

OUT OF LINE(AGE)

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

And Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehas, the son of Levi took... (Bamidbar 16:1)

Had it only said "And Korach took," we might have anticipated that the 'taking' had not been a positive one. However, once Korach's lineage is presented - and a powerfully spiritual one at that - we can only anticipate a positive taking. Thus, it comes as a shock to find out that in spite of the fact that Korach had such an illustrious lineage, and in spite of the fact that the Divine Presence hovered above, he still had perpetrated one of the worst coups in Jewish history, and might have succeeded had G-d not stepped in.

Therefore, this parshah is not simply a recounting of a black moment in Jewish history, it is a warning to all future generations about how even a person with great leadership potential can go astray and take many important people with him. Sometimes it can be the result of a bad upbringing, and sometimes it may have to do with the root of one's soul:

Korach, the son of Yitzhar was from the level of the Ruach of Kayin from the side of evil, as the verse indicates, "And Korach took" (Bamidbar 16:1). This evil Ruach of Kayin was enclothed within him, and therefore, he accused Hevel his brother, Moshe Rabbeinu. However, Yisro, though he too was from Kayin, as it says, "Chever the Kenite separated from Kenites (kuf-yud-nun)" (Shoftim 4:11), was from the level of good of Kayin. Therefore, he gave his daughter Tziporah to Moshe, was good to him, and fed him bread. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 33)

Sometimes, as in Korach's case, it is because of such an illustrious lineage that downfall occurs, as the Arizal continues:

Korach thought he had rectified Kayin the firstborn, and therefore he tried to overcome Moshe, who was Hevel. However, he had erred in this because the tikun of Kayin could not have come through Korach, since he was from his evil side. Rather, it could only come through his descendant, Shmuel HaNavi, who was also from the good side of Kayin. Chazal have said that Korach prophesized but did not know, because he saw a fire go out from him (Tanchuma, Korach 5). (Ibid.)

In other words, Korach came from great people, and great people were to come from him. Sandwiched between two sides of greatness, is it not safe to assume that one is also great, and

meant to become greater? Answers Parashas Korach, and history over and over again: NOT NECESSARILY.

For, we can't always relate to the full picture of who we are, for we are more than we have become. Furthermore, our spiritual roots have so much more to do with how we relate to reality than we relate to it. Rav Chaim Vital writes:

My teacher also told me that if someone is from the root of Kayin, which is from Gevuros and is called "fire," he becomes very animated and anxious when he sees water and enters it, since water extinguishes fire. Another sign is that he is quite afraid of Sheidim and Mazikim (Damaging Angels), since all the Mazikim came out from Kayin "in the land" as the Zohar says (Hakdamus HaZohar 9b). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 36, p. 112)

Perhaps that is also why Kayin, whose base is fire, felt compelled to kill Hevel, who 'comes from' water. Perhaps this is also why Korach, who came from Kayin, felt compelled to overpower Moshe, who came from Hevel.

In any case, we are warned. When taking up a position against leadership, particularly Torah leadership, one has to be certain about one's sincerity. One has to be cautious about his inner spiritual driving force, which may be compelling him to take action that may not be called for, and which may be the cause of his own spiritual downfall.

Shabbos Day:

G-d spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying, "Separate yourselves from this assembly and I will destroy them in an instant!" (Bamidbar 16:20)

Why? Couldn't G-d just destroy them without having Moshe and Aharon change their positions? Human beings, even sharp shooters can miss by a few millimeters sometimes and hit the wrong person, G-d forbid. However, if G-d could cause a fire to come out from the Holy of Holies and take out the souls of Nadav and Avihu while leaving their bodies intact, then surely he could wipe away Korach and his followers without bringing the slightest harm to Moshe and Aharon!

There are different parts to the answer of this question, but one of the main parts has to do with merits. Everything in creation comes down to merits, which has a direct bearing on what happens to us at any given moment in time. Sometimes, even though we lack sufficient merits to succeed or even survive, we can still come out on top because of our association with those who do.

Someone who was traveling by plane just after the World Trade Center was destroyed last September told me that he was afraid to fly. However, to calm himself down just before take-off he

would survey the passengers all around him and see how many religious people were flying with him. Even though he himself wasn't all that religious, he still felt that when it came to merits, the people praying three times a day and learning Torah instead of watching the movie, not to mention eating the strictest of kosher foods, had to bolster the plane's security.

True, the fact that one is religious is not always a tell tale sign of righteousness, as many not-so-religious people have often pointed out to me. However, as this person knew only too well, the performance of mitzvos still counts the most from the Torah perspective, and he felt a heightened sense of security seeing mitzvah-doers on his flight.

This is one of the powers of giving tzedakah and helping others so that they can do important mitzvos, like learning Torah. Even though the giver, if he were to stand alone and not give would become a lightning rod for the wrath of G-d, by helping others less fortunate than himself, especially those who learn Torah, he gains an added protection from bad things. His chesed builds a connection that serves both the recipient, and maybe the giver even more so.

However, sometimes the giver sins too much and needs to be punished, for his own good. Sometimes G-d wants to deny the giver a chance to remain protected because he abused life to the point that he must lose life. Or, sometimes G-d just wants to see if the giver really appreciates what he is doing and what it is doing for him.

In either case, G-d will create a situation that will force the benefactor of good causes to re-think his position, in order to decide his future involvement. The outcome may be that the giver once again justifies his involvement and increases his appreciation for the merit it brings to him, whereas other times the benefactor may feel emboldened to sever his connection and abandon the recipient.

In the latter case, the benefactor has to beware. If he is justified in doing so from Heaven's point of view, he has nothing to worry about; he has done the right thing. However, if he is NOT justified in doing so, that is, he has a distorted point of view or he is simply protecting himself against some other kind of backlash, then he may be saving himself some money but losing plenty of merit - merit that he may need at some critical moment in his life.

The heads of governments do not read this parshah sheet, as one would rightly assume. However, as a commentary on the situation today, one might point out: Europeans, watch out. As you pull your investment out of Israel in favor of others, you might consider that your savings are really your losses if Heaven disagrees with your motivation for doing so.

More internally, if the secular Israeli government decides to cut corners by denying those who need money to continue on with their Torah lifestyle before they lower the expenditure on other more frivolous commodities, they may be losing more than they are saving. Who knows if they are not severing ties to merits that have saved them countless times throughout the last five decades. With crises looming on the horizon and Divine judgment at hand, without the merit of supporting Torah either directly or indirectly, will they be able to survive?

Korach did not survive. Once G-d had Moshe and the righteous of the Jewish people sever all ties with Korach, it was as if the carpet was pulled out from underneath him, and he fell to disaster. All of us have to keep this in mind, so that we can keep a spiritual and physical hand in as many meritorious projects as we can. The state of the economy can be an excuse to cut back, as may be political associations. However, they have been created by Heaven to see on which side of the line we stand: on the side of merit, or on the OTHER side.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

For the tithe of the Children of Israel which they set apart as a gift to G-d, I have given to the Levi'im as an inheritance. Therefore I have told them that they will not receive an inheritance amongst the Children of Israel. (Bamidbar 18:24)

This is one of the mitzvos that is 'dependent' upon the land of Israel, applying only to produce that has been grown there. It is a positive mitzvah, one that instructs a Jew to separate out one-tenth of the produce after the t'rumah due to the kohen has been taken, and give it to a Levi. It is called 'Ma'aser Rishon,' the 'First Tenth.'

Thus, though the parshah began with Moshe saying,

"You have enough, sons of Levi!" (Bamidbar 16:7)

- still, they received more: financial support from the community that was backed up by G-d. What else could one ask for?

However, at some point in the future, they lost that too, as the Talmud relates:

Why did they fine the Levi'im with respect to the tithe? It is a point of disagreement between Rebi Yochanan and Savya: One says because they did not ascend in the days of Ezra, and one says in order that the kohanim should depend upon them during their days of impurity. (Yevamos 82b)

The Rambam takes a position with respect to this disagreement and decides:

Ezra fined the Levi'im in his time that they should not receive Ma'aser Rishon and that it should go to the Kohanim instead, because they (the Levi'im) did not ascend with him to Yerushalayim. (Hilchos Ma'aser, 1:4)

This took place after the Purim miracle, when Jews had permission to return to Eretz Yisroel during the rulership of Darius, and to rebuild the Second Temple - which was supposed to have been the FINAL Temple. In other words, post-Purim was a phenomenal moment in history when the time was right to bring history - ALL OF IT - to an end.

Why? Because, when Ezra tried to assemble the Jewish people of that time to return from exile and

rebuild the Jewish nation on their own land, he received a lukewarm response. It seemed obvious to Ezra that it was the will of G-d to return, in spite of the dangers involved - and there were great dangers involved - to Eretz Yisroel.

As mentioned before, according to tradition, the Final Redemption is supposed to 'begin' in earnest on Seder Night, and 'end' on Shavuos. This year saw a war begin on Seder Night when a terrible blast brutally murdered Jews sitting down to their own seder in a hotel in Netanya.

The next day the Israelis were well into Jenin and this country saw a level of war that has yet to be seen in this latest uprising. Seeing that the Talmud says that war is the beginning of redemption, the timing of the tragedy made it more ominous than the rest of the suicide bombings to date.

The war and the tension only increased with each passing day, as international criticism for Israel's 'incursion' seemed aroused. Even the American's were forced to publicly condemn the attack and call for restraint by the Israelis, even though they were only seeking out terrorists and cleaning up after themselves wherever they made a mess. They wouldn't even use Arab electricity to recharge their cell phones, though they did make sure to distribute sweets to the scared Arab children.

With the tension mounting and Shavuos fast approaching, one couldn't help but wonder if this was going to be the year after all, being the eighth year of the Sh'mittah Cycle as well. Even though things began to calm down, the Palestinians made a point of committing another horrible act of murder just in time to push the Israelis to enter Gaza, right before Shavuos.

Who knows where such an attack would have gone, but it had the potential to grow into something big, very fast, perhaps even on the scale of the War of Gog and Magog. Then, all of sudden, after much preparation, a series of bizarre events forced the Israelis to cancel their plans and go back home, having accomplished absolutely nothing in terms of warding off future terrorist acts.

Now, in retrospect, people wonder if that was an opportunity given to us on a silver platter to initiate a series of events that might have resulted in the Final Redemption. All reasons and excuses aside, it was a non-war, a non-event, one that required more self-confidence and conviction to carry out than the Israelis could muster.

No one in his right mind wants war. However, no one in his right mind wants to extend the exile either. This is especially true given what is coming up, and it does not look so promising.

We may not have the likes of Ezra around today, but history and current events themselves call us and ask us to ascend. The price of not responding is far greater than we understand and appreciate at this time.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Shabbas Mevarchin: Tammuz

It has only been three weeks since we celebrated Shavuot and the giving of Torah. Now, this week, G-d willing, on Sunday night to be precise, we will begin a new month, the Jewish month of Tammuz.

With the coming of Tammuz, we become acutely aware that the 'Bein HaMetzarim' (Three Weeks) period is fast approaching. It will begin with the day fast of Shiva Esrai B'Tammuz, and end with the 24-hour fast of Tisha B'Av. During the entire period we contemplate how spiritually lame we are without a Temple, and what happens to the Jewish people when we lose our way and stop relating to the ultimate goals of Torah.

Kabbalistically, it is the most dangerous part of the year for the Jewish people not because of what happened during history, but because of what happened just prior to history, in the year before creation. In fact, according to the Zohar, the second verse of the creation story is really the first one, out of order only to make understanding more simple.

In other words, 'tohu' and 'vohu' - null and void - was not the result of creation, but the other way around. It was from the chaos that preceded creation that G-d built the world as we know it now, making chaos a dangerous undercurrent in all of history.

What is 'tohu' (not be confused with 'tofu,' a soya product)? In the year prior to creation, it was a period of tremendous 'hester panim,' the hiding of G-d's hand in existence. Even the most chaotic period of history that we can recall does not compare to the spiritual chaos that existed at that time of pre-history, though it is rooted in it.

In fact, what we perceive as spiritual darkness and destruction is just an aspect of tohu that existed prior to history rearing its ugly head within history. And, what we called the 'yetzer hara' - our evil inclination - has its root in that awfully dark period of time, which indicates why G-d even allowed it to exist: to give rise to that which makes evil, and therefore free-will, possible.

The destruction of both Temples and of Jewish independence is the direct result of tohu. As long as both Temples had meaning, they had the power to keep tohu at bay, like a lion tamer who maintains the psychological edge over the lion he is training.

However, lose that edge by making the Temples superfluous, and the lion attacks, which in this case is the tohu. Since this is the undercurrent of history, it is also the recurring pattern of history. Three thousand years later from Mt. Sinai, we can testify to the veracity of that statement as we watch the wall crack once again and tohu seep into daily life.

The only solution is to make Torah and the Temples central once again. The only thing that can push tohu back to where it belongs, and even eliminate it, is the light of Torah and the Temples within which the Divine Presence used to dwell. To accept exile as a viable way of life is to send tohu a personal invitation to wreak havoc on mankind, and particularly the Jewish people, G-d forbid.

My we see the rebuilding of the Temple in our time, and the Final Redemption at long last.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston