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## EMPOWERMENT

**EMPOWERMENT IS A CENTRAL ISSUE IN MODERN LIFE. EVERYONE WANTS to have responsibility for their own lives and destiny, and also to have a significant voice in the progress of the community and even the world at large. With rights, of course, come responsibilities: the responsibility of power. Quite naturally, we want to be free and empowered ourselves and we also want others to be empowered in ways which are balanced and healthy for all. However, is there any absolute authority?**

The Sedra<sup>1</sup> this week is about this question. The authority of Moses as the transmitter of Divine teaching has been undisputed all the way through the Torah, since his first personal encounter with G-d at the Burning Bush. Together with Moses is his brother Aaron: the High Priest who conducts the service in the Sanctuary (prototype of the Temple), for the spiritual benefit of the whole people.

In this Sedra, suddenly their nephew Korach rebelled against them. He too wanted authority and power. The first part of the Sedra is about the miraculous events which made clear that Moses is the true teacher of Torah, and that Aaron and his descendants are the Divinely appointed Priesthood serving in the Sanctuary or Temple.

What does this mean for our own time? The simple message, that there is indeed a line of spiritual authority. Through the generations there has been a wonderful chain of leadership by our Sages. Ethics of

117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF  
cru@lubavitchuk.com - www.chabadresearch.net

the Fathers, which we read at this time of year, encapsulates the first millennium of this chain with its opening sentence: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Joshua; and Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly”.

Then came the chain of the Sages of the Mishna and Talmud, completed 1500 years ago. Maimonides compiled a list of forty generations from Moses to Rav Ashi, the final editor of the Babylonian Talmud<sup>2</sup>.

After the completion of the Talmud, came the teachers and scholars who expounded it and explained it, generation after generation, till our own time. In each epoch “Questions and Answers” (Responsa) addressed to and received from the leading Rabbis ensured that the application of Jewish law kept up with recent developments and showed how the principles of Jewish teaching should be applied to complex urban societies and technological developments. “If you are a spaceman on the Moon, what time does Shabbat begin and end?” *Ask the Rabbi!*

At the same time, the Torah makes clear: we are *all* empowered in our own domain, through Torah study and observance of the Mitzvot. The second half of the Sedra is about the special spiritual responsibilities of the Priests and the Levites. The Sages emphasise that each individual has the spiritual responsibility to be a ‘Priest’ or a ‘Levite’. The Torah tells us we are “a Kingdom of Priests”<sup>3</sup>. Maimonides adds that when the Torah speaks of the Levites, in a certain sense it includes everyone<sup>4</sup>. In our generation the Lubavitcher Rebbe emphasised the spiritual empowerment of each man, woman and child.

Korach was wrong: Moses has the true authority. At the same time, each one of us is empowered to reveal the Divine Presence in our own lives and in society as a whole, guided by our Rabbis, ultimately changing the world for good.

1. Numbers chs.16-18. 2. Introduction to Mishneh Torah. 3. Exodus 19:6.

4. Mishneh Torah, end of Laws of Shemitta.

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*SEDRA KORACH*

**GOOD ADVICE**

Debby walked up the steps to the school. The main hall was full of people, some of whom were already wearing their costumes for the dress rehearsal. She saw her friend Esther. "I was looking for you!" Esther exclaimed, "you must come and have your make-up done".

The annual school play was to be held in two days. Many of the girls in the school were either singing or dancing, but Debby had been one of those chosen to act. As she sat on a black plastic swivel chair, the person in the mirror op-posite began looking less and less like Debby. Yellow face, orange around the nose, her hands were going to have gloves, and her hair had been spay painted orange just in case any of it would stick out.

Three hours later, tired but less nervous, Debby sat on the steps of the school eating crisps waiting for her father to come and pick her up again. There was no way she was going to walk through the street with her face painted like this! During the drive home Debby's mind was full of thoughts about birds, good, bad, decisions. So much to think about.

She skipped up the driveway to the front door and stopped.

"Hello Debby!" Her cousin Miriam was standing there grin-ning at her. Miriam went to a different school, and was planning to come with her mother to see the play.

“What are you?” She asked in mock horror. Debby explained, “I’m a bird”.

She sat down and explained the plot to her cousin. “Basically there is this girl called Elisheva in the play who is very unhappy. She is an orphan. She goes to live with her cousins who are very nice and kind, but Elisheva does not really appreciate them. She thinks everything is bad, and she makes lots of mistakes, but then eventually with my help, she begins to make the right decisions!”

“How do you help her?” asked Miriam looking a bit suspiciously at the orange hair.

“Well, basically, I am like a little friendly canary that the cousins have, and I keep chirping and then I say things and help her to veer the right way whenever she is not sure about a decision. It sounds funny but it’s actually quite a big part, and I stop her doing things she shouldn’t.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Miriam. “That sounds like this week’s Sedra!”

Now it was Debby’s turn to look puzzled.

Miriam explained. “In this week’s Sedra it talks about Korach who rebelled against Moses. There was a man called Oin the son of Peles, one of the other leaders of the rebellion. His life was saved because of his wife. She knew that Korach was up to no good, so she did her best to stop her husband from having anything to do with him. In the end she was successful - so his life was saved. That’s rather like your canary - stopping people do-ing what they shouldn’t!”

“Mmm” said Debby. “Maybe everyone needs a good canary,” she said.

Miriam smiled. “And a good wife!”

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