

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

## **From Rav Binny Freedman**

### **(Portion of Korach)**

*The sensei clapped his hands loudly: "Yame!" ('Stop!'); and the entire Dojo (everyone in the Karate Training hall) went silent.*

*We all gathered and sat as our Sensei (Master) strode to the front of the hall. He motioned to one of the larger brown belts in the room to stand and assume a fighting stance, and then pointed to Laurie to stand opposite. Were it not for everyone's serious demeanor I would have burst into laughter; she could not have been more than 5 feet tall, a thin wisp of a girl, and seeing her assume a fighting stance opposite the tall muscular brown belt seemed ludicrous. Barry was well over six feet and all muscle; he probably outweighed her by almost a hundred pounds, and had been training for nearly five years, while Laurie had only joined the Dojo six months earlier.*

*My mind vividly recalled almost the exact same scene when Laurie had first walked into the Dojo with some twenty other College co-eds from Pitt University in response to a martial arts ad in the College newspaper.*

*There had been a spate of terrible rapes and attacks in and around the campus, targeting young female College students, and our Sensei felt a responsibility to try and do something about it. So, he had developed a six month course to train young women with no previous experience to defend themselves in emergency situations, and he had asked for volunteers to learn his system and help teach and train these students. Fascinated by whether a student could move from helplessness to competence in such a short time, I volunteered for what proved to be a fantastic and successful experiment.*

*To make his point, our Sensei, who happened to be the head of security at Pitt University and thus took the matter personally, created a demonstration. On the first day of the course, Laurie was asked to step to the front of the class and try to defend herself against the same Brown belt: Barry. She stood opposite him and a look of terror crossed her face as he suddenly thundered across the room at her full force. To her credit she tried to hit him, but the blows glanced off him, and he picked her up, holding her arms at her side as she wildly flailed her legs in the air. It was a comical sight and the entire Dojo burst out laughing as he tossed her effortlessly onto the mat.*

*"If this were an actual, attacker" said our Sensei, "It would have been over before it began, and you would be in a hospital or a morgue.*

*We are going to spend the next six months teaching you how to change that outcome fundamentally, so that your assailant ends up in the hospital, or better yet, never even attacks you, realizing quickly you are not the target he is looking for."*

*Six months later, I watched them standing opposite each other, and it seemed the scene was about to repeat itself. The only indication this time might be different was the determined look on Laurie's face.*

*As Barry let out a roar and charged across the floor, I actually sensed the hint of a smile on Laurie's face. Just as Barry reached her, she deftly stepped out of the way throwing her foot out, and as Barry thundered past, she collapsed the back of his leg with her foot and he crashed to the ground. Instantly on top of him she reached inside his thigh finding the Sciatic nerve, one of the most painful pressure points in the body and as she pressed, he slammed his hand down repeatedly on the mat, signifying his submission.*

*How does a 110 pound girl learn to overpower a third degree Brown belt in 4 hours a week, over six months?*

This week's portion of *Korach*, contains a valuable lesson in overcoming and resolving conflict.

Korach, at face value, is a disgruntled cousin of Moshe with leadership qualities with an unfortunate penchant for cynical politics. He mounts a rebellion that very nearly results in the destruction of the entire Jewish people (Bamidbar (Numbers) 16:21).

Moshe proposes an amicable solution: let all those who would desire the priestly leadership offer up incense in the morning, before the tabernacle, and allow Hashem (G-d) to make clear who is indeed chosen.

It is worth noting that Moshe might have hoped they would take a moment to consider that the last time, under far more favorable circumstances, incense was offered at men's initiative (rather than G-d's ) it did not end well; Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu were killed for offering a 'strange fire' of incense not that much earlier. (*Vayikra* (Leviticus) 10:1-2). Indeed, as we shall see these two hundred and fifty men who sought the priesthood would ultimately suffer the exact same fate.

But although this proposal seems a healthy way to resolve the conflict, something goes wrong. Korach, instead of simply acquiescing, spends the night (see Rashi *ibid.* v.19) recruiting the people to his cause, subsequently gathering the entire congregation (*ibid.* v. 19) against Moshe and Aaron.

At this point Hashem intervenes and in fulfillment of Moshe's prediction ((*ibid.* v. 30) brings a miraculous earthquake causing the earth to open up and swallow up Korach and those closest to him entirely (*ibid.* v. 32). Then, to finish the point, the rest of the 250 followers from the tribe of Reuben who offered up incense that morning were consumed by a heavenly fire. (*ibid.* v. 35)

With the rebels completely annihilated by the hand of G-d this story should be over; end of story, right?

Yet the story does not end here. The next morning, the people, despite all they have seen are still upset, (*ibid.* 17-6) and seem still to be challenging Moshe and Aaron's leadership! How could they still harbor any doubts as to the authenticity of Moshe and Aaron's roles after seeing Hashem's hand weigh in so obviously and directly?

Hashem's response to this new and yet continued challenge (*ibid.* v. 10) is to offer yet again to destroy the entire Jewish people. At which point Moshe and Aaron (*ibid.* v.11-15), using the same incense save the people from destruction!

At this point one might have expected Hashem to open up the earth again or bring down the same all-consuming heavenly fire to destroy all those who yet dare to doubt Hashem's choice of Moshe and Aaron as the people's leaders. Yet Hashem only offers no such destruction, ultimately offering a completely different path to resolve this rebellion:

Hashem tells Moshe to gather the leaders of the twelve tribes all of whom will bring their staffs and place them before the tent of meeting and in the morning a miracle occurred and the staff of Aaron grew a plant which flowered and blossomed with almond blossoms, thus demonstrating that Aaron was indeed chosen by G-d as the High Priest. (ibid. v. 16-24) which finally quelled the rebellion and resolved the conflict.

And one wonders: why wasn't an earthquake enough to make the point?

Perhaps the Torah is sharing with us a fundamental lesson regarding conflict resolution: Conflicts are never resolved by force alone; it is only with dialogue and inclusion that we really move past our battles and struggles; Force alone simply never solves the problem; it merely puts it off for another day.

This is not to say that force and even war have no place; sometimes they are necessary. But we should never delude ourselves into thinking we have resolved the issue simply by winning the day.

As an example, no modern peace treaty has ever been achieved before a war was won. Peace came to Vietnam when the Americans (and South Vietnamese) realized they had lost. And peace has largely reigned in Europe for the past seventy-five years because the Allies won World War II without challenge. But it was not winning the war that resolved the conflict; that needed mediation, inclusion and dialogue. In fact after World War I, a war which was also won unequivocally by Allied forces did not resolve the conflict, because the treaty was not part of an inclusive dialogue, it was forced upon the losing side, ultimately leading to world War II, the greatest tragedy in World History a mere twenty years later .

Indeed, here in the Middle East, Israel has fought a myriad of Wars, but with few exceptions, the Arabs have not accepted that we won, such that for the most part they are still not ready to sit and dialogue. But make no mistake about it: even if the Arabs finally accept the war is unwinnable for them, we will not resolve this conflict until we find a way to dialogue and find an inclusive solution based on reasonable compromises we can all live with.

In this writer's opinion, Anwar Sadat finally realized we had won the war and would not be beaten on the battlefield. So, he brought Egypt to the table and we have had peace with Egypt for over forty years. King Hussein of Jordan came to the same conclusion which is why we have had peace with Jordan for twenty-five years. And while there is much room for improvement in both those peace treaties, there is much to be thankful for as well.

Yasser Arafat, however, never really learned that lesson, and nor have his heirs Mahmoud Abbas of the PLO and Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas. Until we finish winning that war, sad and painful as that may sound, there will be no point to trying to create a peaceful, inclusive dialogue.

This is not to say such conflict resolution is impossible without force; if both sides genuinely want to find peace (and stop teaching their children to hate) it is possible, but I can't think of a modern conflict where that was accomplished without force first prevailing.... Perhaps the force of conviction and a commonly sought ideal can substitute pure force and lead to such dialogue...

And it goes without saying that this is equally true on a personal level. No conflict will ever be resolved, much less end up with a healthy outcome by force alone. Beating up a bully never solves the issue; nor does kicking a child out of class, or imposing a solution on a child without any discussion. But force can get the parties to the table for that healthy discussion if employed in the right fashion...

As an example, throwing someone's car keys away (force) if he smells of liquor may save his life, but it's the discussion and inclusive dialogue that has a hope of resolving the issue so it does not happen again. And I've never met anyone who stopped smoking because someone yelled at him or her, or threw away their pack of cigarettes....

Something to think about...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman