

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Korach)

Sometimes, the most powerful experiences are the ones you least expect. Such was the case on a recent trip to Poland. Tucked in between our visits to the Lodz Ghetto in the morning and the Warsaw Ghetto in the afternoon, we made a brief stop in a town called Czestochowa where we found ourselves on an innocuous city street off a town square. There were 30,000 Jews in Czestochowa before the war; today it is Judenrein; no Jews are left.

We were not sure where our guide was taking us as we entered an apartment building and walked down the stairs into the basement until we suddenly found ourselves squeezed into a cellar that had been dug as a bunker under the street. The walls were still raw rocks and mud, and the dank musty smell of damp and rot was overpowering.

When the last Jews of Czestochowa were being deported to Treblinka in the summer of 1943 a certain Mr. Fishman, realizing what was coming, broke through the basement wall and dug out this bunker literally beneath the street above. When the Nazis announced that all Jews must report to the Umshtagplatz for deportation he took his family and neighbors down there where they hid for 12 days.

There were 35 of them and we could not imagine how they stayed there in the cold and damp, with no air and only candles which they used sparingly, for twelve days; we were claustrophobic after twelve minutes.

Mr. Fishman himself had to lock the bunker from outside and pile furniture in front, so people would not see it or would at least think there could not be anyone in there as it was locked from the outside. He himself hid in a crawl space in the attic....

They soon ran out of food, and he managed to forage for food in homes that had been emptied of Jews....

For nearly two weeks while they remained in Czestochowa they were completely hidden from the town and thus began a life of being separate, apart and unseen as they hid eventually in sewer drains and forests for the better part of two years until they were liberated. Sometimes it is good to be apart.

This week we read the story of *Korach* whom Jewish tradition excoriates as a wicked man who was looking out for himself at the expense of the wider Jewish community.

It seems Korach, who felt he was next in line for a plumb position was put off by the fact that Aaron was designated as the new High Priest (the *Kohein Gadol*). Apparently, Korach felt he should have been chosen for this position.

So he mounted a rebellion against Moshe and Aaron ultimately resulting in his untimely demise as G-d created an earthquake which swallowed him whole.

Korach was perceived as a wicked man who was out for himself, and although he did contend that “All the members of the congregation (of Israel) are holy” (*Bamidbar* 16:3) and asked why the priests should be on a higher level, he nonetheless desired the High Priesthood for himself.

Which makes one wonder why the entire portion was named after him? Especially as the Talmud (Yoma 38b, based on the verse in Proverbs (*Mishlei* 10:7) “The *name of the wicked shall rot...*”) teaches that we should not even mention the name of the wicked.

So why is an entire portion in the Torah named after him? There must be some redeeming message hidden in his name and in what he did.

The portion of Korach is all about division and separation. Korach’s rebellion was about the feeling (or at least the public contention) that the Jewish leadership of Moshe and Aaron was too separate from the people, holding themselves to be *above* the people (ibid. 16: 3). Even the name *Korach* means a bald spot (*Sanhedrin* 109b) describing two sections of hair on a person’s head that are separated or divided.

In fact *Onkelos* in his Aramaic translation of the first words of the portion (“*And Korach took ...*” (ibid. 16:1) actually translates it as “*Ve’itpeleig*” which means to divide: Korach divided the people, trying to cut a wedge between them and the leadership.

Perhaps even as we decry Korach’s actions as well as his methodology, the Torah, by naming the portion after him, wants us to remember that division, being set apart, is not always a bad thing.

The *Noam Elimelech of Lizhensk* (quoted here by the Lubavitcher Rebbe) actually compares Korach’s actions to the second day of creation when G-d divided the waters above and below.

Interestingly the second day of Creation (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 1: 6-8) is the only day of creation which does not contain the words “and it was good”. Rashi (ibid. 1:7) explains that this is because the second day was when the waters separated, and separation is not good. That is also why on the third day when the waters come back together the phrase ‘*and it was good*’ is actually mentioned twice (ibid. v. 9-13) the first being for the completion (i.e. the re-uniting of the waters) of the division of the second day.

But if separation is not good, why did G-d separate the waters at all? And why wasn’t the re-uniting of the waters done on the same second day? Why wait till the third day?

Perhaps the message here is that sometimes separation, if only for a time, is a good thing, as long as it is not the goal.

In fact it is fascinating to note that one of the major topics of this Portion (ibid. chap. 17 and 18) is the priesthood (the *Kehunah*) even engendering a contest between some of the rebels from the tribe of Levi and Aaron himself as to who was meant to be the High Priest (the *Kohein Gadol*).

And there is an inherent paradox within the role of the *Kohein Gadol*: on the one hand he is meant to completely separate himself from the people, even confining himself to the temple and its environs (see *Rambam* (Maimonides) *Hilchot Klei haMikdash* 5;7, and *Biat ha’Mikdash* 1:10) . And yet he was also meant to be the lover and pursuer of peace, and Jewish tradition is replete with the legends of how Aaron would connect with the people and help them to resolve their differences and make peace amongst themselves. Indeed, it is Aaron who remains below Mount Sinai with and amongst the people, leading to the debacle of the Golden calf.

It seems there are times we need to separate ourselves from unhealthy environments. Indeed, the Rambam (*Deot* 6:1) suggests that if one lives in a wicked place, he is obligated to remove himself and separate from such environments. And sometimes, in order to grow and focus on one's physical and/or spiritual health, there is a need to separate from society and focus on one's own growth. (Such is the case of the Nazirite who desists from wine and certain pleasures in order to allow for self-growth.)

But ultimately the goal is to return, better than before, ready to re-engage society and impact the environment rather than have the environment simply impact us.

Perhaps this is why there needs to be a separate day in creation for valuing...separation. And perhaps this is why our portion is named after Korach, the separator, so that we recall that sometimes it is good to be apart, if only to prepare to one day come back together.

Over eighty years after the Jewish people, in bunkers forests ghettos and gas chambers were forced to acknowledge just how separate and 'other' we had become, we have with Hashem's help built a State in fulfillment of the verse (*ibid* 23:9) that we are meant to be a "*People that dwell apart*". After two thousand years we have become a nation apart with our own army and economy, judiciary, and government.

We would do well to remember the lesson of Korach: as a 'Kingdom of Priests', we are meant to be apart from the world, but a part of it as well....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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