

PUMPING UP THE SITRA ACHRA

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

[Moshe] spoke to Korach and to his entire assembly, saying, "In the morning Hashem will make known the one who is His own and [who is] the holy one. He will be able to draw close to Him. And whomever he will choose, He will draw close to Him.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Korach's claim had been egalitarian. Other groups may have needed leadership to preside over people of different accomplishments, talents, and resources. The Jewish mission statement, however, focused on *kedushah* – and there was so much of that to go around, that no leader was required. Korach thus argued that "the entire assembly – all of them! – are holy."^[2] There was no need for a top-down power arrangement.

Not so, responded Moshe. There is *kedushah*, and there is *kedushah*. You are correct in sensing the *kedushah* shared by all of this magic generation of Bnei Yisroel, said Moshe. But that level is insufficient for the kind of relationship and closeness that we should seek to develop. Firstly, we need to find people who are truly given over to Hashem in their entirety. The greater levels of *kedushah* are reserved for those who hold nothing back from Him.

Furthermore, even those special enough to have been chosen as those drawing closer to Him need further elevation. The ascent to *kedushah* is so steep, that there are peaks that you have not yet imagined. Those who want to draw closest – and have been chosen to be in range for it, having acquired great *kedushah* as a precursor – will need for Hashem to draw them closer. Only that way can they achieve complete shedding of their material selves, and negate themselves to Him entirely. (Note that this is born out by the subtle difference between the two instances of drawing close in our *pasuk*. The first verb is *hikriv*, while the second is the more direct *yakriv*. The sense of this is that some people achieved exemplary levels of *kedushah* – beyond that of the rest of the nation. Moshe's work succeeded in bringing people to those levels. They, chosen by G-d, would be able to fit into the role of those drawing close. Impressive as this is, it remains insufficient. Hashem wants to propel people to even higher levels. Thus, some of the special ones who are chosen to have His Name associated with them require further elevation. This would come from Hashem actively drawing them closer yet, to the point of full self-negation.)

When the people absorbed this message, they understood that Moshe's leadership had nothing to do with his ego needs. Those didn't exist. They understood what made Moshe unique – how he renounced every purpose on earth other than rising level after level.

"They would gaze after Moshe."^[3] Remarkably, Chazal^[4] explain this as meaning that they all suspected their wives of liaisons with Moshe. Having come to a deeper understanding of the specialness of Moshe's *madregah*, we can explain what they meant.

All the *neshamos* of Klal Yisroel are interconnected; what people do affects all others. The role of the very greatest *tzadikim* is categorically different from others. Their *kedushah* is so intense, that the opposing forces are specially drawn to it. Ordinarily, they cannot gain any foothold. But the slightest *aveirah* of the *tzadik* affords an opportunity for the forces of *tumah* to establish a beachhead in his *neshamah*. From there, they are able to cause much greater damage in the more vulnerable souls of the common people. The slightest sin of the *tzadik* can thus lead to more major failing on the part of the rest of the people.

The inverse is also true. Lots of serious aveiros on the part of ordinary people will lead to small imperfections in the luster of the *neshamah* of the *tzadik*. This is the idea behind Chazal's comment on Hashem's terse instruction to Moshe informing him of the *aveirah* of the Golden Calf: "Go, descend."^[5] They explain^[6] that Hashem meant, "Both you and they are part of a precipitous descent from a previously high spiritual plateau."

With this understanding in mind, we can understand an entire genre of statements Chazal make, comparing a smaller *aveirah* with a major offense: Whoever does X is as if he worshipped idols, or consorted with a married woman, etc. We often have a hard time comprehending what X has to do with much more serious offenses! Our approach offers us a novel solution. When a great person commits *aveirah* X, it allows the *Sitra Achra* to gain traction in the rest of the nation. This leads to the most serious of transgressions – with the *tzadik* partially to blame for offering the welcome mat to the forces of evil! When the Bnei Yisrael "gazed after Moshe," they believed that his position of authority over the people was fueled in part by his growing ego. This perceived *ga'avah* opened the door to the *Sitra Achra*, which was able to infuse the people with a spirit of *arayos*/ forbidden relations. That spirit was just sufficient to make men jealous of their wives. (The proper understanding of the words of Chazal is that each person became suspicious of his wife consorting with other men – and this suspicion all came "from Moshe," i.e. from the *ga'avah* they perceived in him.

In truth, of course, there was no pride. The Torah tells us^[7] that Moshe was the most humble of men. His ruling over the people had nothing to do with his own ego, and everything to do with the need for a strong leader to bring people closer to Hashem. Moshe, in his humility, thought that the people had been correct! He therefore assumed some of the blame, and asked Hashem to blot out his name from the Torah.^[8]

The same dynamic plays out in our *parshah*. Confronted by the rebels, Moshe initially thinks that they were justified! Perhaps his ego really was involved in the discharge of his responsibilities. For this reason, he falls on his face^[9] - in prayer for forgiveness for his role in this episode. Only after

Hashem commands him to leave the assembly so that He can destroy them^[10] does Moshe come to grips with his absolute innocence in the matter. He then asks to make this clear to everyone else: "Through this shall you know that Hashem sent me to perform all these acts."^[11]

^[1] Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar 16:5

^[2] Bamidbar 16:3

^[3] Shemos 33:8

^[4] Sanhedrin 110A

^[5] Shemos 32:7

^[6] Shemos Rabbah 42:2

^[7] Bamidbar 12:3

^[8] Shemos 32:32

^[9] Bamidbar 16:4

^[10] Bamidbar 16:21

^[11] Bamidbar 16:28
