

LIFE IS LIKE A LADDER...

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And they gathered against Moshe and Aharon, and they said to them, 'it is too much for you; for the entire congregation, they are all Holy, and G-d is among them -- why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of G-d?'" [16:3]

We see that Korach praises the people of Israel. Moshe does the same, saying "would that all of the nation of G-d were prophets." [11:29]

Yet, as a Rabbi once pointed out, there are important differences between the praise of Moshe, and that of Korach. Moshe says "would that...", while Korach declares that they are indeed all Holy. Moshe speaks about the "nation of G-d," those who are truly dedicated to G-d, while Korach says "the entire congregation, they are all Holy." While it is true that every Jew is imbued with Holiness, not every Jew manifests that Holiness equally well. There can indeed be evil people within the congregation, as G-d Himself says later [16:21], "divide yourselves from among this evil congregation."

When Korach declares that the entire nation is entirely Holy, this tells us that he has lost sight of true Holiness. If he sees no need for Holy leaders for the Holy nation, it is because he can no longer distinguish between the Holy and the profane. And since he is unable to distinguish between the truly Holy and that which merely appears Holy, he ends up opposing the Holy: Moshe and Aharon.

A European Rabbi once commented that "American Jews know how to make Kiddush, but they don't know how to make Havdalah." Havdalah is the prayer said at the conclusion of the Sabbath and holidays, and the word means "distinguishing." The blessing praises G-d "who distinguishes between the Holy and the profane." American Jews, he said, know how to declare things Holy, but not how to distinguish between that which is, and that which isn't.

This penetrating remark is certainly no less accurate today than it was fifty or sixty years ago, when it was originally said. In the hurry to develop an image of Judaism which is "personally meaningful," people have declared "sanctified" most any activity which Jews wish to undertake, no matter how contrary to 3300 years of Jewish tradition. They say the Grace after Meals on a bacon double-cheeseburger.

When people do not observe some aspect of Judaism, but they recognize that this is, in fact, not Jewish observance, then they retain the ability to "make Havdalah." They know what is Holy, whether or not they actually observe it today. If, however, someone declares the profane to be sanctified,

then that person has fallen into the congregation of Korach, and is blinded to that which is truly Holy. Like Korach, he or she will quickly find him or herself not merely doing something which is not Holy, but declaring his or her position to be superior, more moral, to Holiness itself.

We are all struggling with ourselves, all striving to be better, to come closer to G-d. If we are not, Heaven forbid, then we are slipping away. Life is like a ladder: without effort, one naturally descends. No one can judge another for his or her struggles -- who knows where we would be in the same situation. Yet we cannot lose sight of the need to make Havdalah. After all, we must be certain that we are struggling to go in the right direction!

Good Shabbos,

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