabbi Natan 36:2).

R. Eliezer:	R. Joshua:
The crime of the rebels was so severe that they were not given a trial, let alone, allowed into the World-to-Come.	The rebels indeed had a trial and were punished. While they remain buried in the desert, their souls were eventually allowed into the World-to-Come.

What are they arguing about? When someone *does not have a portion in the World-to-Come* it means that they are irredeemable. The rabbis offer a list of such people. For example, *חַבְרֵי בְּרִיּוֹת*-someone who humiliates another person in public, or *בְּתוֹרָה פְּנִים*-someone who has contempt for Torah.⁴ (The fact that the rabbis are not unanimous about who is "in" and who is "out" means that there's hope for us all!) Every era has its list of irredeemable deplorables. For example: do those Jews who served on the various Jewish Councils (Judenrate) or in the Jewish police during the Shoah, *have a place in the World-to-Come*? Do the kapos? In the early days of the State of



Israel, many of them were tried, but after serving relatively short sentences (~26 months), or none at all, they were more or less forgotten.⁵ Today we are engaged in a painful debate about so-called "**As-a-Jews**"⁶. Many of us believe that, in their detestable defense of Hamas rapists and murderers, the "**As-a-Jews**" are endangering the lives of Israelis and other Jews all over the world, and that they are irredeemable. Thus, not

only have they have forfeited their place within the Jewish community, they have forfeited their place in the World-to-Come.

Question to R. Eliezer:	Question to R. Joshua:
Can an irredeemable person ever gain entry into the World-to-Come? How honorable do you have to be in order to be allowed in?	Can an irredeemable person ever forfeit entry into the World-to-Come? How despicable do you have to be in order to be kept out?

The dispute between Korah and Moses was about power and leadership. It was political. Korah's challenge resulted in his death. According to R. Eliezer, Korah was irredeemable. R. Joshua, disagrees, and claims that Korah was allowed into the World-to-Come, alongside his political rival, Moses. What then, does this say about the World-to-Come? The World-to-Come is the ultimate safe-space where political and ideological rivals can transcend their differences and exist in harmony.⁷ Our idea of the World-to-Come, or Heaven, shapes the way live in the World-that-Is, or Earth. For those who want everyone to agree with them, Heaven is political and ideological uniformity. For those who value political and ideological diversity, Heaven is where we can debate and disagree with each other, find compromises and share in each other's lives. Ideological uniformity leads to totalitarianism. Ideological diversity inspires democracy, like the one we are living in, which after 248 years still strives to be a more perfect Union.

Mazel Tov USA! Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS DAY 274. WE PRAY FOR THE HOSTAGES AND THEIR FAMILIES. MAY THEY BE RESCUED FROM THEIR SHEOL. MAY GOD SHIELD AND PROTECT THE IDF IN GAZA AND NORTHERN ISRAEL WHICH IS UNDER RELENTLESS ATTACK.

² *מִה שְׂאוֹל שְׂנֵאמָר לְהֵלֵךְ מוֹרִיד וּמַעֲלֶה אֵף שְׂאוֹל הָאִמּוֹר כָּאֵן יִרְדּוּ וְנִשְׁתַּדִּין לְעוֹלָם* Literally: Just as it says there, with regard to **Sheol**, that God lowers and raises, so too, when it says **Sheol** here, it means that they descended and will eventually be raised up from there!

³ *מִתּוֹךְ הַקֶּהֱל אֲבָדוֹ. מִן הָעוֹה"ב לֹא אֲבָדוֹ*

⁴ Among many other forms of heresy and malevolence. See Pirke Avot 3:11 and Sanhedrin 10:1.

⁵ For a fascinating discussion of this, see Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators*. Cambridge: Bellknap Press, 2019.

⁶ A term coined by journalist Eli Lake to refer to self-hating anti-Zionist Jews who side with Hamas in the present war, and wish to dismantle the State of Israel; and who always preface their statements of opposition to Israel with the 'righteous' pronouncement, "As a Jew..."

⁷ American political history has many examples of political rivals who went on to become cordial friends: Thomas Jefferson and Johan Adams; Abraham Lincoln and William Seward; Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon; George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. George W. Bush and Barack Obama.