

DANGEROUS INTELLECT

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Humility is the prerequisite for true greatness because true greatness must know its limitations. The greatest CEO in corporate history could not personally build the inventory necessary for maintaining even the smallest corporation. Thousands of people are necessary to produce almost any product, whether widgets, computers, cars, or space stations. The greatest industrialist and corporate leaders know this and never take for granted the degree that they personally depend on the unnamed masses. The great ones are as certain of their dependency on the many others as they are about their own ability to take the big chances and make the deals. Maintaining the balance between dependency and certainty is the measure of true greatness and the meaning of true humility.

G-d described Moshe as "the most humble human who ever lived." Moshe's humility defined the totality of his essence and was the reason why G-d chose him to be the First Teacher of Torah. Moshe knew the limits of his own strength and ability. Raised to be both leader and redeemer, Moshe had spent the better part of a lifetime struggling to understand the ways of G-d and man.

Moshe understood that the redemption of the Jews would herald the redemption of the world; however, his personal experiences taught him that the Jews were not ready or worthy of redemption. (When Moshe killed the Egyptian overseer revealing his secret Jewish identity, the man he saved was the one who turned him in to Pharaoh. See Maharal) He feared that if the Jews would be redeemed before they were ready to do the work of redemption the outcome would be disastrous. Failure of the Jews to embrace the responsibilities of redemption would be the failure of all humanity to attain redemption. Better that the Jews remain enslaved in Egypt than be let loose upon an unsuspecting world. When summoned by G-d at the Burning Bush to become His First Teacher, Moshe reluctantly agreed. He did not understand why the Jews deserved redemption. He knew that individuals were deserving of redemption, but he also believed that the collective whole of the nation was not.

Until the Burning Bush redemption was exclusive to a handful of individuals. From Adam to Noach to Avraham to Moshe, only individuals rose to the level of personal redemption. Avraham was unique among even the very few because he embraced his personal redemption and extended himself to teach and redeem others. However, in the end, Avraham's ministry produced a very limited redemption. World redemption ? Tikun Olam, was still a distant dream.

This meant that the individual model of redemption was the only working model of redemption to which Moshe had ever been exposed. A national embracing of redemptive responsibility had never before been attempted. In fact, more often than not, collective responses had been toward the perpetration and perpetuation of evil rather than the teaching and doing of good. You can imagine Moshe's shock when G-d told him that the time had come for collective redemption and the first step toward world redemption! Wasn't world redemption predicated on having a nation who embraced the responsibilities of redemption? Wasn't it dangerous to attempt redemption with a nation that was as distant from redemption as the world it would have to help redeem? What if they failed? What then of the promises to the Forefathers? Better that the Jews remain in Egypt and let the natural selection of weakness and strength in the face of survival and assimilation take its toll. Those who would remain strong in their spiritual convictions and determination would be the tried and the proven. Upon such as those G-d could depend. Upon such as those G-d could trust to teach the rest of the world His reality and greatness. Let the others perish in ignorance and through assimilation! In the end the "nation" would be invincible in their devotion and beliefs!

In fact, last week's Parsha proved Moshe's understanding of the redemptive process. Having sinned with the Miraglim (spies), G-d decreed that the generation of the Exodus die in the desert. Rather than forgive their sin and trust that they would do the work of the redeemed, G-d cleaned house. Why didn't G-d forgive them? Why did they have to die?

My Grandfather Zt'l explained that the sin of the Miraglim proved that the generation was not ready to enter the Promised Land and embrace the work of redemption. Although they had seen more of G-d's manifest greatness and power than any generation before or after, they had not studied Torah. It is not the magnitude of the miracle or the number of miracles that change a person. It is the changes in the person that make the miracles more than just a passing event? no matter how mag wondrous those events may have been.

Imagine if following the Six Day War there had not been a Baal Teshuvah movement. Following that modern-day revelation of G-d's love for His chosen children, the Gedolim (Torah leadership) encouraged the observant world of Torah to reach out and embrace those who because of assimilation were ignorant of their heritage. "Teach them about Shabbos! Teach them about Kashrus! Teach them the laws of Family purity! Go onto the college campuses and quench their thirst for spirituality and meaning with Torah and Mitzvos. Bring back the distant and the ignorant! Now is the time to bring My children home!"

The 60's were a generation that wanted to be different than their parents. They wanted more than their parents. They just didn't know what that "more" was. The Gedolim encouraged those who new what "more" was to reach out and teach those who did not know what "more" there was to be had.

How many people have suffered and survived the ravages of war? How many of them recount the miracles of their personal survival as warriors? How many of them changed their lives because of those personal miracles of survival? I do not know for sure, I can only assume that because of our general reluctance to change few would have changed their lives because of the personal miracles that occurred to them. Change assumes recognition of the miracle and the framework to assimilate the miracle into a process of change. For many, the personal miracle may not have even registered as "a miracle". For others, the moment was profound but every passing moment diminished the impact and profundity. In either case the miracle would not translate into any kind of significant change. That alone suggests that miracles without the framework for personal change are not worth the paper they're printed on.

The same was true with the generation of the Miraglim. They had witnessed the manifest wonder of G-d's majesty and it wasn't enough. They still lost faith; they still questioned G-d and Moshe. Had they entered the Promised Land with the same weak commitment and devotion, they would have certainly failed. They would have lost faith again and again because they had not sufficiently studied Torah ? they did not the framework for true and lasting change. All the miraculous experiences of Israel's existence until that point would have been filed away in the collective memories of the nation as nothing more than momentary wonders. Therefore, G-d decreed that the nation remain 38 more years in the desert to give them the time to properly prepare to assume the responsibilities of redemption. During those additional 38 years, the generation studied Hashem's Torah, taught it to their children, wove its truths into the fiber of the nation's existence, and created the framework for lasting change (otherwise called growth and development). The deaths of that generation proved to their children, the generation that would occupy the Promised Land, that the essence of their existence and the essence of redemption was the study of Torah and only the study of Torah. As the Talmud states, "The one who engages in the study of Torah is the only truly free person." As we say in the morning blessings, "And the study of Torah is tantamount to all the Mitzvos."

It was true that as Moshe stood at the Burning Bush the Jews were only a little better than the rest of the world. They were on the 49th of 50 levels away from G-d and truth, and Moshe saw their redemption as premature and dangerous. Yet, G-d said that it was time for the redemption. In response to Moshe's question and confusion G-d answered, "And the sign that I have sent you be when you bring this nation to serve Me on this mountain (Sinai)." G-d explained to Moshe that regardless of how distant the Jews might have been at that moment, the Torah had the power to change them. The actual miracles of the exodus from Egypt were not the real proof of their divine mission to be redeemed and to redeem the rest of the world. The proof would be when they accepted the Torah and studied its truths. Moshe would then see the nation change from being enslaved to being free. The model of redemption would then be a collective one rather than an individual one.

However, free will is always alive and well in the hearts of all, and we have the ability to pervert even Torah in support of falsehood and the denial of G-d.

This week's Parsha describes the rebellion of Korach. 30 years younger than his cousins Moshe and Aharon (Korach had to be less than 50 because he was still serving in the Mishkan. Moshe was 82 and Aharon was 85. See Eliyahu Ki Tov) Korach was reputed to be a leader of exceptional charisma and intellect. He publicly challenged Moshe and Aharon's divine appointments to the key positions of national leadership. The challenge was couched in Halachik (legal) query and challenged Moshe's understanding of G-d's will.

"Undoubtedly G-d chose you to deliver his commandments to the world. However, who said that you are the only one empowered to interpret and explain G-d's will? In fact, I contend that in fact you were only empowered to deliver G-d's words while the right of interpretation is the responsibility of those smarter than you. Everyone knows of my intellectual brilliance and I challenge you before the entire nation to a battle of intellect and interpretation!"

"Does a Talis (garment) dyed entirely Techeles (special blue Dye) still require Tzitzis (fringes)? Does a house filled with Seferim (books of Torah) still require a Mezuzah?" Korach said "No" and Moshe said "Yes."

Simply put, Korach claimed that the theological value of a commandment was far more important than the particulars of how to fulfill the commandment. Therefore, Tzitzis and Mezuzah were but indications of a person's devotion to G-d. How much more so would be a person's indicated devotion be if he went to the enormous expense of dying his entire garment the color Techeles or filling his house with holy books of Torah? More than that is unnecessary, redundant, and not the true will of G-d!

Moshe's answer was, "Korach what you say might very well be true; however, there is more to the commandments than their theological value. In fact, the greater value of a Mitzvah is the degree of subjugation indicated by its performance. You Korach are the perfect potential subject. If you would suspend your analysis of G-d's intention and nevertheless do what G-d said should be done, not what you think He meant should be done, that would be the greatest Mitzvah of all!"

The Ramban and the Ibn Ezra argue as to exactly when the rebellion occurred; however, they both agree that it happened within the second year following the Exodus. According to the Ramban, the rebellion occurred after the incident of the Miraglim. According to the Ibn Ezra it occurred after the inauguration of the Mishkan. (See ArtScroll pg. 820) I would like to suggest that both opinions are predicated on the same understanding of Korach's motive for rebelling.

The Ibn Ezra says that Korach's rebellion happened after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Imagine! The eldest sons of Aharon offered a non-commanded offering in the Holy of Holies on the day that the Mishkan was inaugurated and the whole nation witnessed their deaths. Yet, Korach managed to convince 250 men of leadership quality and bearing to do the exact same thing! How was that possible? Why weren't they afraid for their lives?

Last week I explained that the sin of Nadav and Avihu was that they did not ask before they acted. They assumed a right that was not theirs to assume because that were overwhelmed with the desire to be as close to G-d as possible. On a gut level they felt that their love for G-d was greater than His prohibition against entering the Holy of Holies and performing the Ketores (incense) offering. Therefore they died.

Korach had a completely different take on the reasons for their deaths. Korach agreed that they had stepped beyond their rightful places. He agreed that they should have first conferred with others to ascertain whether they had a right to do what they wanted to do. The difference was that he believed that they had acted from emotion rather than intellect, and that was their sin. On the other hand, he and his rebellion were following the prescribed rules for challenge and implementation. First they asked Moshe, then they argued with his ruling, and then they did as their intellect dictated. At all costs they had to remain true to their intellect!

For Korach it was all intellectual. The outcome must be true so long as you were true to the intellectual process for ascertaining truth. Korach believed that G-d desired humans to use their intellect to ascertain truth. G-d did not want humanity to merely accept the literal presentation of G-d's commandment as the only truth. Please note that Korach painted the Oral and the Written Torah with the same intellectual brush. The Oral Torah was also given by G-d to Moshe; however, it was never intended to be the sole explanation or definition of G-d's will. Assuming that the Torah has infinite profundity, the greater the intellect of the individual the greater his depth of understanding. As far as Korach was concerned Moshe's level of understanding was basic rather than ultimate.

The same understanding of Korach can apply according to Ramban's opinion that Korach's rebellion occurred after the incident of the Miraglim. Korach understood that the Spies had erred in their analysis of the situation. Had they applied proper deductive reasoning to the situation they would have concluded that the Canaanites were a far easier adversary to beat than the Egyptians. It was not a matter of blindly trusting G-d's promise. Just the opposite! G-d does not want dogmatic adherence to His will. G-d wants us to challenge Him in seeking truth. Didn't G-d grant Moshe permission to send the Miraglim? Wasn't that proof of His intention that we use all of our human faculties to accomplish His will? Had the Spies used their minds rather than their emotions they would not have been afraid! Had the nation only used their minds rather than their emotions they would have never lost faith and G-d would not have issued the decree of death!

More so than the actual sin and the punishment was the need to understand the sin and correct it. "Sure, G-d was angry. Sure G-d had decreed death. However, He had done so because we were not using our minds! We were following our fears and not our intellect! It was time to show G-d that we were no longer afraid to think for ourselves! It was time to move the nation beyond the limitations imposed on them by the miracles and emotionality of Moshe and Aharon. It was the age of reason not superstition! Let Moshe challenge us with miracles and "new creations! Intellect will prevail! That is the true will of G-d."

Humility is the prerequisite for true greatness because true greatness must know its limitations. Moshe was the most humble of all. He too possessed great intellect and creativity. He too desired the freedom of choice and novel interpretation. The difference was that Moshe knew his limitations. Simply put, the word of G-d and His will were those limits. Korach on the other hand was brilliant but arrogant. For him, subjugation to the literal word of G-d was an anathema. He used the Torah as a springboard to rationalize his own desires and was an arrogant human who did not recognize his own limitations. Simply put, Korach had no limits except his own arrogance.

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