

NOT SO INNOCENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

I do not recall, at least in my lifetime, the United States of America being so divided. Though people tell me that it is President Trump's fault, the truth is that it goes back to the Obama Presidency. It was just that unlike the Left today, the Right then was more civil and restrained in its objection to President Obama's policies.

If anything, Trump just caused the division to become more pronounced, and faster. In fact, he is in response to it, and he wouldn't have even been elected had the division not already existed. The political schism put him into office.

The question is, is there are a right and wrong here, or just a right and a left? People who believe in relative morality and not in God would argue against the latter. God-believers would say just the opposite, that the side that advocates the highest level of Divine morality would have God's vote.

Another question would be, assuming that there is a wrong, how responsible are all the members of the respective parties guilty because of it? Surely each party has its extremists AND mildly involved contingents. Will God take only the extremists to task, and overlook the "sins" of the more innocent?

One might have thought so, until this week's parsha. Embedded in the argument between Korach and his followers and Moshe Rabbeinu is one of the scariest and most important lessons of life, as Rashi quotes:

So they withdrew from around the dwelling of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram. Dasan and Aviram went out standing upright at the entrance of their tents together with their wives, their children, and their infants. (Bamidbar 16:27)

Come and see the severity of dispute. The earthly courts do not punish until [an accused] has two [pubic] hairs, and the Heavenly court does not punish until one reaches the age of 20. Here even nursing babies were punished. (Rashi)

The fact that the wives of Korach and his followers were included in their punishments is not surprising. As the Talmud points out, it is the role of the wife to at least try and encourage her husband to do the right thing, or to dissuade him from doing the wrong thing. If she doesn't try, then she is guilty by association.

But the children, and especially the babies? What culpability could they possibly share with their parents, who have become part of a machlokes—a disagreement? Why should their innocence be

ignored and they be treated as guilty just by association with the perpetrators? Rashi, quoting the Midrash, points out that machlokes is powerfully incriminating, but he doesn't say why.

Even Korach's sons, who actually do teshuvah before God lowers the boom, are included in the punishment, albeit to a lesser extent. Usually sincere teshuvah is enough to spare a person punishment if done on time, but that was not the case here. It shows once again the negative power of machlokes.

Of course, not all machlokes is bad. The rabbis in Pirkei Avos make this distinction quite clearly:

Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will ultimately endure, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not ultimately endure. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? This is a debate between Hillel and Shammai. What is a dispute not for the sake of Heaven? This is the dispute of Korach and his assembly. (Pirkei Avos 5:20)

This is clear from the Talmud which is FILLED with disagreements. All of them however are for the sake of Heaven, that is, in order to establish the law as God commanded it. No one is arguing for their own sake or for personal benefit.

The only problem with this explanation is that the sons of Korach, and certainly the younger children and babies, did not argue for personal benefit. Nevertheless, they went down with their families which apparently, had argued for personal gain. The question remains.

Perhaps the answer has to do with a different halachah. The law is that once every last Amaleki is killed, all of their property must be destroyed as well. There is no such thing as booty from an existential war against Amalek, and the question is, why not?

The answer given is that no reminder of Amalek's existence can exist after he is completely gone. If victory over Amalek is only partial, then the survivors themselves are the reminder of Amalek. If there are no survivors, then we don't want someone to be able to say, "That belt belonged to an Amaleki," or "That was an Amaleki cow."

Perhaps the same answer can be used here. Machlokes NOT FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN, which is easy to be a part of if you don't know what Heaven wants, is EVIL. It's not just bad from God's point of view, but REALLY bad. It reverses the good of Creation to such an extent that it must, like Amalek himself, be completely obliterated.

This means that every last trace of such machlokes must be removed from future history. You can't change the Past, but you can protect the future. This means removing all reminders of evil, even the "innocent" ones, including the children who were not yet old enough to choose sides.

Like it or hate it, it is an important message to keep in mind when choosing sides in any argument. Your intentions may be pure, but you must come to the same conclusion, BASED UPON TORAH, about the main proponents of your side. Your innocence will NOT be enough to protect you if theirs

is lacking.