

PARSHAS KORACH - CREATIVE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE: KORACH WOULD BE HAPPY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

What is the best way to connect with G-d? Many would argue that Man should note the stirrings in his heart, and then give spontaneous and creative expression to his spiritual quest. Man senses the presence of Something greater than himself, and reaches towards Him in any way he finds meaningful. Such feelings well up inside a person at unpredictable times, and must be dealt with on a personal level.

This is what they think. It is not a very new idea. Korach came up with it first.

Korach's rebellion embraced several mistaken notions. One of these was an outgrowth of Korach's chief crowd-pleasing argument: "The entire congregation - all of them! - are holy."^[1] By emphasizing this, Korach did not mean to simply give them high marks on their spiritual report cards. He attacked the entire structuring of the community, of which Moshe's leadership was only a detail. "We are weary of all of these restrictions and commands, ostensibly guiding us to relate to G-d properly. We don't need them! We all stood at Sinai; we are all holy people. We don't need to be instructed about G-d. We all heard His voice. It remains for each of us to find his own, private way of deepening the relationship. There is no reason why we cannot do so without taking orders from some despotic leader."

It was an appealing argument - and dead wrong. Where some people see noble spirituality at work in crafting new rituals, new ways of cherishing the spiritual urge, the Torah sees chaotic subjectivity.

In the aftermath of the Korach episode, the Torah sets forth many rules about Kohanim and Levi'im. In passing, the Torah provides a brief mission statement of the Kohanim. "I give you a Kehunah that is a service of giving."^[2] The avodah of the Kehunah is about devotion, about giving oneself up. Here we have the other side of the coin of the symbolic message of the chief fixtures and appliances of the Mikdosh. The aron, the shulchan, the menorah all focus our attention on the great gifts that we receive from Hashem. Our response to this rich and varied Divine largesse is in the form of our avodah, which teaches us to give to Him, rather than receive. It is about taking those gifts and redirecting them away from our personal use, employing them instead in His service, and in the service of His Torah.

The theme of giving underlies so much of the activity in the Mikdosh. In bringing the blood of a korban, representing our very life force, to the mizbeach, we dedicate life itself to Him. Whether it is

the fats that symbolize our aspirations, or the limbs specified for burning (which symbolize our activity and movement), or the kometz of a flour-offering, or the water offered on Sukkos, or the wine offered daily - all these items focus us on our different potentialities and talents, and express the idea that we wish to elevate them and dedicate them all to Hashem.

A good indication of the core, essential character of the avodah can be found in the prohibition of usurping the role of the Kohen in the Mikdosh, a transgression punishable by death at the hands of Heaven. For the zor, the non-Kohen imposter to deserve death, he must meet two conditions according to the gemara.[3] The avodah he illicitly performs must be one of presenting something (like blood on the mizbeach), rather than removing something (like ashes). Additionally, his activity must be of the type that completes a process, rather than some intermediate, preparatory stage. Taken together, these conditions specify an avodah that hands something over fully to the Mikdosh. Because the quintessential avodah is one of giving, the zor is liable to death at the hands of Heaven only when he mimics an avodah of clear, complete giving.

True giving has to be sincere, and non-coerced. Giving under duress is not really giving, so much as preservation of self-interest. If our avodah must be a service of giving, we are meant to summon up our entire moral freedom and determine within ourselves that we really want to give! This desire must come from within us, responding to the most profound voice of our inner selves. So far, so good.

Why then, does Hashem emphasize, "I give you a Kehunah that is a service of giving?" Herein lies a subtle but crucial point - and the negation of Korach's position. Our giving must be ours, and freely willed. But how we give, when, where - even why - all must be according to rules laid down by Him. He gives us the framework within which we give. Not only do we merely give to Him what is not really ours, but provided by Him, even the very fact of our giving derives from Him. He is the One who demands of us that we give! In effect, our obedience is entirely free-willed, but He determines all other parameters of our service. It is decidedly not something left to the whim of the individual, each one translating the urge to give to Him in a different manner, and varying according to the intensity of the urge to be spiritual.

Serving Hashem, according to the Torah, cannot be a matter of responding to an impulse towards piety that wells up within a person, and which he chooses to discharge by determining his own way to please G-d. We please G-d by obeying Him, not by creating our own rituals. It is not the ritual and the ceremony that He wants, so much as our willingness to take our cues from Him alone. Creating our own rituals, even in the ostensible service of G-d, serves ourselves as much as it tries to serve Him. It leaves us empowered, rather than recognizing Him as the source of all our power. A religion left to the creative whims of its adherents remains, at least in part, an exercise in narcissistic subjectivity.

As the prophet put it, "He has told you, O Man, what is good." [4] We can do no better.

1. Bamidbar 16:3
 2. Bamidbar 18:7
 3. Yoma 24A
 4. Michah 6:8
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