

CONTROLLED AMBITION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The effects of personal ambition upon a person's behavior and decisions should never be underestimated. Korach, like many demagogues before and after him, cloaks his personal ambitions in the mantle of populism and democracy. He proclaims against Moshe: "All of the congregation of Israel are holy people and therefore by what right do you allow yourself to lord over them?" Of course when he succeeds to topple Moshe then he will lord over them.

The whole history of humanity is littered with such populist revolutions that only bring in their wake oppression and dictatorship, many times worse than the regime that they dispossessed. The French and Russian revolutions are only two examples of this bitter historical truth. The current "Arab spring" shows signs of turning into such a type of disaster as well.

In the Tanach we read of the revolution of Yeravam against Rechavam in the name of justice and democracy only to see it end up in tyranny, paganism and the division of the Jewish people into two warring kingdoms. It is an interesting point to note that the greatest tyrannies proclaim themselves with the most high sounding and complimentary names and descriptive adjectives.

In our world whenever you see a country that advertises itself as "The Peoples Republic" you can be certain that you are dealing with a tyrannical dictatorship. This is the only way to view Korach's sloganeering and good words. And the true tragedy is that Korach will convince himself and his followers of the rectitude of his cause and be blind to his own burning ambition which fuels this entire incident.

Altruism is a difficult commodity to find in this world. Because of this fact people should always attempt to look at themselves honestly and admit to themselves their true drives and motivations. Channeled and focused ambition directed to the advancement of legitimate causes is part of Jewish tradition. Uncontrolled ambition that can destroy others is certainly outside the pale of Torah behavior.

The necessary vision to create and innovate is always founded on personal ambition and hope. But the ambition to destroy others, to climb over bodies to reach the perceived top destroys all concerned. Hillel's famous statement: "If I am not for me then who will be for me and if I am only for me then of what value am I?" expresses this balance of necessary and destructive ambition clearly for us. It is reflected in the prohibitions against slandering others and causing others pain and anguish.

It is related that when the great Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (Chidushei HaRim), the founder of the Chasidic dynasty of Gur, was yet a young scholar he composed a commentary to a certain section of Shulchan Aruch. He received such approbation on his work that great rabbis told him that his commentary would eclipse the commentary of Shach (Rabbi Shabtai Cohen) to that very same section of Shulchan Aruch.

Rabbi Alter never published his commentary because he felt that Shach (already in Heaven in the World to Come) would feel slighted that his commentary would now be replaced. Such are the lengths necessary for one to go to in order to control ambition which even in cases of great scholars and people such as Korach can bring one to ruin.

Shabat shalom,
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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com