

# ICY FREEDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*Korach... 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. Why do you elevate yourselves above the people of G-d?" (Bamidbar 16:1-3)*

Once again, there is rebellion amongst the ranks, and once again, G-d will intercede and put everyone in his place. It happens a lot throughout history, including Jewish history as well. You would think people would learn their lesson already, but it does not seem so. The same mistakes keep getting made over and over again. As they say, history repeats.

One of the main reasons, of course, is that, at the time, no one thinks that he or she is making the same mistake that others made before them. On the contrary, they usually feel emboldened by their cause, and backed up by a sense justice, of true right and wrong. Korach certainly felt this way until the ground broke beneath him and swallowed him up.

And, many of us look on and shake our heads and say things like, "Tsk, tsk. Won't we ever learn?" And the answer usually is, "Some of us yes, most of us, no." Just take a look at all the times we didn't learn, and here we go again. The Zohar says that anyone who speaks loshon hara about Eretz Yisroel is considered to be speaking loshon hara about G-d (Shlach 109b). But, does that stop anyone from bad-mouthing Eretz Yisroel these days? Not necessarily. Just as we often err regarding what is permissible to say about someone and what is not, people greatly err about what can and cannot be said with regard to Eretz Yisroel, and when it comes to loshon hara, the general rule is: When in doubt, do without — don't say it!

No wonder G-d took the episode of the Spies so personally; it WAS personal. He also took the complaint about the lack of meat and the manna personally as well, because it showed a tremendous lack of appreciation for G-d's Providence. And how much more so when they recalled the "good life" back in Egypt! Were they both masochistic and sadistic, or what?

"No, no, we aren't talking about the slavery..." Rashi explains they said. "We are talking about how we could eat food without making blessings, and get food without having to do mitzvot..."

In other words, what they enjoyed was the hefkerut — the complete openness of Egyptian society.

"What?" you are saying incredulously. "Egyptian society was anything but open," you are probably thinking. And you would be right, with respect to the Jewish people, who lived the life of the overworked slave. However, for the Egyptian, it was basically "do-as-you-please", completely open for everyone except the Jewish people. There were no demands in terms of belief, just as long as you paid the proper homage to the people in power.

A lot of good that did for the Jewish people! What point was there in reminiscing about the freedom of the society you came from if for you it was not free at all? If anything, they should have kept running away from Egypt, not talk about appointing a leader and returning back there. What were they thinking?!

They were thinking about the fact that they would not remain slaves forever. No one ever does, and if they waited long enough, they could join society, either through acceptance or through assimilation, but either way, they'd be free to eat without the need to make blessings or to worry about living a moral life. And now that the worst of Egypt was destroyed through the plagues and again at the sea, the opportunity to rebuild their lives in relative security, was more appealing than ever.

As absurd as it may sound, it is not so absurd. Even for a religious Jew, the looseness of the society he lives within can even work in his favor for a time. For, in a society that says, "To each his own", and "Do whatever you will, just as long as you don't impose your set of values upon me," there is room to be a frum Jew. In such a society that everyone is content to "live and let be," there is room to set up a sub-culture that maintains traditional Torah values, as long as doing so does not interfere with the lifestyle of others.

Of course, the only trouble with such a society is when it falls apart. For, once a society built up by hekerut goes through difficult times, it begins to look for scapegoats. And, since it was not a society built upon justice, there is no one to make sure that once people start lashing out at others, that there is some kind of mechanism to stop them, to keep them in place. It is usually at that time that the freedom the Jew once depended upon starts to disappear, and dark times arrive, often with devastating effects.

### **SHABBAT DAY:**

*The Children of Israel cried and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free, as well as the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Our spirit is weakened now because there is none of that — only manna!" (Bamidbar 11:-4-6)*

Over the course of 3,319 years since the time we left Egypt, the Jewish people have settled in many lands. In some places, it never went well for us, but in other places, it at least started off well for us before it ended off bad. However, in either case, it just goes to show how the Jewish people, during times of exile, can never be too sure about anywhere they may be living. If ever there was a nation that could justify its paranoia about living amongst the nations of the world, it is without a doubt, the

Jewish people.

Not that millions of Jews living in the Diaspora today feel any reason to be concerned. Many have been born into freedom, and during the golden eras in the countries in which they find themselves, few either know or take the long and blood-spattered history of their people that seriously. They don't deny it; they just feel that it was something that was possible only in the past, not in the present or future, not in societies as civilized, as the one they now live in.

The largest, and seemingly most secure of all Jewish communities outside of Eretz Yisroel, at this time, is the American community. Though America may not be as good to the Israelis as they have been previously, they are still quite good to the Jews who live there. Of all the diasporas that the Jewish people have ever lived in, the American one has probably been the best of all.

However, what is the basis of Western Jewish security (whether Canadian, British, or South African, etc.), for that matter? What is it, if there is anything, that makes the Jews of America feel so at ease with where they live, where they work, and their lifestyle, whether they are an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jew? You might get different answers if you ask different Jews across America, but perhaps one of the most prominent answers would be: American society is a just one.

The \$64,000 question is, is it? Is it really just a system as people would like to believe, one that is so engraved in stone that it can resist the temptation of the masses that easily revert to anti-Semitism when things go bad? There is no question that there is a system of justice in place, and that the American one is and was, a valiant effort at creating a fair and just society, especially at its conception. However, has it fulfilled its original mandate, and does it have the moral fortitude to withstand the greatest test of all the nations throughout the history of mankind: how will it treat its Jews towards the end of the exile?

The answer, if you check it out and think about it deeply and without bias is disappointing, but not surprising. Indeed, it seems that what benefits the Jew at this time is not so much the American legal system, as anyone who has become entangled in can testify, and as its history of loopholes, pitfalls, and conspiracies can bear witness to, but the openness of American society, the to-each-his-own aspect of the American lifestyle.

As Hollywood and American materialism reveals, not to mention the amount of emphasis on political correctness which permits, indeed, demands the corruption of ideas to suit the whims of those who corrupt those ideas to suit their purposes, American society is hefker, certainly by Torah standards, and it is this that has allowed two things to happen: millions of Jews to assimilate and intermarry, and those who remain committed to Torah, to continue on with their lifestyle with great success.

"Justice" implies more than just a legal system. It implies commitment to morality of which the laws of torts is but one aspect. To be a just society, you cannot talk out of both sides of your mouth, on the one hand seeming to keep the peace and prosecuting the "bad" guys, while at the same time rationalizing deeds against morality that are clearly against the Torah for the sake of money, just to

entertain others!

There is no question that America, and other Western countries have been great to the Jews, but for how much longer will they be? If the fun leaves Western society, what will happen to Jewish security? If true justice is not the ruling factor in Western society, where will the Jews of Western society turn when Western society turns against them? A hefker-based society can be either a great place of freedom or enslavement, depending upon which direction the political winds are blowing at the time.

### **SEUDAT SHLISHIT:**

*Eisav thought to himself, "May the days of mourning my father approach, [after which] I will kill my brother Ya'akov." (Bereishit 27:33:41)*

In 1898, the famous American humorist, satirist, writer, and lecturer, Mark Twain, wrote an article for Harper's Magazine called, "Concerning the Jews". In it, Mr. Twain addressed several points regarding the uniqueness of the Jewish people, and at the same time the inability of the gentile nations to show the Jew proper respect, to put it mildly.

However, it is worthwhile to see what prompted such a famous gentile to write an article that, in his day-and-age, could easily have brought trouble to his own personal life. Concerning the Jews begins as follows:

Some months ago I published a magazine article descriptive of a remarkable scene in the Imperial Parliament in Vienna. Since then I have received from Jews in America several letters of inquiry. They were difficult letters to answer, for they were not very definite. But at last I have received a definite one. It is from a lawyer, and he really asks the questions which the other writers probably believed they were asking. By help of this text I will do the best I can to publicly answer this correspondent, and also the others — at the same time apologizing for having failed to reply privately. The lawyer's letter reads as follows: "I have read 'Stirring Times in Austria'. One point in particular is of vital import to not a few thousand people, including myself, being a point about which I have often wanted to address a question to some disinterested person. The show of military force in the Austrian Parliament, which precipitated the riots, was not introduced by any Jew. No Jew was a member of that body. No Jewish question was involved in the Ausgleich or in the language proposition. No Jew was insulting anybody. In short, no Jew was doing any mischief toward anybody whatsoever. In fact, the Jews were the only ones of the nineteen different races in Austria which did not have a party — they are absolutely non-participants. Yet in your article you say that in the rioting which followed, all classes of people were unanimous only on one thing, viz., in being against the Jews. Now will you kindly tell me why, in your judgment, the Jews have thus ever been, and are even now, in these days of supposed intelligence, the butt of baseless, vicious animosities? I dare say that for centuries there has been no more quiet, undisturbing, and well-behaving citizen, as a class, than that same Jew. It seems to me that ignorance and fanaticism cannot alone account for

these horrible and unjust persecutions. Tell me, therefore, from your vantage-point of cold view, what in your mind is the cause. Can American Jews do anything to correct it either in America or abroad? Will it ever come to an end? Will a Jew be permitted to live honestly, decently, and peaceably like the rest of mankind? What has become of the Golden Rule?" (Concerning The Jews, Harper's Magazine, 1898.)

What astounded the lawyer was the fact that ancient anti-Semitism, which had often been associated with less-educated classes of European society, was able to ferment amongst those who had become quite educated. Furthermore, as the lawyer pointed out, fanaticism also could not be indicted as the sole reason for such extremism against a people who clearly caused the least amount of harm to society. In other words, according to any true system of justice, the Jew should have received a metal of valor pinned to his chest, not one smashed across his head.

Mark Twain offers some interesting insights, many of which might be considered secondary causes. However, if they had known the Midrash, they would have understood that the real basis for anti-Semitism, at least with respect to Eisav and all of his descendants over the generations spread throughout America, Europe, and Russia, is innate. They can't help it; the best they can do is be distracted from it, which is basically what Western society does when things go well.

That is not historical rhetoric; that is historical fact, if one spends enough time to find the thread that connects up all the anti-Semitism over the millennia, and when one realizes who the ancestors of Western society were. (Actually, I am writing a book about this now called, "On The Same Page". In the meantime, the latest book, "Be Positive Is More Than Just A Blood Type, It Is The Way of Life" is now available through my site at [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org)).

The only question is, is this still true? Or, has Western society finally evolved past the nature of its ancient beginnings, allowing, finally, intelligence to prevail over primordial urges? Is Western society's sense of justice, its sense of right-and-wrong so ingrained that it can be relied upon during the most grave situations? Has the Jewish American lawyer's question from 1898 finally been answered in the affirmative?

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*Moshe said, "Through this you will know that it was G-d who sent me to do everything, and that I have not acted of my own accord. If these men die naturally, sharing the fate of most men, then G-d has not sent Me. However, if G-d creates a new thing, and the earth opens up her mouth and swallows them up with all their possessions, sending them to their graves alive, then you will know that these men have rebelled against G-d." As he finished talking, the ground split under them. (Bamidbar 16:28-31)*

On the surface of it, Korach seemed like a hero to many in his camp. That is why he was able to marshal so much support from so many people. We, fortunately, get to see the story from G-d's perspective, through the eyes of the Torah, and from that perspective, it is clear that he never was hero. He was no champion of the people, even though he claimed to be working on their behalf

from the beginning.

What was Korach really after in the end? If he had succeeded in transferring the power of leadership from those whom G-d had chosen to the people in general, what kind of society would have resulted? A structured, well-disciplined society, or one that would have eventually descended to the depths of chaos? Judging from the Midrash's version of Korach's confrontation with Moshe in which he rejected many aspects of the Oral Law, it seems as if that was the type of society he was aiming for.

Even if Korach believed his talk of holiness, as if he had a better approach to setting up a holy society than Moshe Rabbeinu did, without the kind of structure G-d had Moshe implement, it would not have lasted long. Likewise, as much as the founding fathers of the U.S. Constitution may have wanted to create the ideal, moral society, without the structure offered by Torah for the gentile nations, under the guidance of Torah law, it could never have lasted, as amendment after amendment has proven, each one interpreting the original intention of the fathers in ways that clearly, the fathers had never intended.

Any system of justice established by people who do not believe in Torah, G- d, the World-to-Come, etc., cannot be reliable. That is man interpreting the law according to man, and man is certainly not reliable, except to cause the earth to open up underneath him, causing entire populations to be "swallowed up". The last great "swallow up" was six million Jews in the Holocaust, and given the appetite of people these days, given the crooked perspective of so many nations at this time, it seems as if the ground is shaking once again, looking to do some more swallowing. Eretz Yisroel may look dangerous, but it is G-d's special land, the one that He personally pays attention to. The miracles that happen here on a daily basis are innumerable. The Diaspora belongs to G-d as well, but He acts as if He does not pay as much attention to it, and it never hurts a Jew to ask, especially based upon our past history, "What is REALLY the basis of what I rely upon for my sense of security in the Diaspora, and can it really last forever?"

Have a great Shabbat,  
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