

# GUARD THE RIGHTEOUS ONES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*"You take too much upon yourselves, seeing that all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and God is among them. How then do you elevate yourselves above the assembly of God?"  
(Bamidbar 16:3)*

There is an interesting discussion that occurs in the Talmud between a Tzeduki (Sadducee) and Rebi Yehoshua, based upon the verse:

*The best of them is like a thorn; the upright is like a succah ... (Michah 7:4)*

According to the Talmud, the Tzeduki, paying attention only to the first part of the verse, argued that the best of the Jewish people are like thorns, obviously a negative thing. However, Rebi Yehoshua berated him for being so rash and told him to look at the end of the verse, which compares the upright to a protecting succah. Hence, the comparison to thorns is positive, as if to say: Just as thorns guard a breach, so do righteous people protect us (Eiruvim 101a).

What the Talmud means is that thorns can act as kind of naturally-grown barbed wire to keep out unwanted visitors when there is a breach in a wall. All a person has to do until he can fix the hole in his wall is stick some thorns in the actual hole, and predators and the like will be deterred, at least somewhat.

Likewise, the righteous people of the world can keep out evil decrees by virtue of their merits, effectively filling the breach in the national spiritual wall. Hence, even though the generation may deserve some form of Divine punishment because of its lack of spiritual achievements, the meritorious lives of the righteous people of their time can intercede on their behalf and mitigate the Divine wrath, just as Iyov did for his generation in his time.

From this may come a litmus test of sorts for a righteous people. And, even though we don't always know who the righteous people are in any given generation, since some of them hide from the public eye, certainly it can test those who proclaim their own spiritual greatness, such as Korach in this week's parshah, who said:

*Korach ... said to them, "You take too much upon yourselves, seeing that all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and God is among them. How then do you elevate yourselves above the*

*assembly of God?" (Bamidbar 16:1-3)*

But, Moshe Rabbeinu wasn't born yesterday, and he could see Korach and his argument this were heading. Korach may have been speaking about everyone else around him, but Moshe Rabbeinu knew that he was talking primarily about himself. So, he challenged Korach and those who followed him, as if to say, "Listen, Korach, if you are as great and righteous as you say you are, let's see if your merits can save you and your followers."

But, right on cue, crack went the earth, and down went Korach and his followers. It looks as if Korach was not as righteous as he claimed to be, because neither he nor his generation was protected from the Divine wrath:

*And it came to pass as he concluded his words that the ground under them opened up. The earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korach, and all their goods. They, and all that pertained to them, went down alive into the pit. The earth closed on them, and they perished from among the assembly. All Israel that were around about them fled at the cry of them, saying, "Lest the earth swallow us up." And fire came from God and devoured the 250 men that offered the incense. (Bamidbar 16:31-35)*

So much for the righteous Korach and his followers.

The first clue that Korach was not who he claimed to be was the fact that he said he was righteous. Righteous people do not like to talk about themselves and certainly do not assume that they are righteous. Indeed, we are told, there are 36 righteous people in each generation (actually, 36 in Israel and another 36 in the entire Diaspora) saving it, and they tend to be hidden. Hence, their Hebrew nickname Nistarim, which means hidden ones.

For example, there is the following example from the Talmud:

*The whole world is sustained for the sake of My son Chanina, and Chanina My son has to subsist on a kav of carobs from one week end to the next. (Brochos 17b)*

In other words, while many people live it up as if the world exists in their merit, the righteous barely partake of this world, though it does exist in their merit. This is a large part what makes them so righteous: unlike Korach they expect little from this world, and therefore rarely experience negative emotions such as greed and jealousy.

And, most important of all, the righteous are completely self-honest and know that, though you can fool yourself some of the time, other people most of the time, you can't fool God any of the time. They don't blame others for their own problems, and realize that what ever difficulties they must

undergo in this world is only for the sake of bettering their portion in the world that counts the most, the World-to-Come.

There is another interesting point about tzadikim that comes from the Zohar on last week's parshah, Shlach. According to the Zohar, the reason why Moshe Rabbeinu did not know how to answer the Bnos Tzelofchad in Parashas Pinchas when they requested land in Eretz Yisroel in the merit of their dead father is because Moshe Rabbeinu was not sure that he was forgiven for breaking Shabbos in Parashas Shlach. (Maybe he lost his portion in Eretz Yisroel when he sinned, making the request of his five daughters an empty one?)

However, when God referred to Bnos Tzelofchad in the name of their father, Moshe learned that Tzelofchad had indeed been forgiven for his sin, for God does not mention the names of evil people, only the names of tzadikim. Apparently, however bad the sin that Tzelofchad did had committed, his death atoned for it, and he passed back into the category of righteous once again.

The question might be asked, why is it that the merits of righteous people can save a generation? It's a nice idea, but not a logical one. Righteous people are good people and deserve good in return. Evil people are evil people and deserve evil in return. Why should the latter have their cake and eat it too? Obviously they hope to, but why should they be able to?

There are a few answers to this question, but the most obvious one is the concept that every Jew is a guarantor for his fellow Jew (Sanhedrin 27b). To be part of the Jewish nation is to be part of a single unit that functions very much the same way a body does. Stubbing one's finger may not send pain down to the toes, but there is no denying that the toes are affected by virtue of the fact they belong to the same overall unit to which the hurt finger belongs. And, if an infection starts to spread, eventually it will affect all parts of the body.

This means that, even though Heaven judges an individual as an individual when it comes to his portion in the World-to-Come, when it comes to the Jewish people in this world, there is also a collective judgment (Shabbos 54b). On many occasions, all the merits and demerits of the entire nation are thrown into one pot which is then placed on the scale of Divine judgment to see if the scale balances out in favor of the nation or against it.

As one can well imagine, millions of Jews make for a lot of sins in the pot, which can only spell trouble for the Jewish nation. If so, then how can the merits of a few righteous people balance them out, and even tip the scale in our favor to avert a Divine decree?

There are a few answers for that one as well, but the main answer is because of the mitzvos that the tzadikim do, and how they do them, usually with tremendous self-sacrifice. Righteous people do the will of God with as much gusto, if not more, than the rest of the nation may do sins. However, the drive with which righteous people perform mitzvos counts for a lot more to God than the drive with which the average person performs sins.

For, where as the latter is the result of the yetzer hara, the former is the result of pure will to please God, something that is far more difficult to muster and maintain. More than God's hate for sin is His love for mitzvos, and the sincerity with which they are performed. More than God dislikes the spiritual impurity of the common individual He loves the purity with which righteous people conduct their lives.

Hence, if you were to look into the pot of Divine judgment, you might see, in general, a lot of black coal. But, amongst the black coal you would also see sparkling diamonds, whose glitter might be enough, on many occasions, to overcome the darkness of the coal and bring about a favorable judgment for the entire pot, as it has done on many occasions.

However, on many occasions the merits of the righteous have not always been enough to avert the Divine decree. At such times, the demerits of the Jewish people may have grown too great that even the diamonds amongst them are unable to sparkle enough to overcome the blackness of the sins, leaving the decree intact.

Sometimes history might be the imperative, meaning that something is meant to happen historically by a specific time, but the Jewish nation is not doing that which it is necessary to bring it about. Therefore, Divine Providence may use an alternative method, but one that is not pleasant for the Jewish people. Just look at how many such corners have been turned that way throughout the last three millennia.

Whatever the reason, one this is for certain: it is important to take care of the righteous people in each generation. In their humility, they may appear unimportant to the world, and especially to themselves, but in reality, they are what is keeping the world going, and the Jewish people alive. Once they go, God forbid, we can expect history to take a turn for the worse, God forbid, and historically, it usually has.

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