



Escape From Leadership and Controversy Parshas Korach

Kupalnik was a large city and peaceful town in the Bucovina province, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The rumor of the arrest of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin by the Russian Tsar spread quickly, even though most of the Jews of the city were not affiliated with the Chassidic movement.

My great-grandfather, Rabbi Mordechai Grossman, was the rabbi of the city; he was deeply admired by the entire community.

One night another rumor spread that Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin crossed the border during the night, escaping Russian persecution. My great grandfather understood this was a unique opportunity to host a righteous person, and went to seek him out on the beach, where the border ran. Their meeting was very exciting. They spoke of family history. Rabbi Israel talked about the hardships he had recently endured. Great-grandfather invited him to stay at his home. They quickly became close friends. My grandfather, whom I am named after, was a child at the time, and was present during their walks in the nearby forest.

During that time there was a dispute about Rabbi Israel's leadership. Someone in the community had spoken out against him. The argument rapidly deteriorated into a communal quarrel. My great-grandfather was on the losing side, and lost his position and livelihood as communal Rabbi. He became poverty stricken, but would not recant on his position.

Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin rebuilt his community at Sadigura. My great-grandfather would travel to him, but did not share with Rabbi Israel the adversity he had endured in his community, until one day he broke down and shared with Rabbi Israel all his difficulties and the debts he had accumulated. Rabbi Israel turned to my great-grandfather and said: "I see you have no debt in the world to come; and if you have no debt in the world to come, you have no debt in this world as well."

Our weekly parsha recounts the story of the rebellious Korach and his assembly. We learn from this incident many fundamental issues in Judaism. One of them is the significance of distancing oneself from a dispute.

In most cases, G-d enables the sinner to repent, but here Korach and his followers were punished immediately. He was punished severely for his disrespect for Moshe, the revered leader.

Ohr Hachayim, on the verse "And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you"¹ asks why for the blessings G-d is mentioned first, and for the curses the curser is mentioned first? He answers that G-d hastens to bless those who bless the righteous, but for the curser, G-d punishes him only after he curses so that he knows what he is being punished for, and hopefully others will learn from this.

We read two weeks ago about Miriam being punished for speaking wrongly about her brother Moshe. There too she was punished immediately for speaking negatively about a righteous person. Our sages warn us about this: "Said Rabbi Yehudah in Rav's name: He who despises a scholar, has no remedy for his wounds."² Why is there an option for repentance for all sins, but here we are taught that there is no remedy? Because G-d cherishes the respect of his righteous.

My great-grandfather returned home. When he entered the city he was surprised to find a delegation from the community who has come to ask his forgiveness and ask him to reassume his position as communal leader. The dispute did not subside completely, and so my great-grandfather moved to the land of Israel, settling in Tsfat. As a result of his desire to distance himself from all and any disputes my great-grandfather moved the Grossman family to Israel, thus saving the entire family and descendants from the future destruction of European Jewry.

¹ Beresheit 12:3

² Tractate Shabbat 119b.