

# LIVING AND LEARNING

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

*"They gathered together against Moses and Aaron, and they said to them, 'you have taken too much for yourselves, for the entire nation is comprised of holy individuals, and G-d dwells among them - why, then, have you lifted yourselves above the Congregation of G-d?'" [16:3]*

This is what Korach and his group said to Moshe and Aaron. And you know what? For much of what he said, Korach was right: the Jewish people are indeed a holy nation, designated to serve G-d. All of us have a connection to G-d as human beings, and the Jewish people have a special responsibility and special connection as His Nation, the recipients of His Torah. As Korach put it in the original holy tongue, all of the nation are "Kedoshim," which means holy and also distinct, designated. We have a purpose to fulfill.

This, however, does not mean that we have no need for guidance. To say that because everyone is holy, everyone can decide for themselves what is correct, makes no sense. We need guidance, and teaching.

The best way to learn to use or program a computer is to simply try various things, with a manual close at hand. If something doesn't work, you just try something else. This approach works well because computers provide instant feedback -- if something doesn't work, you know very quickly. In addition, assuming you are working on a development platform, there are no major consequences if something fails. Do-it-yourself learning is a fine approach -- yet even so, one always benefits when we can ask advice of others with greater expertise.

Now imagine trying to learn to practice medicine the same way. If someone came in with a serious ailment, we would simply try one medicine after the other until one appeared to work. How many patients would die before we got it right? The feedback is not fast enough, and the consequences of wrong decisions are too grave, to attempt such an approach. In medicine, careful training and expert guidance are that much more important. One who approached this field with the arrogance of a hacker would be a murderer!

In spiritual matters, we are not sufficiently in touch with the higher realms to recognize immediate feedback from our actions. According to Jewish thought, there are certainly immediate ramifications. When we do mitzvos, we create angels. But, and this is very important, we don't see them. We don't know.

Are we doing G-d's will, or not? How do we know? The answer, of course, is through our teachers.

The Torah guides us, but the Torah's wisdom is locked in a chain of tradition. If everyone decides how he or she will interact with G-d, then the result is no dialogue, but a monologue. Such a person ends up worshipping himself.

The Chapters of the Fathers, Pirkei Avos, teach us [1:6]: "Yehoshua ben Prachya says: make a teacher for yourself." This even precedes acquiring a friend or partner in learning and growth. Rabbeinu Yonah explains in his commentary that you should even acquire a teacher if you know as much as he. \_Make\_ someone your teacher nonetheless, he says, for a person is more likely to remember that which he has been taught, and may find that the other party has better understood a topic.

Moshe and Aharon did not lift themselves up; rather, G-d placed them in that position. The nation needed teachers, and we need teachers and guidance today, in order to rise to our full potential.

Good Shabbos,  
Rabbi Yaakov Menken

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