

A POTION FOR LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Moshe sent to call Dasan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav. They said, "We will not come up! Is it a small thing that you have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the desert, that you also make yourself a prince over us?!" (BaMidbar 15:12)

Chutzpah! What incredible chutzpah!

First of all, how dare Dasan and Aviram accuse Moshe have being responsible for the generation's dying in the desert! It was the spies in last week's parsha that forced G-d to cancel the trip to Israel for an extra 39 years, to allow that generation to die off in the desert.

Secondly, Egypt was the land that was flowing with milk and honey? Ouch! To reject Eretz Yisroel and choose to return to Egypt is one thing; but to steal the appellation meant for G-d's holy land and to apply it to the very land G-d rejected is the ultimate insult! What an affront! How many of us could withstand this and not give it to Dasan and Aviram, but good?

Even Moshe had enough at this point. They question is, why?

After all, though it had been Dasan and Aviram who saved overnight some munn after being told not to (Midrash Tanchuma, Tetzaveh 10), Moshe did not pray then for their demise. In fact, it had been their insolence that had caused Moshe to forget to tell the Jewish people about the special double portion of munn erev Shabbos, which earned him Divine wrath as well (Shemos Rabbah 25:2). Still, Moshe had let it go.

And before that, when the Jewish people had stood helpless by the shores of the Red Sea while the Egyptians waited to pounce on them, had it not been Dasan and Aviram who had sharply criticized Moshe, asking to return instead to Egypt (Rokeach)? Still, Moshe looked past that one too, and ignored Dasan and Aviram while focusing instead on saving the Jewish people.

And before even that, had it not been Dasan and Aviram who had forced Moshe to flee Egypt? The Torah tells us that Moshe, after watching an Egyptian taskmaster viciously beat a Jew, killed the Egyptian to save the Jew's life, a capital offence in Egypt. The Midrash tells us the Jew Moshe saved was none other than Dasan himself (Shemos Rabbah 1:31)!

Had Dasan been grateful? The Torah relates how the next day while Moshe was making his daily rounds to empathize with his suffering brethren, he found two men in this midst of a violent quarrel. The Midrash tells us that they were Dasan, and his brother-in-law Aviram. For breaking up the fight, the two responded:

"Who made you to meddle in our affairs!"

Dasan and Aviram didn't stop there either; in revenge, they reported Moshe to Paroah; this resulted in a warrant for Moshe's arrest and execution. To save his life, Moshe fled the comfort of Pharaoh's palace and went it to exile.

Clearly, Dasan and Aviram had it out for Moshe from the very beginning, even calling for his replacement as leader in last week's parsha. Yet, still, when the time had come to leave Egypt, Moshe had harbored no grudge against the two evil men, and brought them out of Egypt as well. Still, in each case of abuse, Moshe simply looked the other way and focused instead on the task at hand.

Why did Moshe show such forbearance? Rashi provides the answer in this week's parsha:

From here we learn that one should not persist in argument, for you see that Moshe sought them out to conciliate them with peaceful words. (Rashi)

Moshe was a man of peace, a leader who despised fights. This is what made it so painful for him when others, such as Korach and his followers, tried to engage him in argument. That is why even after all they had done to Moshe, including endangering his life on several occasions, Moshe still tried to make peace even with Dasan and Aviram.

If so, then the question becomes: Why did Moshe change his mind in this week's parsha, by responding to Dasan's and Aviram's refusal with anger? The answer is in Moshe's request to G-d:

"... Do not pay attention to their offering! I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I wronged them in any way!" (BaMidbar 15:15)

In other words, Moshe's anger was no longer on behalf of himself, but on behalf of G-d. Moshe could handle being insulted by Dasan and Aviram, even their cry to replace him as leader. Such verbal abuse and even death threats come with public office! However, what Moshe could not tolerate was their abuse of G-d, which came out loud and clear when they insulted Eretz Yisroel and praised Egypt, reversing, in effect, all that G-d had done for and promised them. Dasan and Aviram, in this week's parsha, had crossed the line for the last time.

(Their names actually meant: who disregarded the law (da'as) of G-d; Aviram: who hardened (lvair) his heart not to repent; Sanhedrin 109b; see Rashi on 17:3 as well.)

Thus, as hard as they had tried to upset Moshe and bring out the worse in him, Dasan and Aviram had failed each time. However, in this week's parsha, not only did they fail to bring out the worse in

Moshe, they succeeded in bringing out the best in him; they galvanized his trait of zealousness! It was as if Moshe was saying:

"You can talk that way about me and my promises, but you can't talk that way about my G-d, and His promises!"

This is what should happen to any G-d-fearing Jew when the holy Name of G-d is being profaned. Certainly, it is the way Jewish leaders should respond when the honor of Torah is being threatened, even if doing so risks making them unpopular in the eyes of their community.

I remember how once a disgruntled friend of mine complained to me about the local rabbis' over-zealousness to upgrade the kashrus of the town from which he came. He argued that their interference was causing a division in the community, and that this was proof they weren't true Talmidei Chachamim (Torah Scholars). After all, he quoted, "Torah scholars increase peace in the world ..." (Brochos 64b); these rabbis were only "disturbing" the local peace.