

JUST JOKING

by Rabbi Raymond Beyda

"And Korah took..." Bemidbar 16:5

Korah, the cousin of Moshe and Aharon, led a rebellion against the two leaders and attacked the veracity of Moshe's prophecy. He was a very smart, rich man who was able to influence 250 of the greatest people in the outstanding generation of the desert to join him in attacking the validity of the Torah. It is difficult to understand Korah's behavior but even more puzzling is the fact that he was able to gather support from so many of the great people who had witnessed the Exodus from Egypt, the Splitting of the Sea and the miracles of Har Sinai.

The Midrash explains that Korah began to ridicule the commandments in a public debate with Moshe. He asked: "If a small scroll with 2 paragraphs of the Torah -- a Mezuzah -- is sufficient to "kosher" a house, does a House full of Torah scrolls need a Mezuzah?" When Moshe replied that the house still requires a Mezuzah the crowd burst out laughing. Then Korah asked: "If one blue string -- Tekhelet -- is needed for the tsiseet on the corner of a 4 cornered garment -- does a totally tekhelet [blue] colored garment require any tsiseet at all?" Again Moshe's answer in the positive was greeted with guffaws of the crowd. The joking continued until the validity of Aharon's Priesthood was not the issue any longer -- the validity of the entire Torah was denied by the crowd.

The punishments inflicted for the rebellion were various and severe. The men who brought pans of incense --ketoret -- were consumed by fire. Many of the onlookers of the Children of Israel died in a plague. An opening in the desert floor swallowed Korah and his followers and all of their families and possessions. Even the children were killed. The commentators ask why the punishments were so immediate, drastic and unusual. The answer is that the heresy that Korah espoused goes to the core of our beliefs. Acceptance of his position denies the basis for our devotion to G-d --His holy Torah. Yet the question still remains -- How was Korah able to influence so many holy, intelligent people to his camp?

We see from here the power of "lesanoot" --lightheaded frivolity called scorn!

Our sages teach: "1 statement of scorn can nullify 100 statements of reproof. "Imagine an audience listening to 100 of the greatest sages of the generation giving reproof. One after another the Rabbis go to the microphone and say words of strong mussar bringing the crowd to tears and resolutions of

repentance. Then at the end of 100 moving moments one man comes to microphone and tells the crowd 1 joke that belittles all that was said before. The result would be that the joke would have the effect of nullifying all the wisdom that preceded it. This was the psychology of the human being that Korah understood and used to influence his peers.

David Hamelekh in the opening chapters praises the one who avoids socializing with the scoffers. He too realized the spiritual dangers of heretical lightheadedness. The good inclination --one's intelligence and common sense -- are driven away by the power of scoffing and leave a person open to heretical ideas. Today the joke, the insult the quick barb are accepted as signs of wit and intelligence. The entertainers who are paid the most in our society are those who can make fun of established institutions and famous respected personalities. It is a syndrome dangerous to the soul. From the events in the desert 3300 years ago one should learn the unchanging nature of human psychology and steer clear of those who have the power to influence one's spiritual purity and religious beliefs and claim to be "Just joking!"

Shabbat Shalom

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