

BUDS, FLOWERS, AND FRUITS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In this week's sidrah, Korach, after the episode of Korach and his followers casting aspersions on Moshe's leadership and his choice of his brother Aaron as Kohen Gadol (High Priest), Hashem commands Moshe to once-and-for-all prove that He, and not Moshe, made the choice of who would serve Him. Hashem told Moshe to take from each tribe one staff, upon which the name of the leader of the tribe was to be inscribed. The tribe of Levi was to have their own staff, upon which the name of Aaron was to be inscribed. The staffs were to be placed inside the Tabernacle, in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting), *"And it shall be that the man whom I shall choose, his staff will blossom."* (17:16-20)

Moshe did as told, and the next day, when he entered the Tabernacle, he found that, *"the staff of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, had blossomed. It brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud, and had grown ripened almonds. (17:23)"* Moshe took the staffs and showed them to the nation, thus proving unequivocally that it was Hashem Who had chosen Aaron as Kohen Gadol.

Normally a plant buds, flowers, and eventually produces fruit. When the fruit begins to grow, the flower falls off the plant. If Aaron's staff had already produced fully ripened almonds, how did they know it had budded and flowered? The Talmud (Yuma 52b) explains that something special happened: In order that the Jews should bear witness to the fact that Aaron's staff had budded and flowered, the flower remained on the staff even after it had already produced the fully ripened almonds. Ritva (ibid) explains that although there is no practical use for the flower after the staff had already borne fruit, it remained in order to increase the magnitude of the miracle that had occurred. (There were, of course, many additional aspects to this miracle: Staffs don't usually bear fruit, the speed with which the almonds had grown, etc.) Moshav Zekeinim says that although the Gemara doesn't mention it, the buds too remained. Pardes Yosef adds that this may be the answer to the question of R' Chaim Paltiel, who asks that normally a plant buds and then flowers, whereas here it appears that the flower appeared before the bud. Perhaps, however, this too was a part of the miracle.

We may ask: Why was it so important that the Jews bear witness to the staff's budding and flowering? Was the miracle of a fruit-bearing staff not great enough on its own?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l says an amazing thought: Hashem wanted us to realize that there is value not only in the fruit, but even in the flowers and buds which proceed it. The fruit, he explains, is the end product; it is the final result of the process of tilling, sowing, watering, and harvesting. Normally,

we judge the success of our work by the fruit it bears. The process through which the fruits are achieved are at best secondary and of minor importance. In the context of actual fruits, this is to a large extent true. If, for instance, farmers were to come up with a method of growing wheat without first having to till the land, we wouldn't really care, so long as the final product did not suffer as a result.

This is not so, however, with regard to Torah and mitzvos. The buds and flowers - the effort we put into the mitzvah; the time, preparation, energy and enthusiasm - are just as important as the final fruit (mitzvah) itself. At times one may expend great effort to learn Torah or do a mitzvah, and in the end fail to achieve one's goal. Normally we would think of this as a great failure; after all, his labor did not bear fruit. Yet nothing could be further from the truth! Hashem is pleased not only by the results of our efforts, but even by the efforts themselves.

Why did the Torah choose to teach us the value of the "flowers and buds" here, in the aftermath of Korach's rebellion?

Perhaps part of Korach's fatal miscalculation was that he was too focused on the end result. "The entire assembly - all of them - are holy; so why do you elevate yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?" (16:3) Rashi explains Korach's objection: "We all witnessed the Revelation at Sinai!" In a narrow sense Korach was right; there was no essential difference between the experience of Moshe at Mount Sinai and that of the Jews. They all heard Hashem's word directly, without any intermediary. The end result - the fruit - was the same for all.

Yet for the Jews this was a gift. They had done little to deserve Revelation: Just seven weeks before, they had been mercifully removed from slavery in Egypt. Now they were being given the ultimate present; the Torah. They were adamant: If we are going to accept the Torah, then, "We want to see the King Himself! (Rashi Shemos/Exodus 19:9)" Their wish was granted, and they experienced direct Revelation.

Conversely, Moshe's experience at Har Sinai, although ultimately similar to that of the Jews, was in fact very different. Moshe had, in a sense, been working up to this moment his entire life. As a youth in Egypt he had defended the Jewish slaves. He had been the messenger of Hashem, who had inflicted the Egyptians with the ten plagues. He had led the Jews out of Egypt, and had split for them the sea. For Moshe, all of these were just preparations for the final step; the giving of the Torah. In a sense, Moshe's "Sinai fruits" were fully budded and blossomed; those of the nation were just "fruits on a stick." So yes, Korach, "you all witnessed the Revelation at Sinai" - the "fruits" all tasted and looked the same, but in fact they are incomparable.

How relevant is this lesson in today's day and age. We live in a society where all that matters is the "fruit." Our chickens are given hormones that make them grow fatter quicker. They are grown in coops that are lighted 24 hours a day, in order that they eat more and sleep less. Who cares - as long as our foods are better, fatter and cheaper. (And I dread to think what "genes" may be showing

up in our genetically-modified tomatoes!)

It is so easy for this attitude to trickle into our Torah and mitzvos as well. Once upon a time, one had to toil and labor to know the laws of Shabbos. Now, we just "look it up" in one of the many sefarim which easily and effortlessly summarize its laws. (I'm not, G-d forbid, knocking these sefarim; they serve a great need. I'm simply bemoaning the way we've grown accustomed to receiving everything we want on a silver platter!) The examples are endless. It's so easy to focus on the end product, and lose sight of the value of what it takes to get there. We must remember the inestimable value of the "flowers and buds" of our mitzvos, and not be seduced by the flowerless-fruits.

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