

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Korach)

I recently saw a T shirt that said: ‘*It is better to give than to receive*’

Then on the back of the T shirt it added: ‘*So you give and I’ll receive!*’

We live in a culture that seems to carry this mantra almost as its *raison d’être*.

Years ago, we spent three years in the States where our children had the chance to study in American yeshivot and develop close friendships with their American peers.

Our eldest daughter in particular had the chance to befriend some very special girls in her age group with whom she was able to keep connection years after we came back to Israel.

When she was a senior in High School here, she, along with all of her Israeli friends, were navigating their options for the year post-High School and debating their choices: Army?; National Service? ; Seminary studies *and then* army or National Service?

At the same time all her friends from the States were equally engaged with their post-High School plans: should they attend College directly or spend a year in what has become a rite of passage for US Yeshiva HS kids: the gap year. And if a gap year, which seminary would be best for them? Our daughter kept getting e-mails from her friends asking her to recommend which seminary she thought they could get the most out of the next year.

One day, at our Shabbat table, our daughter shared a thought that has remained with me : ‘You know, I just figured out a big difference between growing up in America and growing up in Israel : All my friends in America are trying to figure out where they will *get* the most, while all of us in Israel are trying to figure out where we will be able to *give* the most. ‘

Now, mind you, these American friends of hers were and are quality girls, who grew up in homes that were all about giving. And obviously the American Jewish community is notable for its culture of giving. Just walk into any hospital, nursing home, or school in America and that much is clear.

And yet, there is something here that should give us pause.

This issue is actually the precise topic of this week’s portion, *Korach*, which describes Korach’s ill-fated rebellion against Moshe and Aaron. There is much discussion regarding the exact nature of this rebellion, yet one thing is clear: Korach was a taker; that seems to have been his biggest issue.

Indeed, our portion begins with the words: “*Va’Yikach Korach*”, “*And Korach took...*”(Bamidbar 16:1) however, the verse never explains exactly what it was that Korach actually took, and we are left without the end of the sentence, because it isn’t important. Korach, says the Torah, was a taker. And in the end, the only cause Korach was fighting for was Korach.

Equally interesting is the topic with which the Torah chooses to conclude the portion of Korach: the laws of tithes and contributions to and by the tribe of Levi. Considering that part of the rebellion of Korach and his followers (really two separate rebellions as witness two separate groups punished in two

distinct fashions : an earthquake and fire ...) was against the tribe of Levi, the Torah discusses the role of the Levites and the gifts and tithes they are due. Even the Levites themselves must give a tithe to the priests. And the Priest is not allowed to barter favors in return for receiving these tithes and other contributions as it would cheapen the gift; a Jew should give purely in order to give.

So if Judaism places such an emphasis on giving, how do we end up with a Korach who was depicted as such a Taker? Jewish tradition suggests that what fueled Korach's fire and for that matter all of his followers, was pure envy. Korach was jealous of Moshe and Aaron's position and wanted the same stature. And the Reubenites were jealous as they felt they deserved a lead role, considering they were descendants of Yaakov's eldest son Reuven.

Maimonides (*Hilchot Deot*; Laws of character development 2:7) quoting the *Mishna* in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers 4:21) points out that: "***Jealousy, Desire, and Honor remove a person from this world***".

These three character flaws: Jealousy, Desire for physical self-gratification, and the unhealthy pursuit of Honor prevent a person from living life in the world as it is meant to be. Obviously if we are consumed with the desire for people to give us respect, we will become jealous when others are accorded more respect than we are. And the desire to have and to own material things will inevitably lead us to pay attention when others have the things we crave and yet have not acquired.

So what is jealousy all about? And why is it so problematic? And most important how can we avoid it in order to live a balanced life?

Think about it: If I want what you have, it means that I think I should have it. And yet, Hashem has not given it to me, so why do I think I should have it? If Hashem created me, then whatever I have is what I obviously need, and more important, what Hashem seems to think I should have, in this moment. So jealousy inevitably must mean I am not really respecting what Hashem has decided in the world, at least right now.

This is not to say we should not be motivated to accomplish and succeed in life, but it challenges us to consider *why* we want to succeed and accomplish, which is every bit as important as *what* we want to do.

There are three questions a person must ask him or herself, in any and every given moment:

What do I want?

Why do I want it?

Do I think Hashem (G-d) really wants me to want this for that reason?

Maimonides suggests that the root of all our imbalances are that we think the world is all about us, and whenever it's all about me, it will end up a mess.

We get angry, because we think we deserve better, and we become arrogant because we are too much at the center of our universe. But if it's always about something bigger than us, then we are living in a different and better world.

As an example, for over 100 years we have been in conflict with the Arabs around us, and the root of the issue may well be simple, base jealousy. The Jewish people, with Hashem's help, have built a

remarkable Start up Nation sending satellites to space and creating technology that has changed the world, while some of our neighbors are still ploughing fields with donkeys. And as long as their question remains 'how do we get more', we will never be able to give them enough. Rather, when we all are focused on how we can make the world a better place to be, inevitably it is more easily accomplished together.

And the same principle holds true for our own youth: we need to inspire a culture of giving in every sphere.

As an example, the cohort with the greatest potential for Jewish leadership may well be the young post-High School students who arrive in Israel every year for ten months of intense Jewish programming and study, most of them after 12 years of Jewish education. We have given them so much, when they take their next step into the larger Jewish community; it is high time they start giving back. Here in Israel that is exactly what they do, in the Israeli army and in social services projects all over the country.

And as students embark on their Jewish lives post programs and schools, the measure of our success in educating them is actually how much they value giving back, as well as how much and how they actually do just that. By focusing on what we all have to share and give, the taking of Korach does indeed get swallowed up into the dust where it belongs.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem

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