



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

### פרשת קרח תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Korach

## AN EPISODE FROM THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

In a most remarkable way, the Maharil Diskin explains the events of this week's *parshah* through a veritable potpourri (look it up) of *p'shat*, *remez*, *drash*, *v'sod* (literal, allusive, *midrashic*, and *kabbalistic* interpretation), *halachah* (civil and ritual law), and *aggadah* (homiletics).

### VARYING VOCABULARY

Eliciting substantial retribution, the rebellion of Korach left much destruction in its wake. The main players – Korach, Dasan, Aviram, and their 250 devoted followers – met with a horrible death (consumed either by the ground or by fire), while many others who had been swept up by the spirit of rage and grievance succumbed to a Divine plague. The devastation of the plague was halted when Aharon the Kohen ran with a fire pan of burning incense into the midst of the dying hordes.

Toward the end of this episode, the Torah records the total number of casualties: "And those who died in the plague numbered 14,700, aside from those who perished in the matter of Korach," (*Bamidbar 17:14*). We will yet return, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, to the significance of this number.

In the recounting of these events, the Maharil Diskin takes note of certain curious linguistic inconsistencies:

Twice it transpires over the course of these events that the masses congregated against Moshe and Aharon, causing Hashem to threaten to wipe out the unruly crowd. (Through their supplication, Moshe and Aharon succeeded in

averting the decree against the people the first time; after the second time, however, the plague was visited upon them.) Each time, Hashem instructed Moshe and Aharon to remove themselves from the midst of the congregation: "And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon ... 'Separate from amongst the congregation, and I will eliminate them in an instant,'" (*ibid. 16:20-1; repeated in 17:9,10*). However, in the Hebrew text, a different term for "separate" is used each time. In the first instance, the term *הַבְּדִלְוּ* is used; when instructing them the second time, the word *הִרְמוּ* is utilized instead.

When referring to the "congregation" in this *parshah*, the Torah usually employs the term *עֵדָה*. When recounting Aharon's "rescue effort" to halt the plague with incense, a different term is used: "And he ran into the midst of the *קָהָל*" (*ibid. v. 12*).

In addressing these discrepancies, the Maharil Diskin extracts some background information contained in the Mishnah. He understands the term *הִרְמוּ* as referring to the institution of *terumah*, one of the gifts separated from one's produce and presented to the *kohen*. The Mishnah (*Terumos 4:3*) records the *shiur* (recommended size) of the *terumah* gift, of which we find three options:

שְׁעוֹר תְּרוּמָה: עֵין יָפָה, אֶחָד מְאַרְבָּעִים... וְהַבְּיֹנוּתִית, מִחֻמְשִׁים. וְהִרְעָה, מִשְּׁשִׁים.

"The *shiur* of *termumah* is as follows: For one who gives with a good eye (i.e., most generous donor), the amount is  $\frac{1}{40}$  (of his yield);  $\frac{1}{50}$ th for the mediocre donor; and  $\frac{1}{60}$ th for the *ayin ra'ah* (cheapskate)."

As stated previously, the decree against the entire congregation was averted the first time. After

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the second time, however, Hashem decided the retribution was unavoidable. However, he did not exterminate the entirety of the people; rather, He felt that only a “representative amount” of the population would be extirpated. This – explains the Maharil Diskin – accounts for the usage of the *הַרְמוּ* term this second time around. When Hashem decided to visit the punishment, He chose to exact the penalty as a form of “*terumah*,” not all of the “produce,” but a representative percentage.

**MATH LESSON**

Which *shiur* of *terumah* was to be used for this purpose? Because of the gravity of the situation, and the resulting Divine anger in response to the people’s behavior, this period was referred to by Chazal as an *edan rischah* (time of burning, Divine wrath). As such, it was determined that the *terumah* to be taken from the lives of the people would be of the maximum *shiur*:  $\frac{1}{40}$  of the Jewish population. Since the census at that time had yielded a figure of 603,550,  $\frac{1}{40}$  of that total would equal 15,088 people.

(To be sure, the exact number comes out to 15,088.75. Regarding this remaining  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a person, we have a concept – based on a *pasuk* in Iyov [33:23] – that even one advocating angel against 1,000 accusers [or .1%] is enough to spare a person’s life. In our instance, this individual had a 25% volume of advocacy, so his life would surely be spared. As such, the number of those sentenced to be executed as a result of the Korach incident stands at exactly 15,088).

Recall that the Torah placed the final tally of those killed in the plague at 14,700, “aside from those who perished in the matter of Korach.” This latter group comprised a sum of 253 people (Korach, Dasan, and Aviram, together with the 250 stalwart associates), yielding a total of 14,953 casualties of the overall episode. Based on the “*terumah*” calculation, however, a full 15,088 individuals were supposed to perish. The tally above falls 135 people shy of the *shiur* of  $\frac{1}{40}$ !

The stunning conclusion of this tragic mathematical saga – according to the Maharil Diskin – is that this discrepancy accounts for the usage of the term *קָהַל*. Yes, 15,088 people had been sentenced to death for their sins – the largest “*terumah shiur*” of the nation’s population. Yet, before the full sum had been taken, Aharon – using the incense – was able to stop the plague prematurely. His efforts spared the lives of the final 135 individuals.

This fact is reflected in the language of the verse describing Aharon’s deed. “And he ran into the midst of the congregation – *קָהַל* – and the plague ceased,” (*ibid. v. 12, 13*). Note the *gematria* (numerical value) of this term: *ק* = 100; *ה* = 5; and *ל* = 30.  $100 + 30 + 5 = 135$ , the exact number of people who were saved by Aharon! For this reason, the Torah here substituted the usual term of “*eidah*” with that of “*kahal*.”

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