

UNREAL REALITY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

... As a reminder for the Children of Israel ... to be like Korach and his company. (Bamidbar 17:5)

Arrogance is so destructive. Who can total the billions of people it has hurt throughout history, or the trillions of dollars of damage it has caused? Who does not know of a person whose arrogance has got him into serious trouble, and maybe even cost him the things he valued most? Arrogance, eventually, equals implosion.

Arrogance is so blinding. It doesn't just compel people to overlook truth. It causes them to change the truth to suit their needs. They actually come to fight for their distorted perception of reality, offending honest people along the way, and hurting others whom they dragged with them down their dishonest path.

We all have a little arrogance, at least at one time or another. A little arrogance can be a healthy and productive trait, in the right measure and at the right time. A person has to have some pride in what he thinks and does, or he will end up feeling as if he does not matter. That is also very self-destructive.

Fear of God is supposed to keep our pride in check. It is the boundary of truth that our pride can approach but not cross over. It says to pride, "Until this point you are okay. But, past this point you are going against God and yourself. Bring it down a few notches."

The amazing thing about arrogance is how it gives the appearance of being an unmovable mountain when in fact it is no powerful than a hair:

In the time to come, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the evil inclination and slay it in the presence of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it will have the appearance of a towering hill, but to the evil it will have the appearance of a hair thread. Both the former and the latter will weep. The righteous will cry saying, "How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!" The evil will also cry saying, "How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread!" (Succah 52a)

Talk about great magicians. How is that the yetzer hara can take on two very different persona, and basically at the same time? The magical answer? It doesn't have to. It is the person who perceives it that dictates what the yetzer hara will look like to him.

It's like paint. If a person has a can of red paint and adds blue to it, its appearance will become purple. If a person adds yellow paint to the red, it will change its appearance to orange. In each case,

the red paint remains red paint, but changes its appearance according to what was added to it.

In essence, the yetzer hara, as much as we personify it, is really just a bodily instinct, a relatively unintelligent physical reaction to the world around us. This is why, as the Talmud insightfully points out, it is necessary for mitzvos just as much if not more than it causes sin (Yoma 69b).

Not only do we need the yetzer hara to survive, we need it to be human. Without a yetzer hara, as will be the case in Yemos HaMoshiach, we would be unable to do evil. Therefore, in the Messianic Era, we will also lose free will, making us more like angels once again. This will deny us any further opportunity to increase our portion in the World-to-Come.

Thus, our greatest enemy is also our greatest asset, and the Talmud even says something to this effect. Kept in check, the yetzer hara can be the source of great productivity, a tamed "stallion" upon whose back a person can ride to personal greatness and self-fulfillment.

The problem is when the yetzer hara remains unchecked. Life goes awry when people lose track of the yetzer hara and even confuse it for their yetzer tov. Korach confronted Moshe Rabbeinu as if driven by his good inclination when in fact he was totally driven by his evil one. It destroyed him and everyone associated with his rebellion.

How does this happen? The answer to the question is summed up by the following two statements:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, says to the Jewish people: "I created the yetzer hara, and I created Torah as its spice. If you involve yourselves in Torah, then you will not fall prey to it . . . and if you don't involve yourselves with Torah, then you will fall prey to it." (Kiddushin 30b)

The School of Rebi Yishmael taught, "If this repulsive 'wretch' meets you, drag him to the Bais Midrash. If he is stone, he will dissolve, if of iron, he will break into fragments . . ." (Succah 52b)

How is Torah a spice for the yetzer hara? This is different than an antidote, which is often the translation of the word "tavlin" used by the Talmud. An antidote counteracts something, a tavlin enhances or "channels" its flavor.

Clearly Torah is meant to channel the yetzer hara, not eliminate it. It does this in at least two ways. First of all, Torah, when learned for the right reasons, purifies a person, which also purifies his intentions. It is supposed to help with one of the most important traits in life: self-honesty.

Self-honesty is the difference between appropriate pride and pure and dangerous arrogance. For a person to pursue a lie as if it is the truth, he or she has to first make the lie the truth. It is one thing to lie in life, and there are even times when the mitzvah is to do so. It is a whole other thing, though, to lie and act as if it is the truth. It is the quickest way to destroy what one has built and lose what one cherishes the most in life.

This is what happens to be people with substance addiction. When the addiction makes abstinence too painful to bear, the addicted person will shift reality to justify the satisfaction of their addiction.

To everyone else but the addicted person, the lie will be blatant, as will the self-destruction it causes. It is tragic.

The same thing is true of emotionally damaged individuals. If someone suffers from extreme insecurity, they can act like an addicted person as well. They can become a control freak, meaning they will go out of their way to control reality in order to minimize their vulnerability. They will become manipulative of others, and claim that they have become so for all the right reasons.

Everyone else, but the controlling individual him- or herself, will notice what is going on. They might go along with it for a period of time, but no one likes to be controlled by another for very long, or be part of a lie for any prolonged period of time. Eventually, the very control the person sought through falsehood and manipulation will leave them with less control than they would have had if they had more trusting.

The problem is that their emotional handicap is exactly that, which is why they act the way they do in the first place. It is their mindset, their perspective on life, which is why they are so blind to it in the first place. It has become their reality, their paradigm, and they will insist on being the right one even as their world crumbles around them.

Some people are fortunate enough to wake up in time, and by "in time," I mean before they lose everything for good. They get the help they need. They learn to see reality as it is, not as they have painted it. They may have relapses from time-to-time, but they can see that they have, and work on fixing the problem for the future. That is the important part: they can see that they are making a mistake.

Korach could not. He erred in a major way, like so many before and after him. He risked everything to take more than belonged to him, and lost even that which was rightfully his. He tried to be an example of what to become, and ended up being THE example of what to avoid.

The second thing that Torah can provide a person against false pride and dangerous arrogance, is a sobering look at the winners and losers in history. The Torah shows the results of people who ignore reality, and what happens to those who obey it. Cheaters only prosper for the moment, but in the end they are lost in the annals of history. The truth-abiders live on forever, even after they have physically moved on.

This is because you can lie to yourself you can't lie to Truth. Truth will always prevail, if not immediately, soon after. It's built into Creation. Not only will Truth catch up with the person, it will, in the end, overrun them. Or, as in Korach's case, swallow them whole. In Noah's time, the Flood waters, the symbol of Torah, washed everyone away.

There's a lot of sheker—falsehood—out there today, a lot of bloated prides and plenty of arrogance. It's not necessarily something anyone can turn around, especially at this point in history. Nevertheless, a person has to make sure that he is not a part of it in any way.

