

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

As Korach's challenge to Moshe reached its crescendo, with all parties prepared to offer incense - G-d's dearest form of service - on the morrow, Moshe beseeched G-d not to be swayed by the sweetness of the offering of Korach's followers. "This [Dasan and Aviram's refusal to respond to Moshe's overtures for peace] distressed Moshe greatly, and he said to G-d, 'Do not turn to their gift-offering!'" (Bamidbar/Numbers 16:15) Moshe was concerned that Divine acceptance of the rebels' incense offering would vindicate their treachery.

Why did Moshe give this service any consideration? The incense to be offered was unsanctioned, a form of service that brought death to Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu (see Vayikra/Leviticus 10:1-2). Surely a similar fate awaited these men; Moshe even warned them of such a consequence. Furthermore, the service was to be performed as a step in the challenge to G-d's command to the Jewish nation to follow the leadership of Moshe as the political leader and chief prophet of the Children of Israel. Moshe himself had declared that this would be the test to disprove the veracity of Korach's claim. Why was Moshe concerned that this empty, deceitful service would have any consequence?

The Alter of Kelm (Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv; 1824 - 1898; Of the three leading students of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Ziv was the one who Rabbi Salanter expected to carry on the movement; he shunned positions and titles and devoted his life to Rabbi Salanter's teachings) explains that this episode reveals the awesome powers contained within the sincere service of G-d, whether the sacrificial order of old or contemporary prayer services. Moshe realized that even their service could be accepted, thereby effectively validating their rejection of Moshe and the Torah, a step that Moshe feared would serve to negate the authority of the Torah (Heaven forbid). By extension, WE possess the awesome power harnessed in our prayers for the salvation of the Jewish nation. True, we continue to be mired in our Exile, but the number of challenges avoided and trials rescinded as a result of our prayers is incalculable.

Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna (1890 - 1969; successor to Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel [Alter of Slabodka] as the spiritual mentor of the Slabodka Yeshiva; moved the Yeshiva from Europe to Chevron in 1925 and, following the 1929 Chevron Massacre, to Jerusalem; later assumed position of Rosh HaYeshiva/Dean) similarly questions those who believe that their prayers fall on "deaf ears" and are ignored. Granted we have yet to witness the ultimate redemption, but we cannot begin to estimate, posits Rabbi Sarna, how many otherwise harsher decrees have been softened by the tearful

supplications of G-d's children. On the other side, Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon/Maimonides) states in the Laws of Fasts: "One who does not cry out [for Divine mercy on a fast day] displays his cruel nature." Rabbi Sarna notes that the non-suppliant is not called "evil", but "cruel". When a person finds himself in a situation of challenge for which there appears to be no natural course of resolution, his estimation of the situation awakens his heart and stirs him to cry out to G-d with all of his heart and soul. Because the distress touches him or his loved one, he genuinely appreciates that he has no one upon whom he can rely other than G-d in heaven. If, indeed, he would react this same way for communal challenges just as he does for personal challenges, the outpouring would most certainly originate in the depths of his soul. To not identify with the communal need on a personal level - to lack the genuine sense of identification with his "brother's" pain - is to possess a lack of sensitivity akin to cruelty.

We look at the problems in the world around us - the butchery of civil wars in Africa, the carnage of terrorism, the poor and hungry in our own cities, the personal suffering of families in our own congregations - and we think, we feel, we "know" that we cannot make a difference. Our teacher Moshe feared the awesome power of a simple Jew's heartfelt, tear-filled prayer. As we contemplate the awesome power inherent and imbedded within our spiritual potential, we are comforted by the knowledge that we do, indeed, impact and shape history. Whether it is a confrontation between nations halfway around the world or a crisis faced by our next door neighbor, our prayers make all the difference in the world.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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Kol HaKollel is a publication of the Milwaukee Kollel Center for Jewish Studies 5007 West Keefe Avenue; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; 414-447-7999