



“With their congregation, do not unite”

Through the Study of Torah She’b’al Peh We Transform the Open Mem of מַחְלוֹקֶת into the Closed Mem of שְׁלוֹם

In this week’s parsha, parshas Korach, we read about the incredible chutzpah displayed by Korach and his entire assembly. They had the audacity to speak ill of and question the integrity of the preeminent Rav of Yisrael, Moshe Rabeinu. Hence, it behooves every Jew to learn a lesson from the harsh punishment HKB”H inflicted upon them. Here is the opening passage of the parsha (Bamidbar 16, 1):

”ויקח קרח בן יצהר בן קהת בן לוי ודתן ואבירם בני אליאב ואון בן פלת בני ראובן, ויקומו לפני משה ואנשים מבני ישראל חמישים ומאתים נשיאי עדה קרואי מועד אנשי שם, ויקהלו על משה ועל אהרן ויאמרו אליהם רב לכם כי כל העדה כולם קדושים ובתוכם ה' ומדוע תתנשאו על קהל ה'.”

Korach the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehas, the son of Levi, separated himself, with Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and Ohn the son of Peles, sons of Reuven. They arose before Moshe with men of Bnei Yisrael, two hundred and fifty of them, princes of the assembly, those summoned for meeting, men of renown. 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?”

When they refused Moshe Rabeinu’s appeal to make peace with them, this is the punishment that was chosen for them (ibid. 32): **”ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אותם ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל הרכוש, וירדו הם וכל אשר להם חיים שאולה ותכס עליהם הארץ ויאבדו מתוך הקהל, וכל ישראל אשר סביבותיהם נסו**

.”לקולם כי אמרו פן תבלענו הארץ. 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; the earth covered them over and they were lost from among the congregation. All Yisrael that was around them fled at their sound, for they said, “Lest the earth swallow us!”

Our sages of blessed memory expounded in the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 18, 4): **Come and see how grievous “machloket” (discord) is. For HKB”H blots out the memory of anyone who aids a “machloket.” For thus it is written (ibid. 35): “A fire came forth from Hashem and consumed the two hundred and fifty men.” Rabbi Berechyah said: How grievous is “machloket”?! For the heavenly court metes out punishment only from twenty years (of age) and above, and the court below from age thirteen. Yet, in the “machloket” of Korach, even day-old infants were burned and swallowed into the depths of the abyss; for it is written (ibid. 27): “With their wives, children and infants . . . (ibid. 33) They and all that was theirs descended alive into the pit.”**

This Passage Emphasizes the Importance of Avoiding Machloket

We will now introduce the eloquent words of the Pri Megadim in Teivat Gomeh (Korach) focusing on Rashi’s comment on the opening words of the parsha: **This parsha**

is expounded well. Now, the wisest of all men states (Mishlei 15, 23): **”דבר בעתו מה טוב”**—**and how good is a word at its appropriate time.** For instance, it is appropriate to learn halachos at their appropriate times—the halachos of Pesach before Pesach and the halachos of succah prior to Succos, and the like. **This parsha,** however, dealing with the reality of **”machloket,”** **”יפה נדרשת”**—is appropriate to be learned and taken to heart at all times, **since disputes are always prevalent.** It is human nature!

In Agra D’Kallah (Pinchas), he presents a teaching from his mentor and Rav, the esteemed Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminov, zy”a, interpreting the passuk (Bamidbar 26, 11): **”ובני קרח לא מתו”**—**but the sons of Korach did not die: Although Korach, who initiated the dispute died, nevertheless, the sons of Korach, his students, those involved in the dispute, did not die. For, in every single generation, there exists opposition from disputants to tzaddikim and those who behave properly.**

The Agra D’Kallah suggests an addendum to his Rav’s teaching. We are informed that **”the sons of Korach did not die,”** so that we would pray not to be enticed by their likes in the Jewish community and not be drawn into disputes and controversy. On the contrary, we should strive to promote **”shalom”** among our fellow Jews, which portends everything good and positive. In the words of David HaMelech (Tehillim 34, 13): **”מי האיש החפץ חיים אוהב”** ימים לראות טוב, נצור לשונך מרע ושפתך מדבר מרמה, סור מרע ועשה טוב. **Who is the man who desires life, who loves days of seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn from evil and do good, seek shalom and pursue it.**

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by examining the opening passuk (Bamidbar 16, 1): **”ויקה קרח: Korach the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehas, the son of Levi, separated himself.** Based on a Midrash, Rashi comments: **It does not mention “the son of Yaakov,” because he (Yaakov) sought mercy for himself, that his name not be mentioned in association with their dispute, as it says (Bereishis 49, 6), “With their congregation, do not associate my honor.”** We

can explain the reason Yaakov Avinu pleaded not to be associated with the dispute of Korach based on what Yaakov says to his sons before passing away (ibid. 1): **”ויקרא יעקב אל בניו ויאמר האספו ואגידה לכם את אשר יקרא אתכם”** **באחרית הימים—then Yaakov called for his sons and said, “Gather together and I will tell you what will happen to you at the end of days.”**

They expounded the following in the Midrash (B.R. 98, 2): **He commanded them regarding disputes; he said to them, “You should all be one, united group.” . . . if all of Bnei Yisrael will band together as a single unit, they will have prepared themselves for the geulah.** The Yifeh To’ar explains that the passuk the Midrash quotes from Yechezkel (37, 16) and this passuk from Bereishis convey a similar message—that through unity, the Jewish people will merit the geulah at the end of days. Hence, when Yaakov Avinu foresaw via his **”ruach hakodesh”** the **”machloket”** instigated by Korach and his assembly, he prayed: **”With their congregation, do not associate my honor.”** Therefore, his name is not mentioned as part of Korach’s lineage at the beginning of the parsha.

The Machloket of Korach and His Assembly Was Not L’shem Shamayim

Let us elaborate based on what we are taught in the Mishnah (Avos 5, 17): **”כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקיים, ושאינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקיים. איזו מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי, ושאינה לשם שמים זו מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו.”** **Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure; but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. Which is a dispute that was for the sake of Heaven? Such was the dispute between Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the dispute of Korach and his entire assembly.** The commentaries endeavor to explain the significance of the statement **”will ultimately endure.”**

The Sefas Emes (Korach 5651) provides an explanation. The sages expounded in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b): **”מאי דכתיב לא יבושו כי ידברו את אויבים בשער. מאי את אויבים בשער, אמר רבי חייא בר אבא, אפילו האב ובנו, הרב ותלמידו, שעוסקין בתורה בשער**

אחד, נעשים אויבים זה את זה, ואינם זזים משם עד שנעשים אוהבים זה זה. **What is the meaning of that which is written** (Tehillim 127, 5): **“They shall not be shamed, when they speak with enemies at the gate.”** Who are the “enemies at the gate” referred to by the passuk? **Even a father and his son, a Rav and his pupil, who are engaged in Torah-study at the same gate; they become each other’s adversaries; and they do not vacate their positions until they make loving peace with one another, as it states** (Bamidbar 21, 14): **“That which was given at the Sea of Reeds”—do not read this as “reeds” but rather as “in the end.”**

Let us now interpret the Mishnah: **“Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure”—it will endure if there is unity characterized by love and shalom; “but one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure”—i.e., if this condition does not exist; if they lack shalom and harmony. Then the Tanna provides an example: “Which is a dispute that was for the sake of Heaven? Such was the dispute between Hillel and Shammai”—** their relationship and disputes were characterized by love and shalom. This is taught in the Gemara (Yevamos 14b): **“אף על פי שנחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל... לא נמנעו בית שמאי מלישא נשים מבית הלל ולא בית הלל מבית שמאי, ללמדך שחיבה וריעות נהגים.”** **Even though Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel argued . . . Beis Shamai did not refrain from marrying women of Beis Hillel nor Beis Hillel of Beis Shamai. This serves to teach you that they treated each other with affection and kinship, in fulfillment of that which is stated** (Zechariah 8, 19): **“Love truth and shalom.”**

Next, the Tanna provides an example of the opposite type of “machloket”: **“And which was not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the dispute of Korach and his entire assembly.”** For, as we know, their dispute with Moshe and Aharon did not end in keeping with the passuk **את** “והב בסופה”—with brotherly love and peace. Instead, their fates were completely separate and opposite; Moshe and Aharon were granted eternal life and honor, while Korach and his assembly were doomed to eternal damnation and shame. Since the latter’s “machloket” was not “l’shem

shamayim,” it did not portend the outcome of: **“They do not vacate their positions until they make loving peace with one another.”**

Elsewhere, the Sefas Emes (5642) adds a tremendous chiddush. He wonders why the Mishnah describes the “machloket” of Korach and his assembly merely as **“not l’shem shamayim”**; after all, it constituted a severe aveirah. He writes that Korach was certainly prepared to be Aharon’s adversary and contest his role in the service of Hashem, but their relationship could have taken the form of the model of Shamai and Hillel—like the concomitant existence of fire and water in the heavens. This sort of division also exists among the people of Yisrael alluded to by the term כ’ל’י—an acronym for **kohanim, leviim, yisraelim**; all three are vessels with a unique role in the service of Hashem. The prerequisite, however, is that they negate their own personal agendas and act for the sake of Hashem; this is the peace and perfection resulting from “machloket.” But since Korach’s intent from the start was for the sake of self-aggrandizement and not l’shem shamayim, his “machloket” devolved into an aveirah.

Torah She’b’al Peh Begins with an Open Mem and Concludes with a Closed Mem

I would like to propose a fascinating explanation for Yaakov Avinu’s reluctance to be associated with Korach, prompting him to plead: **“בקהלם אל תחד כבודי”**—do not let my honor be besmirched by his assembly. Let us refer to what the great Rabbi of Ropshitz, zy”a, writes in Zera Kodesh (Bo). He explains why Rabeinu hakadosh began the Mishnayos with an open **“mem”** (Berachos 2a)—**מ’אימתי**—**קורין את שמע בערבין**—and concluded the Mishnayos with a closed **“mem”** (Oktzin 3, 12)—**לא מצא הקב”ה כלי מחזיק ברכה**—**אלא השלום, שנאמר ה’ עוז לעמו יתן ה’ יברך את עמו בשלום”**.

He asserts that an open **“mem”** is related to speech. When a person articulates the letter **“mem”**—**מ**—he begins by opening his mouth (lips) and concludes by closing his lips (mouth). He points out that the gematria of **מ** equals the gematria of the letter **“pei”** (80), alluding to the mouth—**“peh.”** By beginning the Mishnayos with an

open “mem” and ending them with a closed “mem,” the sages are teaching us that once you have finished learning Torah, you should shut your mouth—akin to articulating the letter “mem.” He adds that if you do not close your mouth immediately, chas v’shalom, the yetzer hara can insert itself between the two “mems.” In other words, you might start speaking prohibited things. This is alluded to by the word **מִצְרִים**—where the letters of the word “yetzer” separate the open “mem” from the closed “mem.”

The Significance of the Name שלום According to the Maharal

I would now like to spice up this explanation as to why Rabeinu hakadosh began Torah she’b’al peh with an open “mem” and ended it with the closed, final “mem” of “בשלוים”. In Netivot Olam (Netiv HaShalom 1), the Maharal of Prague discusses at length why the term “מחלוקת” begins with the letter מ, whereas the term “שלום” ends with the letter ם. He explains that there is a breach in the floor of an open “mem”; this signifies that as a negative consequence of dissention and disputes—“machloket”—harmful, disruptive forces are able to enter into the fray through this breach. In contrast, a final “mem” is fortified with intact, closed walls on all four sides. This signifies that external, negative influences cannot breach the walls of someone possessing the midah of shalom.

He points out a surprising phenomenon: In the teachings of Chazal, “shalom” is called “shalom,” just as it is throughout Scriptures. Throughout Scriptures, however, disputes are referred to by the term “ריב”, whereas Chazal refer to them as “machloket.” Next, the Maharal explains the significance of each of the letters of the name “שלום”.

The first letter, “shin,” has three heads; one on each side and a third one connecting them; this alludes to the essence of shalom. A third party is necessary to settle the dispute between the two original dissenting parties. He writes that shalom is even more crucial in leaders, because they are responsible for the shalom of the people they govern. If shalom does not exist among

the leaders, the people beneath them will also be in a state of “machloket.”

Next, the “lamed”: It rises upwards representing the transcendent nature of shalom, rising higher and higher. There is nothing better than shalom; it is the goal and purpose of everything. When there is shalom among the people of Yisrael, they attach themselves to the One Who promotes shalom, Hashem.

The function of shalom resembles the closed “mem,” which has no openings; it is walled in on all sides. This differs from the open “mem,” which has an opening through which entry is possible. This indicates that shalom provides insulation from external, controlling influences—even from the Satan.

This is the nature of shalom. An entity that has shalom is complete without any breaches. As such, it is protected from others. This is alluded to by the term “שלום”, indicating its virtue, as explained. Therefore, Chazal referred to a dispute as a “machloket,” a term beginning with an open “mem” having an opening and a breach—the opposite of “shalom,” which is intact without a breach.

The Torah Possesses the Power to Transform the “Mem” of מחלוקת into the “Mem” of שלום

Since it is the nature of Torah to be elucidated in seventy various ways, we will propose another explanation for Rabeinu hakadosh beginning Torah she’b’al peh with the open “mem” of “מִאימת” and ending it with the closed “mem” of “בשלוים”.

We know that Torah possesses the unique quality of promoting “shalom” in the world. In the words of Chazal (Berachos 64a): “תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם”—**Torah-scholars increase shalom in the world.** We also have a passuk stating explicitly (Mishlei 3, 17): “דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום”—**her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are shalom.** This concurs magnificently with the Gemara cited above: “**They shall not be shamed, when they speak with enemies at the gate.**” Who are the “enemies

at the gate” referred to by the passuk? Even a father and his son, a Rav and his pupil, who are engaged in Torah-study at the same gate; they become each other’s adversaries; and they do not vacate their positions until they make loving peace with one another.

Thus, Rabeinu hakadosh conveys a vital message and lesson. Before engaging in the study of Torah she’b’al peh, a person lacks this powerful tool that promotes and increases shalom. This is the significance of the open **“mem”** at the beginning of the Mishnayos. Once, however, a person is meritorious and privileged to study and even complete all of Torah she’b’al peh, he is able to promote and increase shalom and unity. This is the significance of the closed **“mem”** at the conclusion of the Mishnayos.

Sealing the Breach in the Walls of Kedushah

Now, consider the ultimate purpose of the of the Torah. It was given to Yisrael to protect them like a walled fortress from leaving the confines of kedushah. It teaches a Jew right from wrong, what to do and what not to do. This is alluded to by the closed **“mem,”** which is enclosed on all four sides.

This concurs beautifully with how the Megaleh Amukos (Terumah) describes the four banners Bnei Yisrael travelled with in the midbar. They surrounded them on all four sides **like a closed “mem.”** In keeping with this discussion, the banners protected Yisrael like a walled fortress, shaped like the closed **“mem,”** to prevent the body of kedushah from being breached.

Unfortunately, the aim of the yetzer hara is to entice a Jew to breach the walls of kedushah. In the words of the wisest of all men (Koheles 10, 8): **“ובורץ גדר ישכנו נחש”—he who breaks down a wall will be bitten by a snake** (namely, the yetzer hara). Along these lines, the navi says (Yechezkel 7, 22): **“ובאו בה פריצים וחללוה”—and lawless people will come into it and profane it.** When, chas v’shalom, the walls of kedushah—represented by the closed **“mem”**—are breached, it becomes an open **“mem,”** with an opening in its floor. This represents one’s involvement with earthly

desires rather than heavenly spiritual pursuits; hence, symbolically, the breach is in its bottom segment rather than in its top segment.

We can suggest that this is why HKB”H gave us the Torah while requiring Moshe Rabeinu to remain in the heavens forty days and forty nights. This was meant to teach us that the Torah was given to Yisrael to serve as a walled fortress for Yisrael’s protection—resembling the closed form of the letter **“mem,”** whose numerical value is forty. This can also be seen as the rationale for punishing one who violates the commandments with forty lashes (Devarim 25, 2): **“ארבעים יכנו—he shall strike him forty times—forty lashes for breaching the wall of kedushah represented by the closed “mem” (40).**

Now, this enlightens us as to why Rabeinu hakadosh chose to begin Torah she’b’al peh with an open **“mem”**: **“מִן־אִימַתִּי קוֹרִין אֶת שְׁמוֹעַ בְּעַרְבֵינִי”**, and to conclude it with a closed **“mem”**: **“לֹא מִצָּא הַקֶּבֶ”ה כְּלִי מִחֻזִּיק בְּרִכַּה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲלֵא הַשְּׁלוֹם, שְׁנֵאמַר”** **“ה’ יברך את עמו בשלום”**. This illustrates once again that the Torah, which was given to Yisrael over a forty-day period (“mem” days), is designed to protect us like a fortified wall, resembling a closed **“mem.”**

Therefore, Rabeinu hakadosh cleverly began Torah she’b’al peh with an open **“mem,”** indicating that the purpose of engaging in Torah study is to repair the breach in the wall of kedushah—represented by the opening in the bottom segment of the **“mem.”** If, however, we are fortunate enough to engage in Torah study, then at the completion of our studies, when we reach the closed **“mem”** at the end of Torah she’b’al peh, we will have successfully repaired the breach in the wall of kedushah.

I was pleased to find support for this wonderful explanation in the commentary of one of the Rishonim, Rabeinu Bachayei (Bereishis 47, 28). He comments on the fact that we find two instances in Tanach of “mem”s that do not follow grammatical protocol. In this first passuk, we find a closed “mem” in the middle of a word (Yeshayah 9, 6): **“לְפָרְבָה הַמְּשֵׁרָה וְלִשְׁלוֹם אֵין קֵץ”**—**upon the one with the greatness in dominion and the boundless peace.** The

second letter of the first word of this passuk is a closed “mem.” On the other hand, we find an open “mem” at the end of a word in the following passuk (Nechemiah 2, 13): “ואהי שבר בחומות ירושלים אשר **הַמַּ** פרוצים”—**I contemplated the walls of Yerushalayim which had been breached**—the last letter of the word “הַמַּ” is an open “mem.”

Rabeinu Bachayei explains these two anomalous “mem”s based on a Midrash: Currently, during this time of galus, the walls of Yerushalayim are open, because they have been breached. When the breaches will be sealed, the greatness

and dominion of Yisrael, which is currently concealed, will become apparent to all. In other words, the open “mem” in the words “הַמַּ פרוצים” alludes to the fact that the walls of Yerushalayim have been breached and are currently open. The closed “mem” in the words “לפַרְבֵּה המִשְׁרָה” teaches us that when the walls will finally be sealed, the greatness of Yisrael, which is currently concealed, will be apparent to all. The walls of Yerushalayim are the walls of kedushah; it is our obligation to seal the breach and restore the integrity of the closed “**mem.**”



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