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SPIRITUAL SEEKER OR REBEL?

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REBEL AND AN IDEALIST? The story of Korach in this week's Sedra¹ helps us understand this. Korach had exalted ideas which are echoed elsewhere in Jewish thought. The problem was the way he tried to put them into practice. What could have been a positive ideal ended up as a dangerous rebellion.

Korach was a prominent member of the Tribe of Levi, Moses' tribe. In fact he was a first cousin to Moses and Aaron. The Sedra describes his rebellion against their leadership. Moses tried conciliatory measures but was not successful: Korach insisted on his point of view and gathered around him a host of vociferous supporters. Eventually his rebellion failed. G-d sided with Moses and Aaron, and Korach and his followers came to a bitter end.

The clue that Korach could have been a hero instead of a rebel comes before we start studying the Sedra, when we just hear its name. For the name of every Sedra is itself significant. Why call the Sedra after a wicked man? Perhaps there was some good in Korach after all...

Looking a little deeper we see that Korach's desire was actually highly commendable. His claim was that the whole community of the Jewish people was holy. G-d was among them all, and hence they should all have the status of the Priesthood. And he himself longed for the position of High Priest.

Now, the idea that the whole community is holy, is actually true. The Jewish people are indeed holy. Further, G-d said to them just before the Giving of the Torah that they would be ‘a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy nation’. As for Korach’s personal desire to be High Priest, surely an important part of Jewish teaching is to have the ambition to attain the highest spiritual level possible?

In fact the Rambam (Maimonides) states² that not only the tribe of Levi but *any* person is invited to dedicate his or her life to G-d. Through this each person attains an exalted level of holiness which he terms “holy of holies”, like a Priest or even a High Priest.

It is because Korach’s initial ambition was actually positive that the Sedra is named after him. The problem is what he did in order to achieve his desire.

Given that G-d had appointed Aaron as High Priest, the response of Korach and anyone else seeking great holiness should have been to *join* with Moses and Aaron. Through that he would have been part of the spiritual leadership of the Jewish people, focused on the ultimate goal. His participation would have strengthened the Jews and Judaism.

Unfortunately instead of this, Korach set himself up as a rival to Aaron, causing serious harm to the Jewish people. However, the Sages tell us that his children repented, and in later generations his descendants achieved honour and greatness³.

The teaching for us is that indeed we should view ourselves and those around us as capable of reaching the greatest heights of spirituality and holiness. If we apply ourselves with dedication and determination, nothing is beyond our reach. However our quest should be *within* the structure of Judaism and Jewish teaching. In this way our own quest for spiritual ideals will strengthen and enhance the whole⁴.

1. Numbers chs.16-18. 2. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Seeds, end of Laws of Shemitah and the Jubilee. 3. See Rashi to Numbers 16:7, and Midrash Tanchuma, Korach sec. 11. 4. Based freely on points from the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Sefer HaSichot 5750* vol.2, pp.528ff.

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SEDRA KORACH

LEADERSHIP

They were all sitting around in a circle in Sara's back garden, all four of them. Sara spoke up first. 'I think we should start by putting up posters in the school', she said with authority. 'But we need to ask permission for that', Michelle pointed out. 'Don't worry, I've dealt with that,' replied Sara with a smile.

They were busy discussing their plans regarding the play they were putting on for their school as part of the end of year celebrations. They were the organisers of the whole event, and Sara was in charge of the organising.

Dina took out some papers from a carefully packed envelope. 'Here,' she said, as she handed them to Sara, 'I got all the scripts typed out. I did some and so did my brother and my mother.' Sara took them from her gratefully, 'Thank you', she said. She was very concerned that everything should work out properly.

Rebecca, who had been quiet until now, suddenly spoke up. 'Sara, you know I think it is ridiculous the way you take charge of everything! I mean, give us a chance to do something as well...'

She paused for breath. 'You just about let Dina type up the script, and that was only because your computer is broken!' Sara looked at her with horror. The others just looked on in silence. 'What did I do wrong?' thought Sara to herself, embarrassed and confused.

'Look, all I want is that this play should work out well', she replied to Rebecca, trying to stay calm. Then Leah spoke up. 'She is right, Sara, we were all chosen to take care of this'. Sara felt trapped; maybe they were right... Was she leaving them out of everything?

Unexpectedly, Dina came to Sara's rescue. 'What is wrong with all of you?' she said vehemently. 'What do you think? That Sara's a power-hungry person?'

She looked at Rebecca and Leah before she continued. 'We just learned this week how Korach and his followers were jealous of Moses and Aaron and how they made a big revolt. You know what happened? They were all punished for being so silly; they got swallowed up in the earth!'

Dina sighed. The others listened carefully; it wasn't often that she spoke up. 'The point is, that we have better things to do than argue about silly things and get jealous of each other...'

Now it was Rebecca who was embarrassed. 'You know what,' she said, 'I think Dina's right; we have much better things to worry about. I'm sorry for saying those things, you really are doing a great job.' She looked at Sara hoping that she would accept her apology.

Sara smiled at her. 'Don't worry, and anyway, I'm sorry, you're probably right, I do take too many things for myself....' Then Sara turned to Leah, 'Look, can you do me a favour? I need someone to change the dances, do you think...?'

'Yes! of course!' Leah winked at her. 'You shouldn't take me too seriously, you know!'

Dina laughed. For once, she would have the last word. 'At least no-one got swallowed up in the ground!' Her friends smiled. It was going to be a really great play.

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