

## KORACH

In the Sedra Korach which we will read in shul this Shabbos, a curious incident takes place. This sedra deals with rebellion of the Levite Korach, a cousin of Moses, and the Reubenite Dason and Avirom. They openly challenge the leadership of Moses and Aaron and try, through all sorts of demagogic tricks, to set the people against them. They are immediately joined by 250 elders of the community who dispute the right of Aaron's family to be the sole priests in the nation and claim the right for themselves. The whole congregation of Israel gathers in front of the Tabernacle to watch while Korach confronts Moses. From the text it is clear that the congregation does not take any part at all in the revolt. They just have come to see who is going to win. Suddenly the glory of G-d descends and G-d speaks to Moses, "Separate yourselves from among this congregation that I may consume them in a moment." Moses and Aaron immediately fall on their faces and say, "O, G-d, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin and wilt Thou be wrath with all the congregation?" G-d then speaks again to Moses, "Speak unto the congregation saying, "Get you up from about the dwelling of Korach, Dason, and Avirom."

This is a very puzzling episode. Why did G-d first want to destroy the congregation and then change His mind? Some of our commentators are so puzzled by this passage that they say Moses misinterpreted G-d's original comment. They say that when G-d first said He was going to destroy the congregation He was only referring to Korach and the 250 elders who wanted to be priests. Moses interpreted this to mean the whole congregation. This, though, does not seem to make sense. Why then did G-d tell Moses to tell the entire congregation to get away from the dwelling of Korach, Dason, and Avirom?

The best interpretation, to my mind, is given by the Malbim. The Malbim states that G-d really, at first, wanted to destroy the entire Jewish people. The entire congregation was guilty of a terrible sin. They had committed the sin of straddling the fence, the sin of indifference. True, they had not supported Korach but

they had not opposed him either. They had adopted a "wait and see" attitude. It, after all, wasn't their business to pass moral judgements. If Moses should win, well and good. They would continue to work with him. If Korach should win, well and good. They would work with him. They were guilty of not opposing what they knew to be wrong. They say their community was being threatened, but they did not want to get involved. For this G-d wanted to destroy them, for condoning evil. Moses protested, though, claiming, "But, G-d, they haven't done anything. Why should You punish them?" G-d replied, "That's the trouble. They haven't done anything. If they want to be saved, let them actively disassociate themselves from the evil about them. Let them get up from about the tents of Korach, Dason, and Avirom."

Unfortunately, it is not enough to do nothing. We must do something to oppose evil. How many people do we have in our community who are repeating the sin of the community in Moses' time, who see many things wrong in our Jewish community and do not take steps in any way to combat them or disassociate themselves from them? Let us remember that the sin of doing nothing is many times the greatest sin of all.

38 -  
KORACH 1983  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion, Korach, we learn about the great rebellion of Korach against the leadership of Moshe and Aaron. Moshe, who usually is so patient with the Jewish people, the same Moshe who interceded for the Jewish people with G-d when He was so angry with them after the sin of the golden calf and after they refused to go into the Land of Israel, now loses patience. He even tells the people to "part, turn away please from the tents of these wicked people". He even asks G-d to make a miracle. He wants the earth to open and swallow them up. Moshe even earlier when the revolt started to gain steam, looks at the members of his own tribe who have joined the rebellion against him and he says "Ravlochem, it is enough for you, sons of Levi". The Rabbis explain that there were really two different types of people who joined this revolt. There were the people who, like Korach and Dason and Avison, fomented for the revolt just because of personal ambition. Korach was the richest man in Israel. He was a member of the tribe of Levi and already had special privileges. In fact, in Yiddish there is an expression "to be as rich as Korach". The more he had the more he wanted. He was also a demagogue. He used his great oratorical gifts to stir up the people. Dason and Aviron also were people of ambition. All they wanted to do was bring down Moshe and Aaron. They wanted to just see if they could do it. There are a lot of people who just want to see whether they can make another person squirm. They like to exercise power. This was the first group who opposed Moshe. Then there was a second group which was composed of the members of the tribe of Levi and some from the tribe of Reuven who really wanted to have a spiritual experience. They thought that Moshe was shutting them out from the Sanctuary. He was giving too much to Aaron, but they were sincere like many of our young people today who want some sort of a spiritual experience. They do not know how to get it so they turn to drugs or alcohol or cults or other perverse means. Moshe, though, was angry at all of them. He was probably right in labelling the first group as evil people. The Rabbis teach us that there are four kinds of evil people. Here, of course, we are only speaking in moral terms not legal terms. They say a person is evil if, one, he raises his hand to strike someone even if he does not strike him. This, of course, means that you force a person to do things that he knows he should not do even if you do not physically force him. For example, use emotional tricks and make

him feel ashamed or guilty and say, "What's wrong with you, are you medieval?" In other words, you exercise power over a person just for the fun of it. The second person the Rabbis say is evil is one who borrows and does not pay back. The third is the person who is impudent or arrogant and the fourth is the person who is always stirring up arguments. This is true in all interpersonal relationships. Anyone who wants to destroy a relationship, all he has to do is follow these four points: use emotional trickery on a person to try to get them to do what they want; also never pay back. Usually in every relationship there is a giver and a taker, but the person who gives wants something back, a compliment, a nice word, a note of appreciation, but there are many people who refuse to give it. They even refuse to show any gratitude at all. They will never pay back. There are others who are always arrogant and impudent. They are always putting down the other partner in the relationship, and, finally, there are always those who are stirring up trouble for no reason. All they want to do is make a fight to see what they can do. Korach, Dason, and Aviron were those kind of people. They just wanted to see what they could do, but you know, you can always develop up or down. A lot of the sensitivity training we have is also insensitivity training, trying to make a person feel good about certain things that they should feel disgusted about. Korach, Dason, and Aviron went down not up when they tried to just use power for power's sake. The Rabbis, though, are not happy with Moshe Rabbeinu when he spoke to the second group when he said, "Ravlochem, that is enough for you". It is true that these people were misguided, that they were trying to find spiritual growth the wrong way. The Rabbis even say that Moshe Rabbeinu was punished by these same words when later on he wanted to go into the Land of Israel. G-d told him "Ravlochem Moshe". After all, why did Moshe want to go into the Land of Israel? Not for the riches that are there or the trees or the mountains that are there, but for the spiritual experiences which could be there. The Rabbis say that Moshe should have told these other people that in order to have a spiritual experience we should raise families. That is the way we feel G-d's presence. G-d creates and forms us and we, by creating and forming and shaping a family, are imitating Him and have a true spiritual experience. We, of course, must base our family upon mutual respect and love, and today I am glad to see

a young couple who are about ready to form a family. Spiritual growth cannot come from drugs or alcohol, but it can come from forming a family. When a family is formed with the idea of helping each other and helping make this a better world, it will lead to great spiritual growth.

The story about a boy who was very shy and he could not take out a girl because he did not know what to say. His friend told him, "It's easy. The first thing you do is talk about a family. The second thing, talk about love and likes and dislikes. The third thing, you talk about is philosophy." His friend said, "O.K." and he asked a girl out. He first asked the girl, "Do you have a brother?" She said, "No". That took care of the first topic. He then asked her "Do you like noodles?" She said, "No". Second topic gone. He then remembered he had to talk about philosophy. He asked, "If you had a brother, would he have liked noodles?" You cannot base a relationship on such insubstantial things. We all must respect and never put anyone down, not try to use emotional tricks, and not try to stir up things and appreciate. Then our relationships will last.

38.  
KORACH 1984  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

There is a difference between a liar and the demagog. The liar is quickly found out because his words do not conform to reality. However, a demagog is different because he includes a lot of truth in what he says. In fact, the more truth the better the lie. If you want to really tell a convincing lie add a lot of truth to it. That is the difference between the Hebrew word "Emes" and "Sheker." Emes stands for truth and all its letters have at least two points rooted into the ground, but the word Sheker has only one point rooted in the ground. A lie to really be effective has to have some truth. That's what we learned about today with Korach. Korach was a very wealthy man. In fact, in Yiddish we still say "Reich as Korach" "rich as Korach." Korach was also a very smart man. He, however, used his brilliance to just further his ambitions. Many times brilliance blinds a person, as I wrote about in the article this month, how excessive concentration on one thing takes it out of context and distorts it. Other times there are brilliant people who stir things up with words. They plant half truths and get everybody all riled up, and many times they just sit back in the corner not saying a word while other people do their work. This, too, was Korach. It says "Vayeechak Korach" "and Korach took" but it does not say what he took. The rabbis say he took words. He stirred up the sons of Reuven because they were not first in the march. After all, Reuven was the first born. He stirred up the Levites because they felt they were being excluded from the sanctuary with only Aaron and his sons being the priests, and he stirred up others who felt their ambitions were being thwarted. His claims seemed to make sense. He said, "All the congregation is holy and in the midst is G-d. Why do you, Moshe and Aaron, lift yourselves up above the congregation of G-d?" He was a skilled demagog. He asked Moshe questions in order to ridicule the Torah and Moshe's position. He said, "Does a room that contains a hundred Sefer Torahs need a Mezuzah?" When Moshe said yes he and others scoffed at Moshe saying, "A hundred Sefer Torahs are not enough. Here a room that has no Sefer Torah, a piece of the Torah is good enough, but here a room in which there are a hundred Sefer Torahs is not as good as a little piece of parchment on the door."

He asked Moshe, "If a garment is made of all blue wool, does it need to have a blue Tzitzis?" Moshe answered yes and again he scoffed. It is easy to take things and make them look ridiculous. Every principle can be made to look ridiculous if it is put into the wrong context. During this past week I received many calls from people who are "Tzidduring" "trembling" because they are afraid of the Jewish principle that parents should not testify against children and children should not testify against parents. What are they Tzidduring about? It is a very good principle. In Communist countries children spy on their parents. Do we want that to happen here? Family is very important. In American law there is no such thing as family except in inheritance. Maybe that's why there is so much crime and violence. People are not afraid to do things because it will harm their families. Maybe we should put more safeguards about the family in our law. Maybe the family should be recognized more in law. After all, we have the exclusionary rule where evidence cannot be used if it was seized without a search warrant. We have rules where confessions cannot be used if the defendant was not warned adequately. We have lawyer-client relationships and doctor-client relationships and priests are allowed not to testify against confessants. This principle we have is a good principle. We may be confronted with a terrible case here. I do not know anything about the case. This principle has even been adopted by several states. Why all this obsequiousness and lack of self-respect? Every principle can be made to look ridiculous if put in a certain context. Even in our Shul we have taken certain donations and tried to extrapolate them to all donations. Obviously, when a person buys a yehrzeit plaque which we pay \$20 for and we charge \$200 for, he is paying for the service, not for the bronze plaque. Every yehrzeit we take the plaque, put it in the chapel, and light a light by it. We light a light every Yizkor. His name is in the Book of Remembrance, but just because it makes sense for a memorial plaque it does not mean it makes it sensible for all the other donations to the Shul. It is ridiculous to make a person pay when he wants to give something to the Shul. We have lost so many gifts to the Shul because of this. All things taken out of context

KORACH 1984

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

PAGE THREE

can be made to look ridiculous and ludicrous. Korach was wrong. You need a Mezuzah on the door. It is not enough just to be Jewish inside. You have to be Jewish on the outside and proclaim it to the world. You need to have fringes on your Tallis. It is not enough just to have a garment without fringes. Fringes speak about potentiality and vision. You must have potentiality and vision as I spoke about last week, and the principle that parents should not testify against children and children against their parents. However, there is nothing wrong with the principle. It may not be accepted yet in the State of Texas and, of course, we have to obey the law, but that does not mean that we cannot say that this principle is also accepted here as it is in other states. Every principle can be put in the wrong context, but it does not invalidate the principle. Family in Judaism is very important. I am happy today to see that this principle of family is being furthered by many of you here today. I am reminded of the story they tell about two people and an Aggie who wanted to get into the Olympic games. Tickets were all sold out. One man, undeterred, grabbed a manhole cover and ran to the gate and said, "Brown - discus" and was let in. The second man grabbed a pipe, ran to the gate and said, "Jones - pole vault" and was let in. The Aggie grabbed some barbed wire, ran to the entrance and said, "Smith - fencing." He, of course, was not let in. Taking principles out of context to make them ludicrous is easy, but it does not destroy the principles.

# Can Brilliance Lead To Stupidity

JUNE 1984

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Many times we run across people whose very brilliance causes them to act stupidly. Great concentrative powers are needed ~~in order~~ to obtain vast amounts of knowledge and to use this knowledge intelligently. You can usually immediately tell a good student by whether ~~or not~~ he has the ability to concentrate. ~~They~~ once asked (Oliver Wendell Holmes) what it took to become a brilliant lawyer or judge ~~he~~ said all it took was the ability to concentrate on the subject at hand.

However, this great ability to concentr<sup>a</sup>te is a great gift. The ability to concentrate is like a laser. By combining all the different strands  of light and focusing it on an object, we can get right to the core of the object. However, we can also destroy and burn it. In order to concentrate you have to blot out from your mind everything except the subject matter at hand. Many times I have seen great scholars, great Talmudic Chachomeem who, in the midst of chaos, are completely oblivious to their surroundings and who are so completely immersed in their studies that they do not see or hear anything that goes on around them. Many times you have to shake them, literally, quite hard several times in order to gain their attention. We are all aware of the stereotype of the absent<sub>x</sub>-minded professor, but really this image of the absent minded professor is only another way of stating that some people with great intellectual powers concentrate so much on the subject at hand that they are oblivious to most of their surroundings. I am reminded of the famous story they tell about a professor a hundred years ago who was debating Darwin's theory of evolution with his son, and how he got so involved in the subject that ~~he~~<sup>he</sup> completely lost his perspective and said, "Maybe your father was a monkey but mine

certainly wasn't."

This ability to completely concentrate all one's intellectual energies on a particular subject to the exclusion of all else is a wonderful tool for research, but many times it has disastrous interpersonal consequences. It destroys relationships and does not allow for the subject under decision to be put in its proper context. Fanaticism and demagoguery of all kinds, even if well meant, owe much to the distortion of this great analytical tool, the ability to concentrate on the subject at hand to the exclusion of everything else. A surgeon, when he operates, drapes the body to hide and cover every other area of the body ~~except~~ <sup>so that he will concentrate only on</sup> the area in which he is operating. However, a surgeon always has an anaesthesiologist and assistants who monitor a patient's vital signs so ~~they will never say~~ <sup>NEVER WANT IT SAID</sup> that the operation was a success but ~~the patient died.~~ <sup>that a patient's total health as well as the area being operated on will</sup> *always be considered. We*

In life, too often, a person's ~~excessive zeal and~~ excessive concentration on a worthwhile goal, ~~which he or she even may achieve,~~ may in the process destroy the very institution of ~~the~~ marriage or the relationships which he or she was trying to enhance, <sup>in pursuing this goal</sup>. We must always alternate excessive concentration with a glance at the general situation. Analysis and synthesis must go hand in hand. We Jews have always recognized this. That's why we developed the stories of the wise men of Chelm. These were people who were so smart they became stupid. Everything they said made 100% logical sense, but it was taken out of context and became ludicrous, like the time they asked the men of Chelm what was more important, the sun or the moon. They immediately replied, "The moon because it shines when there is no light."

In the Torah portion, Korach, we learn about such a person. Korach was a man who was so smart that he became stupid. The rabbis tell us that Korach was the richest man in Israel, a man who was not only clever and smart but very persuasive. He was able to marshall 250 of the most important community leaders in a rebellion ~~publicly challenging~~ <sup>agent</sup> Moshe's leadership. He fanned discontent in the hearts of the Jewish people by telling Moshe, "You take too much upon yourself seeing that all the congregation is holy." He dressed each of the 250 men who were with him in four-cornered garments made of blue threads, and then he asked Moshe if these robes conformed to Jewish law. According to Halacha, any time a person wears a four-cornered garment he must put on Tzitzis, fringes, on each corner, and ~~on each corner of the Tzitzis in those days there was~~ <sup>in those days</sup> a blue thread, <sup>A</sup> ~~was required on each corner.~~ Moshe looked at the robes and saw <sup>they</sup> they had no Tzitzis. He said they did not conform to Jewish law. Korach ridiculed Moshe by saying, "Four <sup>blue</sup> threads satisfies Jewish law, but a whole robe made of blue threads do not!" Korach continued mocking Moshe by saying, "Would a whole room filled with Torahs need a mezuzah?" When Moshe answered yes, he said, "What kind of a law have you given us, Moshe? An empty room which has a quotation from the Torah <sup>in the Torah</sup> is kosher, but a whole room filled with holy books without a quotation is not?"

Korach then went on to show all the injustices that could follow from following the Torah as given to them by Moshe. He made a story up about a poor widow who only owned one field. She could not plow it properly because the Torah forbade plowing with an ox and an ass together. She could not plant it properly because the Torah forbade

planting with mixed seed. She could not even harvest all her meager crop because the Torah says you must leave the corners of your field for the poor. Because of all these hardships, she was forced to sell her field and bought with the money ~~Lambs~~<sup>lamb</sup>. Of course, Korach did not stop there. He said, "From these few sheep she had to give part of the fleece to the priests and the first born to the priests. Look who is impoverishing her! Moshe's law and the priests!"

Korach, by concentrating his arguments and not putting them in the proper context, had made a convincing case against Moshe and Moshe's Torah. However, you cannot plow with an ox and an ass together. The animals walk at different paces. Sowing with different seeds makes harvesting difficult and getting a good price for the crop impossible as well as making the resulting seed sterile. All of Korach's criticisms can be rebutted if put in context. Sometimes, for the sake of argument and for the sake of research, it is important to disregard the context and just look at the logical conclusions of one's thoughts. (Boullian algebra, a system of computation which is ~~based~~<sup>based</sup> on just a yes or no answer, was thought to be an oddity until computers came along. Many human experiments in very limited contexts can have a wider application as important tools in modern life, but we must always recognize their limitations.

Many times people, especially in interpersonal relationships, by pushing their arguments to the limit, leave out so much they invariably

JUNE 1984  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky  
PAGE FIVE

make the wrong decisions. I know so many people who have come to me with different marriage or business problems, and many of the problems they have, have come about because they have looked at their problems in such a narrow way. Instead of looking at the many good things, the 90%, the 95% good things they have in their relationships, they look at only the 10% or 5% or 1% bad things. This very small percentage drives them crazy. They do not have the proper perspective. This was Korach. He wanted to be high priest so badly that he magnified the faults in Aaron and Moshe while minimizing his and other leaders' important roles in the community. He was able to convince himself and others that Moshe and Aaron were <sup>over-weening</sup> overweening, arrogant people who had usurped authority which did not belong to them.

In Hebrew the word "Korach" can also mean "to uproot" and also "to rob a person of alternatives." "Kereach Meekan U'Meekan." Korach, by his overwhelming concentration on fulfilling his own ambition, had robbed himself and others of alternatives. He stirred up so much trouble that he made the issue either <sup>chose me OR chose Moshe</sup> ~~Moshe~~ or ~~him~~. The issue was settled when he was literally swallowed up by the earth. 250 followers were consumed by fire, by the fire of their own ambition. We must all learn how to be filled with enthusiasm without being burnt by the fires of our own passions. The problem with an excessive concentration on particular issues is that you end up guarding one tree so well that all the rest of the forest is cut down before you even know what happened.

We must always put everything in perspective. Judaism teaches balance and moderation. Even in Jewish learning we distinguish between theory

and Halacha L'Massa, practical Halacha. Not all those who are brilliant scholars can be Poskeem, deciders of Jewish law. There is much more that is required than brilliant intellect. There is the ability to see all sides of every problem and put the problem in its proper context. Korach was a Levi who had special duties and benefitted from the first tithe of Israel, yet he saw himself persecuted and discriminated against, and because of this, all his brilliant intellect, his towering ambition, and his wealth were for naught. They were all misdirected.

Perhaps that is why the holiday of Shavuos is not celebrated with more pomp and ceremony. It was not the receiving of the Ten Commandments and the Torah which is of prime importance to the Jews. It is learning how to apply the Torah to all aspects of life which is of prime importance to us. Brilliant truths that cannot be implemented in life, that cannot change and modify a person's behavior for the better are not enough. We rejoice and celebrate in the giving of the Torah every time we do a Mitzvah, when we say "Asher Kidoshanu B'Mitzvos Tzav", "Who has sanctified us with His Commandments." The man of Torah not only knows how to concentrate, focus an intellectual beam on his problems and the problems of the community, but he also knows how to solve them <sup>by</sup> taking into account all the factors involved.

In the Torah Korach we learn about the great rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu. Korach was successful in rousing the people against Moshe because the people, at this time, were dispirited, upset, and angry. They had just learned that G-d was condemning their generation to wander in the desert until they all died out. This was a fate they could not accept. They were angry that such a thing should happen to them, and they were looking for a focus for their anger. Korach gave them that focus, and that was Moshe and Aaron. The people were ready for a demagogue to come along and inflame them because they were already upset. They did not have the courage to look at themselves and say, "It was our fault". Instead, they needed a scapegoat so they looked outward toward Moshe. This is the way, of course, it works many times in life. Many times a husband will be yelled at by his boss, and when he comes home he will have to get his anger out and will focus his anger on his wife. He'll complain that the food is no good, the house is dirty, the kids are messy, etc., and the wife will not understand what has happened. At the same time, the opposite occurs. The wife gets angry because of something that happened at home and she is upset, and when her husband comes home she really unloads on him. Many times when we deal with people we have to understand where their anger is coming from, that their anger is not really directed at us but at the different circumstances which have happened to them during the day.

This is the same thing that happened at the time of Korach. Korach realized the people were upset and angry and he, therefore, fanned their anger until it exploded. Unfortunately, even today in many Jewish organizations there are people who like to stir up things, to make people angry, because this gives them power. They are able then to attack people in charge and maybe gain control of the organization themselves.

People know that when you can other's anger you can manipulate and use them. That is, of course, what Korach did. There was great dissatisfaction with Moshe at this time. In fact, Dason and Aviron, one of the ring leaders of the rebellion with Korach, stated explicitly, "Moshe, you are no good. You are much of a leader. True, you took us out of Egypt, but you left us here to die, and not to a land of milk and honey have you brought us. You have not given us the possession of field and vineyard." Dason and Aviron knew what the people were really angry at. They were upset because they had to confront their own fate, and they did not want to confront it and take responsibility for their actions.

This was see very clearly later on, too, when, after the rebellion of Korach and his cohorts was put down and it was even put down in a supernatural way with Korach being swallowed up by an earthquake and the 250 other leaders forfeited their lives because they offered a sacrifice when they should not have in the Temple and they were consumed just as Dason and Avihu were, we see that immediately after this the people still complained. It was not really the leadership of Korach and Dason and Avihu which really started the rebellion; they only focused the rebellion. The rebellion was really because the people could not accept their fate. Even though Moshe was forgiving, even though Moshe separated the 250 leaders who had offered sacrificed from Korach, Dason, and Aviron by taking the sensors that they had brought and pounding them into plate, which would surround the altar, showing that these people at least had good motives. They wanted to get close to G-d. They were just misled and let their anger get away from them. Even though Moshe was forgiving, the people still could not accept what had happened. "And they complained all the congregation of the Sons of Israel against Moshe and Aaron saying, 'You are killing the nation of G-d.'" In other words, they could not accept their fate. They did not like what had happened and did not want to stay in the desert.

There are two way that we can attack a problem when we seem to run up against a very difficult problem. We can either focus our anger against somebody else, failing to confront the problem at all, or otherwise we can take our anger and direct it against ourselves, which, of course, leads to great depression. When we direct our anger against others it leads to rage, and when we direct it against ourselves it leads to depression. The people did not know there was a third alternative, that they could face the problem and do the best they could, realize who they were and what they were and then make the best of their situation without getting angry at somebody else or themselves. This, at this time, the people could not do, because they did not have these mature qualities which were necessary in order to meet life head on. That is, of course, why they were condemned to wander in the desert.

A plague then broke out among the Jewish people after they said, "You killed the nation of G-d." It was only thanks to Moshe and Aaron that the people were saved. Moshe then knew that something had to be done to assuage the anger of the people and he then proposed, of course, at G-d's command, that all the tribes take a staff and Aaron take a staff and they place it in the tent of meeting, in the Tabernacle, and then the next morning they would see whose staff had bloomed. The only staff that bloomed was that of Aaron, and then the people were willing to accept their fate. Although they still had lingering doubts, they said, "Hein Gavanu Avadnu Kulonu Uvadnu - Behold we perish, we are done, we are all undone." In other words, while before they directed their anger at Moshe and afterwards they had directed the anger at themselves and become depressed, now at least they were willing to confront the situation and make the best of it.

Why, though, was Aaron chosen to be the High Priest, and why did Aaron's staff bloom and blossom? The answer, to my mind, is that Aaron was one of the people. He had sinned at the sin of the golden calf, whether

willingly or unwillingly, but he was partially guilty. It was not at all clear that he would escape the fate of the generation who were condemned to wander in the desert. It looked at though he, too, would die, and, in fact, he did die before he entered the Promised Land, but Aaron did not let that situation destroy him. He did not turn his anger at Moshe or against himself and become depressed. Instead, he said, "If that is the situation, I'll make the best of it. I will do what I have to do. I will take those talents and opportunities that I do have and make the most of them." That is, of course, the way it is in life. Many times in life we are terribly frustrated because we cannot do things we would like to do, but instead of turning angry against others or ourselves, we should make the best of what we are. There are certain people I know who are 5'0" who are mad they are not 5'8", and certain people who are way over 6'0" who are mad they are not shorter because they are always bumping their head, and other who are 5'8" who wish they would be smaller so they could be jockeys. We all have to come to terms with our own abilities and character, and we have to make the best of what we have and what we are. We have to turn our weaknesses into strengths.

That is, of course, one of the purposes of Judaism: to teach us how to make our weaknesses into strengths. We take what we have and we do the best we can. Many times we can turn a bad situation into a beautiful and wonderful situation if only we will apply ourselves. I think it is no mistake and no accident that the immigrant generation that came to this country, by and large, many of them became scrap dealers. What this means, of course, is they took things that everybody discarded and thought were worthless, and they turned them into something of value. That, of course, is what the Jewish tradition teaches us to do: to take those things other people may think worthless and turn them into something of value. That is something which takes a lot of maturity and guts and stick-to-it-iveness. That is why the people I admire in this community are not generally the people who are successful. To my mind,

the people who really deserve honor and respect are those people who have suffered a lot of hard knocks in life, but they have not let the hard knocks get them down; and they have always come back and made the best of every situation they were in. Many times in life we get hard knocks, not because of what we have done, but instead of moping or getting angry at others or turning the anger against ourselves and becoming depressed, what we need to do is make the best of our situation, to turn, so to speak, the discards and junk of our life into something of value. That is something that the generation who came up from Egypt could not understand, and that, of course, is why they had to wander in the desert until they died out. In this life what we must do is not use anger in order to manipulate others, as Korach, the demagogue, did. He tried on purpose to get people angry because then he could manipulate them. He could destroy them. When people become angry they, many times, lose their common sense and destroy themselves and others. We cannot let our anger be directed outward, and we should not let our anger be directed inward because that will just depress us and destroy us, too. What we need to do is confront the situations of life positively and make the best of them, just as Aaron did, and then, most certainly, our lives will flourish and bloom, too. It is interesting to note that the word for staff here is "mattos". "Matta" can mean "to go down", just like "Malla" means "above", "Matta" means "down". Unless we learn to make the best of every situation in life we will not improve but will instead go down and destroy ourselves. Let us hope and pray that none of us, through anger or depression, will destroy ourselves, but that we will confront every situation positively and turn our weaknesses into strengths. Amen.

KORACH 1994  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion Korach we learn how Korach, Moshe's cousin, starts a rebellion against him, and we see how he enlists in this rebellion primarily the Tribe of Levi and also people from the Tribe of Reuben. We can understand why the Tribe of Reuben was upset because they received nothing that the firstborn usually would receive. They did not get the priesthood; that went to Levi, to Aaron, who was a member of the Tribe of Levi, and the double portion went to Yosef and the leadership was destined to go to Judah. We can understand why he was upset and we can also understand why the Levites were upset because they felt that they would all share equally in the priesthood with Aaron, but did Korach find support among the other tribes? The rabbis say we have to look at when this event transpired. The majority of opinion is that this event took place right after the Jewish people failed to heed the advice of Kore Ben Yefunah and Joshua and instead took the advice of the ten spies and refused to go into the land of Israel. It was at this time that G-d said that that generation would now have to die out in the desert. They were disgruntled. They had brought the punishment upon themselves but they were still unhappy. There was fertile ground upon which to start a rebellion and Korach seized this opportunity. We see that he enlisted in this rebellion not only people who wanted the priesthood but also people who just wanted to pick fights, just people who wanted to bring down Moshe. Dason and Avihu were these kind of people. The rabbis say, though, that the Tribe of Levi actually had holy motives. When Moshe answered them roughly because they told him, "It is enough for you, Moshe, that you want to be the great leader in everything else," and so he answered them likewise. He answered them, "It is enough for you, the sons of Levi." The rabbis say he was punished for this because when he wanted to go into the land of Israel G-d told him, "It is enough for you, Moshe. Don't plead for Me in this case anymore." The Tribe of Levi actually had religious aspirations. They thought that they could only reach G-d if they would be able to be members of the priesthood which, of course, was not true.

KORACH 1994

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Page Two

It is hard to understand how after this rebellion was put down that G-d commanded that Moshe Rabbeinu take the sensors that they had placed on the altar to show whether they should be priests and to use them to cover the altar with, that although these 250 Levites had paid with their lives because fire had come down from G-d and incinerated when they put their sensors into the HOLY of Holies, yet, they were motivated by spiritual motivation. Therefore, G-d did not want that these sensor pans should be completely be discarded because the people's motives were not entirely wrong. They were actually holy and pure.

Later on, too, after Dason and Aviron and Korach were swallowed up by the earth, they and their followers, the people still were disgruntled. The people afterwards came and complained against Moshe Rabbeinu and Aaron and they said, "You are killing of the nation of G-d." At this time G-d became angry and caused a plague to come and Aaron had to quickly stand in the breach holding up his firepan and the plague stopped, but the people still were not convinced. The next day Moshe Rabbeinu had to tell the people to choose a staff, one for each tribe, and that they would take it and place it in the HOLY of Holies along with Aaron's staff and they would see in the morning whose staff would actually bloom. When it turned out that Aaron's staff was blooming then the people finally accepted Aaron's leadership as the high priest. The truth of the matter was that the Jewish people were not just complaining against who was to be high priest; they were complaining against the Torah, itself. They thought that the Torah and Jewish life was just too hard. It was not something that they could really observe. Therefore, they were open to the complaints of Korach and his company. It was true that they had listened to the ten spies but now they had to die out in the wilderness and now they had to observe all these commandments and they felt that it was just too hard for them. They had spiritual yearnings but they felt that they could satisfy these spiritual yearnings in another way.

This is very similar to today where the Jewish people, too, are many of them attracted to cults. In fact, the percentage of Jews in cults is ten times the percentage of the Jews in the general population. There is a spiritual awakening in America among the Jewish people but the Jewish people are not turning to Torah because they think it is too hard. They think it is all negative. They do not think that it can make their lives blossom. Therefore, we need leaders like Aaron who are willing to go out among the people and to show they how it causes their life to be better. That is why it was Aaron's staff that blossomed and it was Aaron who stopped the plague and not Moshe because Aaron took his sensor outside and said, "Listen, if you observe Judaism your lives will be enhanced and be more beautiful," and when his staff blossomed he said, "Your life is going to be so much better.

Your life, so to speak, is going to blossom." That is one of the reasons that the blossom that came out was the almond because the results of observing the Jewish way of life are not in the distant future but after you observe a few Shabbosim you will realize how much Shabbos gives to you, and if you observe the laws of kashruth you will see how much is added to your life. Not only will you have meaning in your life but your life is regulated in such a way that you should be able to deal with the many conflicting pressures that are put upon us and the conflicting drives that are put upon us and are able to deal with life in a beautiful and wonderful way. That is, of course, why it is so important that we have people who go out and present Judaism positively and not negatively. So many people think that Judaism is only religion and no, no, no, but that is not true. Judaism is a positive religion and it tell us no for our own benefit.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a trucker who with his pal was crossing the country. They noticed a sign that said that the clearance for the next underpass was 15'10" and they knew that their rig was 15'2". One looked at the other and said, "Let's look outside." They looked outside and decided to have chutzpah and said, "Let's go ahead and run for it. We can make it." They could not make it

not because of policemen stopping them for arbitrary rules that their truck was going to be behind. It was because their truck just could not make this type of an underpass and if they tried to ram this truck through the underpass they were going to be hurt. It is the same thing with Jewish life. Jewish life gives us so many wonderful things and enhances our lives and allows us to navigate many of the shoals and hard places of life with otherwise could bring us down. This was why Moshe even after the Jewish people had sinned, how the other people were destroyed, it was not enough. They still did not want to listen to him. It is not enough to be negative or present a negative view of Judaism. We have to present a positive view of Judaism and when they saw that Aaron's staff had blossomed and saw that it could not blossom after many, many, many years but it blossomed after just a little while then they felt that Judaism could enhance their lives and was good for them. That is, of course, what we must teach our children, too, if we are to have this strong Judaism. That is why we have to encourage people to go out and bring people close to our religion by showing its beauty through Shabbatonim and through lectures and through living experiences in Jewish homes. If we can show the beauty of Judaism to our young people and show how it makes their lives flower and enhances their life in every respect, then we can rest assured the Jewish people will embrace Judaism wholeheartedly and will not conceive of it as a negative thing but as a positive force in our lives so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

**KORACH 1999**  
**Rabbi Joseph Radinsky**

In the Torah portion Korach, we learn about the great rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe Rabbeinu adopts a very hard line. He becomes very confrontational. This is very similar to what he did during the time the people worshipped the golden calf. He smashed the tablets and pursued the offenders and punished them severely. Aaron, on the other hand, adopts a much softer line. Aaron cooperated with the people hoping to change them from the inside. He suggests the people gather their gold, which was later turned into the golden calf. This time, too, even after the perpetrators of the great rebellion were punished, and Korach and his cohorts were swallowed up by the earth, as Moshe had asked G-d to do, the people were still not satisfied. It was only after Aaron's staff was taken and placed in the Tabernacle, along with the other princes of Israel, and only Aaron's staff flowered, were the people satisfied.

It is difficult to know when to be confrontational and when to be cooperative. Since both approaches are mentioned in the Torah, then perhaps both approaches are equally valid; sometimes we have to use one, and sometimes we have to use another. It is true that under the Nazis, the cooperative approach did not work at all and led to disastrous results. It is equally true that under the Romans the confrontational approach was equally disastrous.

## KORACH 1999

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Today we need to use both quiet diplomacy and protest. Thirteen Jews have been arrested by the Iranian authorities on trumped up spy charges and face the prospect of being hung. We need both approaches: appropriate protests and quiet diplomacy.

What, though, was Korach's sin? The Torah portion just starts off by saying Vayechach Korach - and Korach took - but it does not say what Korach took. The rabbis are ambivalent regarding Korach. Most of them roundly condemn him, but the Kotzker Rebbe refers to him as our holy grandfather, which implies that although his actions turned out to be bad, his motivations were pure. We can see that he raised very good children. In fact, his children wrote many of the Psalms in the Book of Psalms, and Samuel, the prophet, is a direct descendent. The rabbis say that he took himself and his ideas too seriously. He thought that after Mount Sinai the millennium had come. We now had a new man, and, therefore, everybody who was touched by the Sinaitic experience was a completely new creature. After all, each of them had apprehended G-d. The experience had radically transformed them, and they no longer needed these ritual distinctions which Moshe was trying to impose on the

## KORACH 1999

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

people. After all, everyone was holy. The whole people was holy.

As Rabbi Riskin pointed out, he felt that now we were like the Tzadikim who were circling Hashem, that we learned about at the end of the Gemora Tanes. There it says that at the end of days, all of us will circle G-d and say, "This is the G-d Who I waited for." A circle is different than a lineal depiction of society because everybody in a circle is equidistant from the center, and everyone is always going in the same direction. Third, a circle can always expand to include everybody. A circle is a symbol of Messianic time when everybody is closer to G-d, when everybody realizes his responsibilities, and when everyone makes room for everyone else. Unfortunately, after Mount Sinai, we were still in a lineal society. We did not become a circular society. Some people were closer to G-d than others. Some people would not make way for others. Some people thought they should go in a different direction. We need Torah and mitzvahs to make sure that we do not harm others, and to make sure that we can approach G-d without harming others.

Throughout Jewish history, this error has been made repeatedly. People

**KORACH 1999**

**Rabbi Joseph Radinsky**

thought they no longer needed the Torah and mitzvahs because we are completely new. This is what the early Christians did. They no longer needed the Torah and mitzvahs since they now had faith.

This is also what the followers of Shabshai Tzvi believed, and we know that many Jews, when they came to America, felt that Torah and mitzvahs were no longer needed because in America they had found a new way to live which made the Torah and mitzvahs superfluous. The communists and socialists believe that 100%. They even mocked religion, saying it was deleterious to human development. We know all these groups were proved to be wrong. Human nature has not changed at all in the 100 years of recorded history. We still are filled with ambition and lust and avarice. We are pulled in many directions at the same time. There is no such thing as a new man. The Torah and mitzvahs allow us to balance our conflicting needs and desires. Without this restraint, the thin veneer of civilization falls away from each of us. Look at what happened in Bosnia, to people from the same ethnic group. They look like each other. They are all Slavs. They speak the same language. They dress the same, but look at all the brutality that came out just these last few weeks in

## KORACH 1999

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Kosovo. It is true that we have new technologies, new science, new literature, new forms of government, but deep down, we are the same human beings.

Even in our country we witnessed the fire bombings of three synagogues this weekend, and in Israel, too, those groups who are far from the Jewish traditions are beset by all the same problems that everyone else is. Two teenagers were murdered in Israel by their fellow students by knives because of some slight insult. We know that serious wife and child abuse is up, too. The orthodox community is somehow blamed for all this by the secular, but the truth of the matter is, to my knowledge, no orthodox woman has been killed by her husband in Israel, and although you will always find some physical abuse, it cannot be eradicated because of different psychotic personalities. The truth of the matter is, there is less in the orthodox community. Of course, if you want to define abuse as shouting and sarcasm, it is high. I had a gentile judge friend who marveled at the fact that almost no Jewish abuse came before him and no juvenile delinquents. After all, Jews did not come home every Saturday night drunk and beat their wives. Jews, though, too, can do similar things if they get far from Torah and mitzvahs.

## KORACH 1999

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

There is no such thing as a new man. Korach made a fundamental error, and, therefore, he needed to be put down. Even though his motivation was good, his conclusions were false. Man is not naturally good. We also believe that man is not naturally bad. Man is neutral, and he will, unless he is trained, take the course of least resistance. It is important that we all realize that we need Torah and mitzvahs to lead uplifting lives. Without them, we are prey to all the various forces which wreak havoc with out moral understanding. I am sure that the Serbian troops, both regular and irregular, thought they were doing the right thing when they committed the atrocities they did on the Albanians. After all, true peace could only be had if the Serbians live in Serbia and the Albanians live in Albania. Their actions were certainly not informed by Torah and mitzvahs. Unless we make the strenuous efforts to keep the Torah and mitzvahs, we, too, will founder and become moral dwarves.

I am reminded of the story they tell about three mice who were sent up in a spaceship for experimental purposes. When they came down, the reporters crowded around and asked, "Where did you get the courage to go up to space? What did you do beforehand?" The mice replied, "Well, beforehand we were

**KORACH 1999**

**Rabbi Joseph Radinsky**

in cancer research." It is very important that we all make the effort to keep Torah and mitzvahs, otherwise we will not be able to soar to the heights, to spiritually elevate ourselves. Let us all hope and pray that we will realize that there is no such thing as a new man. We all needed Torah mitzvahs, as Moshe has taught us, to reach up to find our better selves. May we all do so soon so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

