

TOO MUCH RIGHTEOUSNESS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Do we trust G-d? Do we trust His stated consequences? If G-d says not to do something, or to do something, do we trust Him and listen, or do we wonder what the cost will be to us? Are we prepared to do or not do as instructed even when there is no stated consequence?

The mindset of the Eved Hashem (servant of G-d) is to listen and do whatever G-d commands, regardless of rational or consequence. This has been the theme of the Book of Bamidbar.

1. The Spies challenged G-d's stated promise of the conquest and victory of Israel and its inhabitants because the physical evidence appeared to contradict the possibility of success.
2. Korach challenged G-d's stated instructions regarding the Mitzvos of Tzitzis and Mezuzah because his intellect could not accept the imposed limitations of Moshe's explanation of G-d's intention.
3. The new generation born in the desert and destined to inhabit the land challenged the limitations imposed by G-d on their moral behavior, because basic animal desires appeared to contradict G-d's lofty expectations for His children.

In each of the above situations G-d's consequences were swift and severe. Those who challenged G-d's stated commands, for whatever reason intellectual or behavioral, did not survive. On the other hand, those who did listen to G-d, regardless of reason or circumstance, were magnificently rewarded.

Kalev and Yehoshua ignored the evidence of their mission. They put the evidence of their mission into perspective. Regardless of what we see or think, G-d's promises will come true because His ability is unlimited. Therefore, whatever we think should be enhances the miracle of what will be. The more impossible success appears to be the greater the sanctification of G-d's name will be when success occurs. Confronted by the nation's disillusionment and loss of faith, Yehoshua and Kalev stated their unqualified trust in G-d's promises. Yehoshua was rewarded by becoming Moshe's successor and Kalev was rewarded by inheriting the city of Hebron and the principality of Shevet Yehudah.

With Korach's rebellion, the heroes were the majority of Jews who did not join the rebellion. The heroes were Moshe and Aharon whose leadership was divinely confirmed in the public arena. Make no mistake; the challenge to Moshe's leadership was serious. If unanswered, the divine origin of both the Oral and the Written law would have been compromised. If unanswered, Korach's intellectual

and emotional challenge would have given substance and credibility to the similar unspoken doubts in the minds of the general population. Therefore, G-d listened to Moshe's request for a swift spectacular and public response. The earth swallowed Korach, Nadav and Avihu. The 250 men were consumed by fire. Moshe remained the sole arbitrator of G-d's law.

To be divinely confirmed is the greatest reward possible. To have your own belief substantiated and your doubts resolved is among the greatest rewards possible. Moshe and Aharon were rewarded and the nation was rewarded.

At the end of last week's Parsha, Pinchas emerged as the hero. Confronted by a nation gone mad, Pinchas reacted with utter confidence in the law of G-d, as taught to him by Moshe. Personal fear, danger, and considerations were of no consequence. Going against public opinion was of no consequence. Complete faith in, "If G-d said so then it is the right thing to do and everything will work out" directed his response. It doesn't mean that Pinchas wasn't afraid. It meant that Pinchas trusted G-d and Moshe more than he was afraid.

Pinchas's reward was immediate. He was made into a Kohain and granted G-d's Covenant of Peace. Pinchas was assured that "his doing the right thing" was the only proper response. Any other response or compromise would have been a disaster. It would have not increased the "Shalom," it would have detracted from it.

The true Eved Hashem - servant of G-d is defined by Antignois from Socho in Chap. 1, Mishnah 3 of Avos (Ethics Of Our Fathers). "Be as servants who serve their master without concern for consequence." Later in the next chapter Mishnah 4, Raban Gamliel stated, "Make G-d's will as your own, so that your will becomes G-d's will." At first glance it seems that the two Mishnayos are contradictory. The first Mishnah says that our service to G-d should be without consideration of reward. The second Mishnah says that having G-d do your will can motivate you to do G-d's; meaning, do what G-d wants and G-d will do what you want. That certainly constitutes reward!

The commentaries point out that the two Mishnayot are not in conflict with each other. (Meiri) If you make G-d's will your own then your will becomes His will! That which you desire will only be that which G-d would give you anyway. The basic format for asking G-d is, "If it is your will that what I ask for is in my best interest, please grant me my wish. However, if what I ask for, regardless of emotion, intellect, or desire is not in my best interest, I fully accept your judgment and accept no as an answer as well." In such an instance, the motivation is solely to do G-d's will, regardless of consequence.

Another approach to resolving the seeming contradiction between the two Mishnayos is stages. Antignos from Socho is defining the ultimate in service to G-d, whereas Raban Gamliel is defining the process for attaining that goal. First, rewards and prizes motivate us; and eventually, the service itself will become our goal and motivation.

Following the record of Pinchas's reward, G-d commanded Moshe to wage war against the Midyanim (Moabites and Ammonites) (25:17). The Medresh (21:5) on this week's Parsha references the

Pasuk in Divarim (23:7) that prohibited all social contact with the Ammonites and Moabites. "Never are you to seek their" peace. "The verses that preceded that prohibition explain why G-d did not want the Bnai Yisroel to have any social interaction with the Moabites and Ammonites. "Because they did not greet you with bread and water" and because they hired Bilam to curse you"

The Medresh continues and recalls the incident with King David when he sent greetings of condolences to Chanun the son of Nachash, Crown Prince of Ammon, on the occasion of King Nachash's death.

In brief, the incident with King David is as follows. When Dovid was fleeing from King Saul, he asked the King of Moab to give safe haven to his parents and brothers. The king of Moab agreed, and when Dovid left, he killed Dovid's parents and all but one of his brothers. (Rashi - Samuel 1: 22:4) That sole survivor fled to Nachash of Ammon who granted him safe haven.

When Nachash died, Dovid felt that it was only right for him to send official emissaries with greetings of condolences to Chanun, the new king of Ammon.

The Navi records that Chanun took the emissaries and disgraced them by shaving off half their beards and sending them back to Dovid. This was perceived as a declaration of war against the Bnai Yisroel. Under the direction of Dovid's general, Yoav, the Jews went to battle against the nations of Ammon, Aram, Tzovah and Maacha. As recorded in both Samuel and Chronicles, although the Jews were victorious, the war proved to be long and difficult with many Jewish casualties. The Medresh concludes, "Why did this tragedy occur to Dovid? Because he transgressed the prohibition of "Never are you to seek their.. peace."

The Medresh references this particular incident as further proof of what it means to trust or not trust G-d's word. Dovid seemed to have good reason to send greetings to Chanun. As a nation we emulate the character traits of appreciation and gratitude. Nachash had done a great kindness to Dovid. He had saved the life of his brother. Yet, the Torah did not make any exceptions when it prohibited contact with the Ammonites. "Never are you to seek their.. peace!" Dovid assumed the exception and challenged the simplicity and directness of G-d's commandment.

As the Medresh references from Koheles (7:16), "Do not be too righteous." Do not be more righteous than the Torah. If G-d said not to have contact, without exception, do not think that you can be kinder and more sensitive than G-d! Trust Him! Believe in Him! Do not try to out think G-d! G-d has his reasons whether you agree with them or not, whether you understand them or not! Because of Dovid's "righteousness" Israel went to war and lives were lost!

The message of these Parshios is clear. G-d knows what He is doing. Trust G-d and listen to the Torah as taught by Moshe and it will always turn out right. Try to be smarter than G-d, more sensitive than Moshe's teachings and the end will be destruction and disaster.

Copyright © 2001 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
