

BALD OUT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the grandson of Kehas, and the great-grandson of Levi; Dasan and Aviram, sons of Eliav; and On, the son of Pelet, descendants of Reuvain, began a rebellion against Moshe, along with 250 Israelites who were men of rank and distinction. They assembled against Moshe and Aharon and told them, "You take too much for yourselves. The entire congregation is holy and G-d is with them [too]. Why do you elevate yourselves above the people of G-d?" (Bamidbar 16:1-3)

L'shaim Shamayim -- for the sake of Heaven. This is the term, traditionally, that has meant doing an act without any selfish purpose whatsoever, except to make Heaven happy. It is the level of intention that the G-d-fearing Jew (which is what every Jew is supposed to try and become) is obligated to try and achieve in all aspects of life.

In other words, as important as it is to do the "right" thing, it is even more important to do that right thing for the right reason. For example, giving tzedakah is a mitzvah; giving tzedakah because this is what G-d expects us to do, is an even greater mitzvah, especially when no personal benefit is to be had.

Intention can be a tricky thing. Sometimes it originates from deep within our unconscious mind and at a time that we are barely paying attention, and therefore, we may not even be aware of our intentions until they find expression in the physical world. However, by that point, it may be too late for us to trace our intentions back to their source, and, we can come to believe that what we are doing is for Heaven's sake when, in fact, it is not really. In fact, it is amazing what people do "l'shaim Shamayim" (and I don't mean this in a flattering way).

We have a choice this week to view Korach and his followers as a bunch of hoodlums following an egotistical leader, trouble-makers in the worse sense of the word, and cheer for Moshe after the earth opens up and eradicates the evil from within the holy Jewish camp. That would certainly make life simpler, answering important questions such as, "How could they rebel against the great and humble MOSHE RABBEINU, especially with the Clouds of Glory enveloping the camp?"

The answer is, because they were completely selfish fools. Next question.

Ah, but life is seldom so simple. Fools, they were, in the end. However, in the beginning, they were

men of great stature, as was Korach himself. And once we admit that, then, we are left with the question all over again: How could they do it? How could Korach convince so many important people to rebel against Moshe Rabbeinu himself?

This time, the answer is, the "l'shaim Shamayim" factor. Korach, one can assume, made good points when presenting his case to those willing to hear him out. However, in spite of Korach's logic, getting so many prominent Jews to tow his party line was still a great feat, and, would never have happened had he not appeared l'shaim Shamayim.

For, one of the ways that we convince others that our convictions are true and worthy when they can't figure it out for themselves is by how sincere we appear when arguing our case. When it comes to fundraising, that is often very much the case; sincere people can do wonders at getting donors to give more money than they ever imagined they would. Somehow sincerity is associated with rightness, and counts for an awful lot when it comes to gaining and maintaining credibility in the eyes of others.

"I didn't intend to give so much, but he seemed so sincere. It was hard to turn him down."

Sincerity is one of the most powerful tools known to mankind. Winston Churchill used it to encourage and inspire the Allies to fight against Hitler and the Nazis at a time that their hope and pride had been at an all-time low. Hitler (yemach sh'mo v'zichro), used his intense sincerity to mobilize 50,000,000 Germans to spend unbelievable amounts of time, money, and energy, just to annihilate the tiny, innocent Jewish nation, and in the most inhumane ways as well.

And Korach, the Midrash says, used his sincerity to gather his own personal army against Moshe Rabbeinu in the desert.

The reason for the power of intention is, because, according to Kabbalah, it corresponds to the highest level of soul, Yechidah. There are basically five steps to carrying out an act, and they are:

1. Will to the perform something (Ratzon): Yechidah.
2. Original planning of how to execute to the will to perform (Hirhur): Chiyah.
3. Actual planning of methodology (Machshavah): (Neshamah).
4. Speaking about doing it, to make it real (Dibur): Ruach.
5. Actual performance of the act (Ma'aseh): Nefesh.

Another way to look at these five levels is as five levels of consciousness, ranging from the most sublime and subtle to the most base and obvious. Hence, the original intention of a person emanates from a very high level of soul, and therefore, is quite powerful.

However, in creation, there is the concept "zu l'umas zu" -- "this corresponds to this." What this means is that, for everything positive in the spiritual world, there is a corresponding negative reality.

We need this balance of power for the sake of free-will choice, without which one side would always prevail.

However, what we learn from this is that there can be "negative will" just as there is "positive will." Both are very powerful -- one positively and one negatively. It is our job in life to figure out which one is driving our decision-making process, because, both emanate from within, and both can appear, on the surface, as being pure sincerity for a G-d cause. That is, until G-d steps in and reveals the truth behind what we do, and why we say we do it.

Shabbos Day:

As he (Moshe) finished talking, the ground split under them. The earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up with their houses, and all the men who joined with Korach, as well as all of their possessions. All of them and their possessions went to the grave alive, and the earth covered them up. They disappeared from amongst the people. The entire nation surrounding then ran away as they heard their screams and said, "The earth will swallow us up!" A fire came from God and burned up the 250 men that offered incense. (Bamidbar 16:31-35)

It must have been quite a horrifying event to experience, not one that was easily forgotten after it was all over. And, when it was all said and done, barely a peep remained from Korach and his followers, save for the following, according to the Talmud:

Rabbah bar Bar Chana said: I was once walking the desert when an Arab merchant said to me, "Come, and I will show you the place where Korach was swallowed up." I saw two crevices in the ground from which smoke came out. I took a piece of wool, dampened it with water, put it on my spear, and placed it in the crevice. When I took it out, it was singed. The merchant said to me, "Listen! What do you hear?" I heard them saying, "Moshe and his Torah are true, and we are liars." The merchant told me, "Each thirtieth day of the month, Gehinnom turns them over here, as flesh is turned over in the pot, and they say, 'Moshe and his Torah are true, and we are liars.'" (Bava Basra 74a)

This little Talmudic passage, like most pertaining to stories told by Rabbah bar Bar Chana, makes one wonder. Was Rabbah being literal when he told this story, and if yes, where are those crevices today? According to Targum Yonason and the Ba'al HaTurim, they should be in the Negev somewhere, in the Paran Desert.

However, as of recent, no one has since reported any sitings of smoke rising from the ground, or voices calling out from the desert floor, "Moshe and his Torah are true, and we are liars." Did we simply lose the right to witness such a miracle, or, is the story one that is applicable even today, at

least morally-speaking.

The Talmud, elsewhere, records an entirely different, yet related discussion:

Jews who transgress Š go down to Gehinnom for twelve months, after which time their bodies are destroyed and their souls are burnt, and the winds scatter and turn their ashes under the souls of the righteous ... But as for deniers of Torah, betrayers, and heretics who deny Torah or resurrection; those who separate themselves from the community or who terrorize the living, or transgress and cause others to transgress, as did Yeravam son of Nevat and his "friends"-- they descend to Gehinnom and are judged there from generation to generation, as it says, "They shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men who have transgressed against Me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched." (Yeshayahu 66:24). Even after Gehinnom is destroyed, they will not be consumed ... (Rosh Hashanah 17a)

In this category, we can probably include Korach and his followers. Indeed, the Talmud clearly states:

The assembly of Korach will not go up in the future Š (Sanhedrin 108a, Mishnah)

-- implying that they, by engaging Moshe in rebellion, forfeited their right to the World-to-Come. And, certainly on the level of pshat, that seems to be the case for many Jews who allowed evil to drive them to the depths of rebellion against Torah and G-d.

After such a statement, and Jewish history, how many Jews will actually make it to the World-to-Come?

Fortunately, however, pshat does not have the final say in the matter, for, according to Kabbalah, not one Jewish soul will EVER be lost:

In the future, all evil will be destroyed and all punishment will come to an end, and not one Jewish soul will be lost; all will merit Resurrection of the Dead and life in World-to-Come. (Kadosh 46b)

Why? Because, as it says in the Talmud:

They [the Jewish souls] agree to the judgment pronounced on them, saying before Him, "Master of the Universe! It is good how You have judged us, good how You gave us merit, good how You found us guilty, good that You have made Gehinnom for the Evil and Gan Aiden for the Righteous." (Eiruvin 19a)

In fact, Rebi Akiva adds in praise of the Jewish people:

It is not enough that they (Jewish sinners) agree to their judgment, but, they even accept it upon themselves! ... When the Evil of Israel see the face of Gehinnom, they accept upon themselves the judgment of Gehinnom and break their hearts in teshuvah before The Holy One, Blessed is He, and with respect to them it says, "Close to Hashem are the broken-hearted ..." (Tehillim 34:19). Then they

are elevated and seated next to the Shechinah and they receive the reward for each transgression they had done [for which they did teshuvah and suffered], and they will be in the World-to-Come with the righteous and pious, and those who learned Torah and those who had faith. (Osios d'Rebi Akiva 8)

Hence, according to the deeper side of pshat, this is really the deeper meaning of:

Every thirtieth day, Gehinnom turns them over here, as flesh is turned over in a pot ... (Bava Basra 74a; Sanhedrin 110a)

In other words, this will not go on forever, but will serve the purpose of purging from Jewish sinners whatever damage was done as a result of each and every sin. It will not be an easy path to the World-to-Come for such people, but neither will it be an eternal one. There will come a time in the future when Korach and his fellow Jews, and all of the Jews throughout history who have been, and are now, like them, will be spiritually cleansed. For:

The Torah has promised that all of Israel will live forever, even if one has transgressed the most serious sin of idol worship, for which the punishment is no portion in the World-to-Come (as the Rambam states in Hilchos Teshuvah, 3:6 which is based upon the Talmud in Rosh Hashanah 17a). Even still, punishment will clear them of this, and not one soul will be lost from Israel, as the Vilna Gaon writes B'Ederes Eliyahu (Nitzavim 18). (Kadosh 45b)

Therefore, whether we can find those crevices in the Negev Desert and hear those voices, it doesn't really matter. Based upon the Talmud, and Rebi Akiva, we can be sure that somewhere, Korach and his followers -- throughout all the generations -- when faced with Gehinnom, are saying with great sincerity: Moshe and his Torah are true, and we are liars.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

The entire assembly of the Children of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon, saying, "You killed the people of G-d!" (Bamidbar 17:6)

As a human being walking the face of the earth, I can personally testify that few things sting emotionally as much as being told you are the cause of something you just worked so hard to avoid! And, if, in the process of trying to save someone's life with all that one had, he was later accused of killing that person, one might find it more devastating than can be handled!

Well, that's what the Jewish people did to Moshe and Aharon in this week's parshah, if you can imagine that! Moshe and Aharon, of all people! Aharon, who is called a "rodeif Shalom" -- a "Pursuer of Peace"; Aharon HaKohen, who so many times sacrificed his own life for the lives of his fellow Jews -- can anything be more absurd than to accuse him of killing his fellow Jews?!

Only one thing: accusing Moshe Rabbeinu of the same crime, for, as the Ba'al HaTurim records for posterity:

When Moshe came to the Appointed Tent to speak with Him (G-d), he heard the Voice speaking to him from over the Kapores on the Ark of the Testimony; from between the two K'ruvim He spoke to him. (Bamidbar 7:89)

From between the two K'ruvim: the first letter of each word (mem-shin-heh) form the word "Moshe," to tell you that Moshe was considered to be like a k'ruv Above. (Ba'al HaTurim)

It is amazing how the Torah's vision of Moshe Rabbeinu can be so different than that of his own people. Then again, if his own brother and sister, Aharon and Miriam, prophets in their own right, can make a mistake about their brother and leader Š

He (G-d) said, "Listen to Me. To the prophets among you, when I appear, I reveal Myself only in a vision, and speak in a dream. Not so with My servant Moshe, who is the most trusted in all My house. With him I speak face-to-face, while he is con-scious, and not in riddles; he has a true vision of G-d. How could you not be afraid to speak negatively about My servant Moshe?" (Bamidbar 12:6-8)

Now, the truth is (as Rashi explains), Aharon and Miriam had meant well, looking out for the best interest of their sister-in-law, Tziporah. Nevertheless, G-d reprimanded them, and questioned their lack of fear of speaking negatively about Moshe RABBEINU. And, if such great people as Aharon and Miriam, who had spoken about Moshe with the sincerest of intentions, were criticized for not biting their tongue regarding this great leader, how much more so must this be so for all subsequent generations, whose spiritual stature, for the most part, has decreased compared to the previous generations.

Torah leaders are not perfect, and, in true humility, they will be the first to admit this. However, possessing the best grasp of Torah in their generation, they merit Divine assistance, especially when it comes to community matters. Just as technology has allowed the average Jew to extend himself into areas of learning far beyond his present capability, Divine assistance allows the "gadol" to be make CORRECT decisions based upon his Torah learning, and then some.

Today, we are witnessing the complete humiliation of the Torah scholars of our generation. Not only are they not revered by parts of the Jewish community, but, they are also considered "fair game" by the secular Jewish press and legal bodies, and are often attacked.

"But of course!" a person may say, "the 'critics' are secular! If they don't believe in Torah from Sinai, then, they certainly are not going to have any respect for those who do, ESPECIALLY their leaders!"

However, though that may be true, it is a warning as well. For, in whatever way the outside world relates to Torah and those who follow it, it is really just an extreme expression of how we, on the "inside," relate to Torah and its leaders. Our own lacking in this area, as minute as it may appear to us on the outside, radiates outward and affects the outside world in a more dramatic, less constrained

way.

We have to be on guard and "fight" against the disgracing of Torah and its leaders wherever we can. However, when such a spiritual malady affects the world, we have to introspect as well, for, it is Heaven's way of talking to us and informing us that OUR level of respect for Torah needs to be improved. If we take this message to heart, and make the proper corrections, then, it will be THIS that will radiate to the outside world instead.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Give thanks to G-d, for He is good -- His kindness endures forever! (Tehillim 118:1)

So begins the next tehillah which forms a central part and last tehillah of Hallel. As one reads this psalm, he can sense Dovid HaMelech's feeling of relief, which, the Radak says, was the result of the death of Shaul HaMelech, whom, until his dying day, tormented Dovid. With the death of Shaul, a new era of Jewish history began, which, Dovid HaMelech perceived as being one improvement after another under his rulership, and he praised G-d for all of it.

However, close attention to the words yields an awareness that Dovid was not simply stating the obvious. In fact, he was referring to the inobvious, those troublesome moments in life when Divine Providence seems to work against a person, allowing one to (incorrectly) perceive Divine abandonment. Dovid HaMelech was addressing those moments in particular.

In fact, Dovid's own life was testimony to his point, and would continue to be so, whether he knew that then or not. His life had been anything but smooth, and he had encountered near-death on several occasions. Yet, somehow G-d always saved him, and he lived to witness his reversal of his fortune by becoming king after watching Shaul HaMelech die at the hands others instead. This had become tremendous inspiration to give thanks to G-d.

From the straits I called upon Y'ah; Y'ah answered me with expansiveness ... (5)

Dovid HaMelech was like the poor man who won the lottery. Almost overnight, his life had been transformed from "rags to riches" -- from outlaw to the law itself. Dovid's life had changed from fleer to chaser, for, he devoted himself to freeing his beloved Jewish nation of the Philistine enemy. He had gone from a man of few resources to one of many resources. G-d had truly answered him "with expansiveness."

Dovid's Messianic message: Just as it happened for me, it will happen for you too. At some time or another, it will happen for ALL of us.

It is better to take refuge in G-d than to rely upon man. It is better to take refuge in G-d than to rely upon nobles. All the peoples surround me; in the Name of G-d I cut them down. (8-10)

Well, one part of these verses are true today: All the people surround us, antagonize us, and seek our extinction, G-d forbid. Perhaps, if like Dovid HaMelech, we'd trust in G-d and not the "nobles" of the nations (who definitely aren't always so noble), then, maybe like Dovid HaMelech, we'd be unaffected by our enemies as well.

They encircle me like bees ... (12)

Yup, they sure do, don't they?

... But in the Name of G-d, I cut them down! You pushed me hard so that I would fall, but, G-d helped me. My strength and son is Y'ah, and He has been my salvation. (12-14)

Herein lies the point of exile, and enemy attack: To recognize that, without G-d, we do not last very long, individually, or nationally. Sure, one could look the proverbial "other way," and say, "Well, every nation has its problems and setbacks. Every nation has its politics and internal fighting. All other peoples have those who work together, and, unfortunately those who work against each other. Why should the Jewish people be any different, and why should we worry about the future based upon this?"

Because, says Dovid HaMelech:

Y'ah has great troubled me ... (18)

When WE, the Jewish people, have problems, be they physical or spiritual, they are not "natural," for, as the Kabbalists emphasize, from the beginning, we have not been a natural people. If we suffer, as individuals, or as a community, it is, WITHOUT FAIL, a message from G-d, and, or, "inspiration" to change something.

... But He did not let me die.

As Rashi points out, this is because any suffering we Jews go through is to spare us death, either in This World, the next world, or both. As they say, "You can pay us now, or pay us later, but pay us you must!" However, payment in This World is ALWAYS better than in the next one, though, perhaps more confusing, because it is hard to know the cause of anything during times that G-d conceals Himself.

The stone which the builders despised has become the cornerstone! (22)

If any posuk in this entire tehillah describes Dovid's underlying sentiments, it is this one. According to the Targum, even Dovid's own father, the righteous Yishai, held out little hope for his youngest son. He was given the ignoble and often dangerous job of tending the sheep out in the wild, and when Shmuel sought out in secret the new king of Israel from within the family of Yishai, no one even thought to summon Dovid to the special banquet.

Is this not the story of the Jewish people today? Once, one of the most respected nations on earth,

today, we are at best left alone, and at worse, laughed at, criticized, and attacked. The world does not appreciate Israel's role in the fulfillment of G-d's master plan, if they even believe in one at all!

There are two ways to cope with the situation. One way is to abandon our Jewish identity, blend in with the non-Jewish world, and hopefully, earn their respect for competing and surviving in their world. The bulk of the Jewish population has done just that.

The other way is Dovid HaMelech's: bide your time, stick to your spiritual guns, and wait for your day of vindication, because it WILL come. As one person aptly put it, it all depends upon who is despising you. If you are disliked by people who seek truth, practice truth, are humble, and above all, have fear of G-d, then you have to worry about their opinion of you. But if your critics share few or none of the above characteristics, then their criticism can only be viewed as a compliment, if you value truth and see closeness with G-d.

And, as Dovid HaMelech promised in this wonderful psalm of hope, if you stay with Torah and maintain your spiritual integrity until the end, eventually those critics will disappear all together. And, those that will still remain will instead grow to realize your centrality and importance to G-d. G-d will make sure of that.

Part of that loyalty means remaining faithful to the concept of the Final Redemption, expressed by our longing for it and revealed by our inability to enjoy exile too much. Every guest, no matter how well he is treated on his travels, eventually must yearn to return home. If he doesn't yearn to go home -- and the more he "can't" the greater the yearning should be -- it makes his hosts wonder what kind of home he came from, and what kind of family he has.

There can be, and are, many reasons why Korach and his followers rebelled against Moshe Rabbeinu, and met with their catastrophic end. One of them helps to explain why his rebellion followed on the heels of the spies' rejection of Eretz Yisroel, at least in the Torah (historically, Korach rebelled about 38 years after the spies came back from checking out the land).

Rebellions, for the most part, take place because of discontent with the present situation, and, as a result of a fear that the situation will continue well into the future. However, entry into Eretz Yisroel for Korach's generation was imminent, and the whole status of each and every Jew was about to change after crossing the Jordan River. Had Korach remembered this, he may never have felt the need to stand up against Moshe.

It is our failure to live with the imminence of the Final Redemption that has led many to abandon belief in it, and, which has allowed others to make long-term plans in a short-term place. Rather than bide our time, we are saying good-bye to our time ... our time when we can officially be called the "cornerstone" of G-d's creation.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

