

THE BRILLIANCE OF COMMON SENSE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 378 - Truth Telling to Patients. Good Shabbos!

The Brilliance of Common Sense

"Korach, son of Yitzhar, son of Kahas, son of Levi, separated himself with Dasan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and O'ne son of Peles, the offspring of Reuvain" [Bamidbar 16:1]. On many occasions, we have quoted the Medrashic elaboration on Parshas Korach that contrasts two types of wives -- the wife of Korach and the wife of O'ne ben Peles [Sanhedrin 109b]. Although O'ne ben Peles is listed prominently in the opening pasuk of the Parsha among the co- conspirators of Korach's rebellion, he did not die. Korach died. Dasan and Aviram died. But our Sages teach us that O'ne ben Peles's wife saved him.

According to the Talmud, Korach's wife goaded him on and encouraged him to stand up against Moshe and his family's nepotism. O'ne ben Peles' wife, on the other hand, counseled her husband to avoid the dispute. "Listen, O'ne, what are you going to get out of this? Whichever way things play out, you will still emerge as just a 'bit player'. Either Moshe will emerge as the unchallenged leader or Korach will emerge as the leader. In either case you will be nothing more than a 'second fiddle'! You stand to gain nothing by getting involved in this fight!"

The Talmud quotes the pasuk "Chochmas Nashim bansa baysah" [The wisdom of a wife can save a household] [Mishlei 14:1]. The Gemara explains that this refers to the wife of O'ne ben Peles. She exhibited tremendous wisdom by convincing her husband that there was nothing to be gained by getting involved in Korach's rebellion. Shlomo was alluding to this wisdom in the above quoted pasuk.

The question can be asked, however, where was the great wisdom here? It was a rather elementary conclusion that her husband would not be the leader either way. Where was the great brilliance? She did nothing more than point out an obvious fact to her husband.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz raises this question and explains that when most people are involved in

disputes (machlokes), they 'lose their cool' and lose their common sense. The fire of machlokes -- picking sides, getting involved, becoming part of it -- is all-powerful. There is an over-riding tendency and evil inclination to throw away one's common sense and jump into the blinding dynamics of machlokes. It requires brilliance to overcome that tendency and instead use such a simple and down to earth approach. Maintaining common sense in moments of tension requires great wisdom.

This is the lesson of the Gemara. "The wisdom of a wife can save a household." Merely telling her husband a simple truth demonstrated great sagacity because most people would have 'gotten involved' and 'lost their cool'.

People argue constantly. They become involved in machlokes regarding institutions. They become involved in arguments regarding questions of politics. Most of the time, the people involved in the argument are not the principals. Nevertheless the tendency is to 'become involved'. One of the confessions we recite on Yom Kippur is for having "gotten involved in disputes that did not involve us. Such is the nature of people.

Maintaining common sense in the fire of machlokes is a great gift which the wife of O'ne ben Peles possessed and which was praised by Shlomo using the words "Chochmas Nashim bansa baysah".

Never Again!

As a post-script to the story of Korach, the pasuk says, "And there shall no more be like Korach and his congregation" [Bamidbar 17:5]. According to some enumerators of the commandments this pasuk is not merely a prophecy. It is actually a negative commandment, one of the 613 mitzvos of the Torah.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says that this pasuk certainly contains a negative exhortation. Regardless of whether it is to be counted in the total of the 613 or not, this pasuk clearly warns us not to mimic the behavior of Korach and his followers. However in addition to warning us, the pasuk is a Biblical prophecy: Never again will there be a dispute comparable to that of Korah and his followers. Why is that? Because in Korach's machlokes, one side was 100% right and one side was 100% wrong.

The Torah is asserting that never again in history will there ever be such a machlokes where it is so clear-cut who is right and who is wrong. Perhaps, in the future perhaps there may be a machlokes where one party is 99 percent right. There may be machlokes that is tilted 90/10 or 80/20 in favor of one side. But never will we have as clear cut a dispute as that of Korach.

Sometimes we have reason to be angry with some one or to be in a state of dispute with someone. We may in fact be 'almost' right! But it is only 'almost'. Maybe the other person's reaction to a certain thing we did or said was totally inappropriate and totally out of proportion. But still, maybe, there was some element of error on our part in what we did or said in the first place to trigger the reaction. Even for the 10% or 5% of the blame that may be attributable to our initial remarks or actions, it is

worthwhile to apologize -- even if 90-95% of the blame is with the other party. The meaning of "There will not be like Korach and his Congregation" is that no one will ever be 100% right, totally beyond the realm of blame and apology.

Korach and Followers Vanished Without Leaving A Trace

The climax to the story of Korach is "And the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed them, their households, and all the people who were with Korach and the entire wealth" [Bamidbar 16:32]. Korach, his family, and followers were swallowed up and disintegrated, never to be seen again.

The Gemara [Shabbos 152] mentions that there is a sin for which a person totally decays after his death. On the pasuk "The rot of bones is jealousy" [Mishlei 14:30], the Talmud comments that whoever possesses the attribute of jealousy, not only will their body rot after death but unnaturally, even their bones will rot. Conversely, if one does not possess the attribute of jealousy, their bones will not rot.

As Rashi mentions at the beginning of the parsha, Korach's revolt originally stemmed from his jealousy over the appointment of Elitzaphon ben Uziel as a Nasi [Prince]. Korach was afflicted with jealousy. As a result, his punishment was that which the Gemara proscribes for anyone afflicted with jealousy -- total decomposition.

What is the relationship between the crime and the punishment? What is the connection between the attribute of jealousy and the fact that a person's bones rot?

By definition, anyone who is jealous of another is denying his own identity. If a person is satisfied and happy with whom he is, there is no need to be jealous of somebody else.

There is no point in Reuven having possession of Shimeon's car or wife or children or job because it is not 'him'. A person is never jealous of someone else's prescription glasses. Clearly it is the other fellow's prescription. They will not work for the other person. So too, in the essence of it, when we are jealous of someone else, it is because we are not happy with whom we are.

If there is one part of the human body that symbolizes who a person is and what constitutes his essence, it is his bones (Atzamos). The word 'etzem' means bones but it also means essence. The punishment for a person who is jealous and who denies his essence is that his Atzamos -- his bones, but more to the point his essence -- will be decomposed.

The antidote to protect oneself from jealousy is realizing that we are placed on this earth for a purpose. G-d has granted us and gifted us with all that we need to fulfill that purpose. When someone is jealous of someone else, he is jealous of something that is irrelevant and totally inappropriate to his unique position and function in this world.

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