



“They and all that was theirs descended alive to Sheol” Man Was Created so that the Physical Body Would Return to the Earth and the Spiritual Neshamah Would Return Perfect to Its Creator Above

In this week's parsha, parshas Korach, it is fitting that we explore the supernatural punishment of Korach and his assembly. Moshe Rabeinu, the foremost of all the neviim elected to alter the laws of nature for the sake of their punishment. He decreed that the earth open up its mouth and swallow Korach and his entire assembly alive, as it is written (Bamidbar 16, 28):

“ויאמר משה בזאת תדעון כי ה' שלחני לעשות את כל המעשים האלה כי לא מלבי, אם כמות כל האדם ימותון אלה ופקודת כל האדם יפקד עליהם לא ה' שלחני, ואם בריאה יברא ה' ופצתה האדמה את פיה ובלעה אותם ואת כל אשר להם וירדו חיים שאולה, וידעתם כי ניאצו האנשים האלה את ה'.”

Moshe said, “Through this shall you know that Hashem has sent me to perform all these acts, for it was not from my heart. If these die like the death of all men, and the destiny of all men is visited upon them, then it is not Hashem Who has sent me. But if Hashem will create a creation, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they will descend alive to the abyss (“Sheol”), then you shall know that these men have provoked Hashem!”

HKB”H upheld Moshe’s decree in keeping with the rule of: The tzaddik decrees and HKB”H fulfills (enforces). For, it is written (ibid. 31): “ויהי ככלותו לדבר את כל הדברים האלה ותבקע: האדמה אשר תחתיהם, ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אותם ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל הרכוש, וירדו הם וכל אשר להם חיים שאולה ותכס. When he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their

households and all the people who were with Korach, and all the possessions. They and all that was theirs descended alive to the abyss (“Sheol”); the earth covered them over and they were lost from among the congregation.

They Descended while Still Alive to the Depths of Gehinnom

When the passuk records that Korach and his entire assembly descended alive to the depths of the earth, the implication is that their bodies and souls descended to the lowest level of Gehinnom. In the Gemara (B.B. 74a), Rabbah bar bar Chana recounts that he saw the place where Korach and his assembly were swallowed up by the earth: **“כל תלתין יומי מהדר להו גיהנם להכא כבשר בקלחת ואמרי הכי משה ותורתו אמת. Every thirty days, Gehinnom would return them to this spot, like meat in a cauldron (a turbulent, boiling pot). And they would proclaim thus: “Moshe and his Torah are emes.”** This is the implication of the passuk (ibid. 33): **“They and all that was theirs descended alive to the abyss.”** Rabeinu Bachaye comments:

“ירדו למדור אחרון של גיהנום, כי שבעה מדורין יש לה לגיהנום, ושואל הוא המדור התחתון, וכן כתוב (תהלים ט-יח) ישובו רשעים לשאולה כל גוים שכחי אלהים, ודרשו חז”ל (מדרש שוחר טוב שם) לדיוטא התחתונה שבשואל. ומה שאמר ישובו ולא אמר ירדו, ירמוז לתוקף היסורין שאין להם קץ, אחר שהם נאכלים באשה של גיהנום חוזרים ומתחדשים ככתחילה כדי שיהיו עוד למאכולת אש, וכן חוזרים חלילה לדורי דורות, וזהו לשון ישובו.”

They descended to the lowest level of Gehinnom. For, Gehinnom has seven levels; “Sheol” is the lowest level. And

so it is written (Tehillim 9, 18): **“The wicked will return to ‘Sheol,’ all the nations that forsook G-d.”** Chazal (Midrash Shochar Tov, *ibid.*) elucidated this verse as a reference to the lowest level of purgatory. The passuk states **“they will return”** rather than **“they will descend,”** alluding to the fact that the duration of their suffering is endless. After being consumed by the fire of Gehinnom, they return to their original state to be consumed by the fire again. This process continues, *chalilah*, forever and ever. This is the implication of the term **“they will return.”**

Additionally, Rabeinu Bachayeï writes:

“ויאבדו מתוך הקהל. מכאן שהבאים כנגד התורה ורוצים לעקור יסודותיה אין להם חלק לעולם הבא, וזה שאמר מתוך הקהל, כי כל קהל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא, ואלו אבדו חלקם מתוך קהל ישראל, וכן דרשו חז“ל בפרק חלק אמר רבי עקיבא ותכס עליהם הארץ בעולם הזה, ויאבדו מתוך הקהל לעולם הבא... והוא אבדן הגוף מן העולם הזה גם הנפש מן העולם הבא. ואף על פי שלא זכו להיות להם חלק לעולם הבא, והוא עולם הנשמות שלאחר המיתה מיד, באים הם לתחיית המתים, שכן דרשו חז“ל לעתיד לבוא חוזרים, שנאמר ה' ממת ומחיה מוריד שאול ויעל.”

“They were lost from among the congregation (“kahal”). From here we see that those who oppose the Torah and want to uproot its basic principles have no portion in Olam HaBa. This is the implication of the words “from among the ‘kahal’”; because the entire “kahal” (congregation) of Yisrael has a portion in Olam HaBa. These, however, lost their portion among the “kahal” of Yisrael. Similarly, in the chapter of “Cheilek,” Chazal elucidate (Sanhedrin 108a): Rabbi Akiva said: “The earth covered them up” in Olam HaZeh; “and they were lost from among the ‘kahal,’” in Olam HaBa . . . namely, the physical body perishes from Olam HaZeh and the soul also perishes from Olam HaBa. Even though they did not merit a portion in Olam HaBa--the world of the souls immediately after death; nevertheless, they are resurrected with the dead. For, this is consistent with Chazal’s elucidation (*ibid.*): They return le’atid la’vo, as it states (Shmuel I 2, 6): “Hashem brings death and gives life; He lowers to the grave (“sheol”) and raises up.”

We will endeavor to explain the profound significance of this severe punishment—the descent to “Sheol”—the lowest level of Gehinnom. After all, all *reshaim*, even those who died natural deaths at the hands of the Malach HaMaves, are punished with the fire of Gehinnom. As we have learned in the Gemara (Shabbas 33b): **“משפט רשעים בגיהנם שנים עשר חודש”**—

the sentence of *reshaim* in Gehinnom is twelve months.

There, they suffer greatly, as the Gemara explains elsewhere (Berachos 57a): **“אש אחד משישים לגיהנם”**—**fire is one-sixtieth of Gehinnom.** So, what exactly was the significance of Korach and his assembly’s unique punishment?

“And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, Who gave it”

We will begin our enlightening journey by reflecting on the purpose of an observant Jew’s life. In essence, his entire life is a form of preparation for the separation of his body and soul at the time of his demise. For, on the one hand, his physical body is buried in the ground, fulfilling the decree issued by HKB”H on mankind in the aftermath of the “cheit Eitz HaDa’as” (Bereishis 3, 19): **“בזעת אפריך תאכל לחם עד שובך אל האדמה כי ממנה -- by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread until you return to the ground, from which you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust shall your return.** On the other hand, the divine soul ascends upwards to its Father in Heaven.

First, let us introduce a valuable insight from the teachings of the brilliant author of the Ketzos HaChoshen, zy”a, citing the author of the Akeidas Yitzchak (V’Zos HaBerachah 105), in his introduction to the Shev Shemateta (10). He addresses the profound wisdom displayed by Shlomo HaMelech in his depiction of man’s death (Koheles 12, 7): **“וַיָּשָׁב הָעָפָר עַל־הָאָרֶץ כַּשֶּׁהָיָה וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב: -- and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, Who gave it.**

He explains that man’s purpose and ultimate perfection come at the end of his life when his two vital components separate from each other completely—without leaving the slightest remnant with the other . . . This perfection should also be sought after during one’s lifetime; one should not pursue or crave material things and should not be governed by them.

Yet, if his soul is drawn toward material desires, he should strive to separate them before his death; so that ultimately the physical dust will return to the ground where it was before it received a soul; likewise, the spirit will return to G-d, Who gave her without any physical component, as it says (Shabbas 152b): **“Give it back to Him like He gave it to you”**—i.e. with purity.

In truth, this separation is extremely difficult for people. For, in general, people are influenced by their material

needs and selves, seeing as they are constantly occupied with material matters, and its influence is overwhelming. Eventually, their souls and beings succumb to its power and influence. It becomes sweet (appetizing) and proper to them, until they love it dearly. Consequently, they cannot separate themselves from it in life or death. For, that physical force is none other than the Satan, who is the yetzer hara; it is dominant and entraps the soul. This, in fact, is the spirit of tumah that surrounds the dead.

Death by a Gentle Kiss Is Like Taking a Hair Out of Milk

Rabeinu Bachayeï concludes by remarking that it is for this reason that it is difficult for the souls of reshaim to leave their bodies. He is referring to that which we have learned in the Gemara (Berachos 8a):

“תשע מאות ושלושה מיני מיתה נבראו בעולם, שנאמר למות תוצאות, תוצאוֹת בגימטריא הכי הוּו. קשה שבכולן אסכרא נוחא שבכולן נשיקה. אסכרא דמיא כחזרא בגבבא דעמרא דלאחורי נשרא... נשיקה דמיא כמשחל בניתא מחלבא.”

Nine hundred and three types of death were created in the world, as it says (Tehillim 68, 21): “Death has many avenues (תוצאוֹת).” That is the gematria of תוצאוֹת. The harshest of them all is “askera” (a disease of the throat); the mildest of them all is “neshikah” (a gentle kiss). “Askera” is similar to thorns caught in a ball of wool that a person tries to pull out (just as it is impossible to pull out the thorns without removing some of the wool; so, too, when a person dies of “askera,” his soul is removed from his body in a painful manner)... “Neshikah” is similar to removing a hair from milk (it is an easy, painless process).

The author of the Akeidah provides us with an explanation. The souls of reshaim did not engage in spiritual endeavors during their lives, such as Torah-study and the service of Hashem. Instead, they attached themselves to the physical, material body, pursuing the senseless whims of Olam HaZeh. Therefore, when it is time for them to die and the soul must vacate the body, it is analogous to the ball of wool that is full of thorns. It is very difficult to remove the thorns; the wool must be torn to shreds to remove all of the thorns. In similar fashion, the soul must be torn to shreds forcefully and painfully to separate it from the material body in death.

This is in stark contrast to the souls of tzaddikim. Their souls and beings were not entangled with the material body, pursuing the senseless whims of Olam HaZeh. For, even when they were occupied with earthly, mundane matters, it was strictly l’shem shamayim. As the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 231) describes it, they were fulfilling the dictum of (Mishlei 3, 6): “בכל דרכיך דעהו”-- in all of your endeavors know Him and emulate Him. Therefore, when it comes time for the soul to leave the body, it is analogous to a gentle kiss; the soul vacates the body easily and painlessly—like drawing a strand of hair out of milk; it is effortless.

The Function of the Soul Is to Rule over the Body Not to Meld with It

It is with great pleasure and delight that we will now delve into the words of the Shev Shemateta (Intro. 40). He explains the remarks of the author of the Akeidas Yitzchak concerning the purpose of separating the body from the soul by explaining why HKB”H created man as an amalgamation of a body and a neshamah. As the Torah describes the creation of man (Bereishis 2, 17): “וייצר ה' אלקים את האדם עפר מן האדמה ויפח באפיו” **and Hashem G-d formed man of soil from the earth, and blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living soul.**

Here is what he writes: When man was first created, when the Creator assembled his various parts, He appointed him the field general in charge of creation. He placed the intellectual soul within his household as the mistress (in charge of the body); all of its functions would come and go according to her commands; she did not venture into the midst of those bodily functions. The soul stood alone in its domain; the physical, material functions stood alone correspondingly. They merely obeyed her orders. She was not an actual part of the body but merely a neighboring attachment.

In other words, man was created in such a manner that the soul would reign over the body. They were meant to coexist like good neighbors living together in close proximity—with each maintaining its own identity. Thus, the spiritual soul could reign over the body and direct it to study Torah and perform mitzvot. It could teach the body how to emulate the ways of the Almighty even when occupied with earthly matters: “בכל דרכיך דעהו”.

He continues: However, after being created, man did not safeguard his soul and it was removed from its authoritative

role as mistress over the body. Due to its evil ways and deeds, the spiritual forces and physical forces intermingled. The merging of the soul with the material resulted in a new creation with an evil nature. When man pursues his cravings to too great an extent, a new form and creature results; he is no longer part man and part corporeal; he is a new mixture.

Let us explain. If the physical body does not submit to the spiritual soul's control of its actions; if it pursues all the senseless whims and pleasures of Olam HaZeh; and it actually drags and involves the soul in its folly; the result is not symbiotic, it is not like two good neighbors standing side by side--"הרכבה שכנות". The relationship becomes "הרכבה מזגית"—they merge together to form a new being. Consequently, the ideal image of a man—consisting of two distinct components, a body and a neshamah—is lost. In its place, a new hybrid creature is formed.

The Shev Shemateta continues: The tzaddik, however, due to his good deeds and Torah-study is able to extract the soul from that mucky, material existence; thus, the body and soul coexist as good neighbors like the bodily limbs and organs such as the arms, legs, eyes and ears. They are composed of simple, bodily tissues, where each one maintains its own, original nature and characteristics. Even though, they function harmoniously within the body, their relationship remains that of good neighbors. Hence, the ultimate purpose is for the soul to return to G-d, untainted, as it was given, and for the dust of the body to return to its original source.

"אדם ובהמה תושיע ה"

With this in mind, the Shev Shemateta explains quite eloquently the elucidation in the Gemara (Chullin 5a) related to the passuk concerning the korbanos (Vayikra 1, 2): "אדם כי יקריב מכם קרבן לה', מן הבהמה מן הבקר ומן הצאן תקריבו את קרבנכם - מן הבהמה, להביא בני אדם שדומים לבהמה, מכאן אמרו מקבלין קרבנות." **"When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem, from the animals—from the cattle and from the flocks, you shall bring your korban"**--the passuk comes to include people who are similar in their actions to animals among those who are eligible to bring sacrifices; from here the sages derived that we accept offerings from the sinners of Yisrael so that they should return to the fold by means of teshuvah. In other words, the reason we accept offerings from sinners is implicit in the passuk. At the

time of their transgressions, they were behaving like animals; yet, when they perform teshuvah and return to the status of "adam," it becomes appropriate to accept an animal offering from them in lieu of a human offering.

Then the Gemara poses a question (ibid. 5b): "וכל היכא דכתיב 'בהמה גריעותא היא, והכתיב (תהלים לו-ז) אדם ובהמה תושיע ה', ואמר רב יהודה כהמה—**wherever the term "בהמה" ("animal") is used to describe a human being, it implies someone inferior; but it is written: "You save man and animal, Hashem." And Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: These are people who are clever in knowledge, yet conduct themselves humbly as though they were animals.** So, we see that the description "בהמה" is sometimes a positive, praiseworthy term. The Gemara answers: "התם כתיב אדם ובהמה, "הכא—there, what is written is "man and 'בהמה"; whereas here, the term "בהמה" is used alone. In other words, when a person is described merely as a "בהמה"—**an animal**—it indicates an inferiority quality; but when he is described as "אדם ובהמה"—**a man and an animal**—together, it indicates a superior, commendable quality.

The Shev Shemateta explains the Gemara as follows: Wherever it says "אדם ובהמה", it is positive and praiseworthy, because it indicates that the person has maintained the two distinct aspects of a human being and an animal—his neshamah and his physical body; each one is recognized as a separate entity. That is the implication of the passuk: "אדם ובהמה תושיע ה". On the other hand, when the two become intertwined and inseparable, the two become indistinguishable from one another; there is no longer a separate image of an "adam" with a soul and a separate image of a material being, the body. This new, foreign creature is merely a "בהמה".

Burial Purifies the Body from the Serpent's Contamination in Anticipation of the Resurrection of the Dead

Continuing onward on our enlightening journey, we will now apply the Akeidah's insight to Shlomo HaMelech's statement: "וישוב העפר על הארץ כשהיה והרוח תשוב אל האלהים אשר" **"and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, Who gave it.** This deserves further clarification. Indeed, the purpose of life is for the divine neshamah to return to its maker in a state of purity. What, however, is the purpose of the body returning to the earth whence it was created?

We learn the answer from the teachings of the Arizal in Ta'amei HaMitzvos (Vayeichi): "סוד קבורת מת... צריך שיכוונו הקוברים, שתתעכל כל אותה הזוהמא שנתערבה בנפשו בחטא אדם הראשון, שתתעכל בקרקע וישאר נקי." **The secret of burying the dead . . . it is imperative that those performing the burial have in mind that all of the contamination that polluted his soul due to the sin of Adam HaRishon be absorbed by the ground, so that it will remain clean (unpolluted).**

Let us explain this sacred concept based on the Gemara (Shabbas 146a). Through the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as," the nachash injected corruption and contamination into all of creation. Thus, the Arizal explains, this prompted HKB"H to decree that man and all creatures must die, so that the body would be buried in the ground. By burying the body in the dust of the earth, the nachash's sustenance, the body's contamination would be eliminated. The source for this idea comes from the Zohar hakadosh in the Midrash HaNe'elam (Vayeira 116a); it explains there that this purification process is an essential preparation for "techiyas hameisim"—when the body will rise pure and unpolluted, free of the nachash's corrupt influence:

"הקב"ה מעייל האי גופא תחות ארעא, עד דמתרקב כוליה ונפיק מניה כל זוהמא בישא, ואשתאר ההוא תרווד רקב ואתבני גופא מניה, ועד כען ההוא גופא לא שלים."

HKB"H places the body under the ground until it decays thoroughly and all the foul pollution leaves it; all that remains is that small amount of decayed material from which the body will be rebuilt; until such time, the body was not complete.

Thus, we learn that HKB"H's decree after the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as" (Bereishis 3, 19): "--כי עפר אתה ואל עפר תשוב" **for you are dust, and to dust shall your return**—was for the benefit of mankind and all of creation, because it was designed to eliminate the pollution and corruption of the nachash. Thus, at the time of "techiyas hameisim," man will be resurrected with an unpolluted body, free of all contamination. This will enable him to live eternally, as he was meant to do prior to the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as."

Korach and His Assembly Were Punished Harshly due to the Intermingling of the Body and Soul

We can now begin to appreciate Moshe Rabeinu's profound intent. He chose for Korach and his assembly a harsh but

fitting punishment: "וירדו חיים שאולה"—**they descended alive into the abyss**—to "Sheol." For, the soul that is adherent to the body is doomed to descend to the depths of Gehinnom. Their extreme jealousy drove them to incite all of Yisrael to rebel against their illustrious leaders—Moshe and Aharon. As a result, the dedication to the Torah and the observance of the mitzvot hung dangerously in the balance. They caused such a major flaw in the divine soul to the degree that it merged irrevocably with the physical body--"הרכבה מזגית".

Perforce, they could not perish like all other human beings, as depicted by the wisest of all men: **"And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God, Who gave it."** Instead, they had to descend alive to the lowest level of "Sheol," bodies and souls intertwined. For, their bodies could not be purified by the earth from the pollution of the nachash; and their divine souls could not ascend to the heavens above. Instead, their merged bodies and souls were judged together and sentenced to burn in the fire of Gehinnom, in the depths of Sheol.

We should note that this punishment exemplified the principle of "midah k'neged midah." For, our sacred sefarim teach us that the congregation of Yisrael are analogous to a whole human being. The leaders of Yisrael represent the neshamah; whereas the remainder of Yisrael represent the body, which is sustained by the neshamah. Here is how the Toldos Yaakov Yosef describes this phenomenon:

"ונראה לי שבא להודיענו דבר גדול, כי נודע כמו שיש באדם פרטי קומה של רמ"ח איברים ושס"ה גידים, והכל הוא רק בשר אדם ולא אדם עצמו, ונפש רוח ונשמה שבתוכו הוא הנקרא אדם, וכאשר זכרנו לעיל בפתח דברינו, כך בכללות אומה ישראלי שיש קומה של רמ"ח איברים ושס"ה גידים, וצדיקי הדור הם הנשמה חיות כללות הדור ההוא."

Man's body is made up of many component parts, including its 248 organs and limbs and its 365 sinews. They are all merely man's flesh but they are not the man himself. It is the three major elements of the soul—the "nefesh, ruach and neshamah"—within him that are called "adam"—man. Similarly, the general structure of the nation of Yisrael is comprised of 248 limbs and 365 sinews. The tzaddikim of the generation are its neshamah, supplying the life force for that generation.

The Chasam Sofer (Mishpatim) writes something similar: "ויודע שכלל האומה הוא בחינת אדם אחד וישראל שמו, וגדולי ישראל הקרובים **אלה הם בכחינת מוח ונשמה**—it is well-known that the nation as a whole is analogous to a single human being and its name

is Yisrael; the preeminent members of Yisrael, who are closest to Hashem represent its brain and neshamah.

Now, Korach and his assembly challenged the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, as the Torah reports (Bamidbar 16, 3): **וַיִּקְהֵלוּ: עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵיהֶם רַב לָכֶם כִּי כָל הָעֵדָה כֹּלֵם קְדוּשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם "ה' וּמְדוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל קַהֲל ה'-- They gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them, "It is much for you! For the entire assembly—all of them—are holy and Hashem is among them, so why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?"** We see that they attempted to incorporate and blend Moshe and Aharon—representing the neshamah of the nation—together with the whole of Yisrael—the body of the people—as if there was no difference between them. Thus, they created an enormous flaw in the soul that had merged inseparably from the material body.

With this understanding, we can understand very nicely Moshe's pronouncement to Korach and his assembly: **"Through this shall you know that Hashem has sent me to perform all these acts, for it was not from my heart. If these die like the death of all men, and the destiny of all men is visited upon them, then it is not Hashem Who has sent me."** In other words, if their death will be like the death of all men—whereby the body returns to the earth to be purified, and the spirit returns to G-d—it will signify that you were right; you had just cause for opposing Moshe, because he was not sent by Hashem; and he does not represent the neshamah of Yisrael.

On the other hand: **"If Hashem will create a creation, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them and all that**

is theirs, and they will descend alive to the abyss, then you shall know that these men have provoked Hashem!"

If they are swallowed alive into the depths of "Sheol," bodies and souls merged inseparably, it will prove conclusively that they were punished "midah k'neged midah." After all, they challenged Moshe and Aharon—the neshamah of Yisrael—arguing that they are no better than the rest of Yisrael: **"For the entire assembly—all of them—are holy and Hashem is among them"**—and they intended to integrate the neshamah of Yisrael with its body. Therefore, they were punished "midah k'neged midah"; their neshamah merged with their body and they descended alive as one to the depths of "Sheol."

Nevertheless, we know that HKB"H never writes anyone off! Therefore, they will be afforded a tikun at the end of days. As we learned, they were swallowed alive, body and soul integrated, to burn in the depths of Gehinnom. There, their screams can be heard on every Rosh Chodesh: **מֹשֶׁה: "אִמַּת וְתוֹרַתוֹ אִמַּת—Moshe and his Torah are "emes"!** Hence, we learned from the Gemara above and the commentary of Rabeinu Bachayei that they are destined to be resurrected and rise with "techiyas hameisim." For, the fire of Gehinnom will purify them rectify their fatal flaw; their bodies will return to the dust of the earth and their souls will return to their Father in Heaven. The Arizal, in Sha'ar HaPesukim, points out an allusion to this fact in the passuk (Tehillim 92, 13): **צַדִּיק כַּתְמִיר: "יִפְרֹחַ—a tzaddik will flourish like a date-tree.** The last letters of these three words spell **קִרָּה**, indicating that Korach will achieve tikun with the arrival of the future geulah—swiftly, in our times! Amen.

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