

'ISM'S THAT AIN'T

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The great rebellion against Moshe, fomented by his jealous kinsman, Korach, turned into a disaster for Korach and his family. The earth opened under their feet and dwelling places and swallowed them, man, woman and child. The fires of dispute are always so great that they scorch even the otherwise innocent. Because of his venomous divisiveness, Korach and his family were doomed to destruction and to disappearance. But were they? In the book of Psalms, chapters of immortal poetry and comfort are attributed to "Bnei Korach" as well as other chapters authored by Assaf, who was also a descendant of Korach. So it seems, that Korach's family was not obliterated, even when the ground swallowed them whole. In fact, the Torah itself tells us in the Book of Dvarim that "the sons of Korach did not die." What are we to make of their survival? How did they extricate themselves from their doomed position?

The Midrash and the Talmud tell us that the sons of Korach did not fall all the way down into the bowels of the earth. The elegant phrase used to describe their rescue from oblivion is that "a place was fortified for them above Gehinom" where they were able to survive. And in that place, in the ruins of their lives and former beliefs, they rethought their father's erroneous and unfair rebellion against Moshe and admitted the truth to themselves and to others. Again, Midrash tells us that their voices could be heard proclaiming: "Moshe is true and his Torah is true." It is this act of honesty, of the ability to rethink and review one's positions and prejudices, that saved the descendants of Korach from death and oblivion and even brought them to immortality and piety. They were able to climb out of the pit when they realized how wrong and suicidal the path of their father had been. They stated loud and honestly that Moshe was right and true and that they and their ancestor were false and wrong. It is not easy to do so, even when the facts of the matter fly in your face and debunk your previously held theory and belief. It was therefore this act of moral courage and searing honesty that allowed the Torah to say "that the sons of Korach did not die."

The twentieth century has been to a large extent, the century of Korach. Rebellion against tradition and the old and the veneration of new theories of social engineering, morality and religion have been the unfortunate hallmark of this, the bloodiest of all centuries. Nowhere has this been more noticeable than in Jewish life. Socialism, Communism, Secularism, Nationalism, atheistic Zionism, Reform, Conservatism, Reconstructionism, Femininism and other assorted theories and movements arose in this century to claim the place of prominence in fashioning the Jewish people and its future. All of them have proven themselves to be woefully inadequate for the task set forth. Much of the ruin currently clearly visible in the Jewish world is directly traceable to the rebellion against Moshe

and his Torah, against Holyoke and tradition, which marks every one of these theories and movements and is in fact the common denominator for all of them. From our perch just above the abyss of Jewish destruction and assimilation, there are determined Jews who shout out loudly that "Moshe is true and his Torah is true." But there are many sons of Korach who still maintain the belief in the false shibboleths of this past century. After an intermarriage rate approaching seventy percent in America, one strains to hear the admission of error from these groups. Unless there is an honest reappraisal of theory and belief on the part of these groups, these sons of Korach will not survive. An admission of change of policy would be most helpful on their part and a boon to the Jewish world at large.

Shabbat Shalom.
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