

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Exposing Ourselves

Shabbat Korach | 5 Tammuz; June 26 - 27, 2009

The rebellion of Korach and his supporters is, on the face of it, pretty absurd. They stand before Moses and Aaron and complain "It is too much for you. For all of the assembly (e.g. all the Israelites)...are holy. Why do you the exalt yourselves over the over the Congregation of G-d...Is it not enough that you have brought us out of land flowing with milk and honey (Egypt!) to cause us to die in the wilderness. Shall you further lord over us, even to increase your dominance?" (Numbers 16: 3, 13)

No one in his or her right mind would identify Egyptian slavery with milk and honey. Further, Moses tried very hard to get out of leadership when first commissioned by G-d, and is so humble that he forbears the vicious slanders even of his siblings. Aaron is famous for yielding, not for dominating (as in the Golden Calf episode).

Characteristically, Moses' first response is to defend not himself, but others: "As for Aaron, what is he that you complain about him?" (16:11). Rabbi Meir Arik understands Korach's attack on Aaron in light of a famous Talmudic teaching of Rabbi Illa'i (Eruvin 65b): "A person's character may be determined by three things, his cup (koso) his purse (kiso) and his anger (ka'aso)". If you want to really know a person, see how he or she behaves when financially strapped, inebriated, or provoked to anger.

According to Rabbi Arik, the first two tests were moot in the case of Aaron who as a priest had no material possessions and was not allowed to become intoxicated. The only way to reveal Aaron's character was to incite him to anger. The argument between Moses and Korach, then, is not absurd, but shrewd. Both understand what buttons are necessary to push when testing another.

There are defining moments when character is really exposed. "When a man is angry his true nature can be recognized. If his wrath is stronger than his wisdom ...then he does things in the moment of his anger without regard to his wisdom. But if his wisdom is stronger than his anger and he does not say or do anything when angry that he would not say or do when he is free from anger, then you can see the extent of his wisdom...Indeed, if you're looking for a good and faithful friend, make (a prospect) angry. If he can be sincere with you at the moment of his anger, become his friend". (Orchot Tzadikim, the Paths of the Righteous).

In contrast to the opinion of many today, stress should be not an excuse for behavior, but a goad for self-improvement.