

## **Korach 5780, Rabbi James Proops**

There has been much discussion throughout the past few months about the need to daven with a *Minyan* in order to say *Kaddish*, the repetition of the Amida and hear the *Kriyat HaTorah* from a *Sefer Torah*. Halakhic discourse has centered on whether one can actively participate in a *Minyan* virtually through mediums such as Zoom, whether standing in different private properties allows one to be considered part of the *Minyan* and the primacy of one's health and safety over joining with others to pray. All these discussions stem from the well known precept that parts of our liturgy for communal *Tefillah* can only be said when a *Minyan* is present and that there is something innately holy and advantageous when we pray together with a quorum of ten men.

The *Gemmara* (Megillah 23b) asks as to what is the origin of this *halakha* and how we know that ten men specifically can attain this unique status. The *Gemmara* there does not find a specific verse in the Written Torah which explicitly states this rule but rather attributes it, via the one of the Shlosh Esrei Midot (thirteen hermeneutical principles) by which the Torah is expounded, to a verse in this week's *Parasha*. Using the principle of *Gezeirat Shava*, which examines two or more verses that have the same or common word which appears to be superfluous and then highlights how each verse complements and shed lights upon the other, the *Gemmara* ties together three different verses to learn out this important rule of ten.

The *Gemmara* demonstrates that we find in last week's parsha of *Shelach*, regarding the twelve *Meraglim* that are sent to investigate *Eretz Yisrael*, Hashem states (Bamidbar 14:27), "How long shall this evil "congregation" (EDAH) exist?". This word *Edah* is a direct reference to the ten spies who offered their damning and negative report of the Land. The *Gemmara* then shows that the same word EDAH is used in this week's *Parasha* referencing the rebellious congregation of Korach (Bamidbar 16:21) "Separate yourselves from "among" (MITOCH) Ha'edah, the congregation". This teaches us that the congregation that aligned themselves with Korach was a group of at least ten men. The *Gemmara* then connects this verse about Korach to a pasuk in *Parashat Emor* (Vayikra 22:32) regarding *Kedusha* (holiness) which states, "And I shall be sanctified "among" (BETOCH) the Children of Israel (Vayikra 22:32) I". We see here a commonality between these two verses using the word BETOCH the Beni Yisrael' and *MITOCH Ha'edah*, (Bamidbar 16:21) meaning 'among'. The *Gemmara* therefore teaches us that

Hashem is sanctified through groups of at least ten men. This *Limmud* is accepted as the source for a *Minyan*.

Based on this however, commentaries throughout the ages have asked an important and troubling question. How can we learn something so unique and special as the concept of a *Minyan* from two intrinsically negative episodes in our history? How can we learn about the sanctification of Hashem from those who seemingly challenged the authority of His chosen leaders and lacked belief and faith in that which He had proclaimed?

In answer to this question Rav Soloveitchik suggested that we see the powerful impact a group of ten men can have upon the masses. A group of ten men were able to turn the hearts and minds of the entire nation against Moshe and against going to *Eretz Yisrael*. Then, by the same token, we can learn from here how great the influence of ten *Tzaddikim*, ten righteous men could have upon a great number of people. A small group of ten religious men can upgrade the spiritual standing of an entire neighborhood. That is why when Avraham pleaded on behalf of the people of *Sedom*, he said to Hashem, "If there are ten *Tzaddikim* in the city (of Sedom) would You destroy the entire city?" To which HaShem replies, "If there will be found ten tzaddikim in the city, I will spare the entire city from destruction". Why? Because Hashem knew the power of ten.

It is also possible to approach this question from a different angle which challenges our natural premise to the question. Rabbi Yissochur Frand citing Rabbi Yaakov Luban, posits that "we as human beings view things as either black or white, pure or impure, *kosher* or *treife*". Whether subject matter, opinions or people, they are either one or the other. However, Hakadosh Baruch Hu, in His Infinite Wisdom, is able to see and recognize positive motivations even in evil deeds. The answer as to how we can learn about matters of sanctity from such negative episodes, is that Hashem can see the *Kedusha* even in the apparent evil of the Congregation of Korach and the *Meraglim*. "Even from these less than totally blameless individuals, there is room to find a derivation for the idea of Sanctity within the Jewish people. The lesson is that people are very complex. They do things for a variety of reasons and there can be Light and Darkness intermingled in their actions and motivations."

We can see from the examples of Korach and the *Meraglim* that while their behavior was ill-judged, error ridden and deserved severe punishment, Hashem does not ignore their original positive motivations, intentions and other positive

aspects to their life. With this lesson in mind I have been reflecting on one of the consequences of the most recent call for racial equality, namely the removal and defacing of statues of people from bygone eras, who were involved to varying degrees in racial persecution and slavery. As we continue to see the impact that slavery still has on society today, one cannot help but feel revulsion at monuments which seemingly celebrate the lives of some of the most prolific protagonists of discrimination and oppression. It is those monuments about which there can be little discussion as to whether they should be removed from the public sphere. To keep them up serves as a haunting reminder to those who suffered at their hands and their descendents.

There have also been calls throughout the United States and Europe to remove statues and monuments which have served to celebrate the achievements and contributions to society of individuals who, while not synonymous with oppression, are also far from innocent with regards to profiting and benefitting from slavery. Regarding these we must ask, just because someone acts inappropriately at one stage in their life or even in one area of their life, does it necessarily mean that we cannot still benefit from their positive influence and their contribution to society? While we may be happy to acknowledge their contribution does that mean we want to celebrate it? We are not blessed with Divine Insight to analyze someone else's motivations nor tally their actions for good vs evil. However, I believe that we can learn from Korach and the *Meraglim* that few cases are clear cut with obvious conclusions. I would suggest that each monument in question must be reviewed on an individual basis and we may well decide that they must come down. However, there is also the possibility that we may decide to decry publicly some of their associations, involvement and actions, while at the same time that there are significant contributions to society that must be acknowledged. The questions that must be asked are what role historical context plays, do we wish to take one's individual circumstances into account and ultimately where do we feel that the line must be drawn. These questions are certainly not easy to answer but the important ones rarely are.

Shabbat Shalom