

Korach, 5780

ואהרן מה הוא כי תלינו עליו

Much can be learned from disagreements. While the dispute between Korach and Moshe revolved around questions of governance, on a deeper plane, it represented a battle between two impulses that exist within each of us. Korach is the embodiment of ego, the part of us that seeks self-aggrandizement for its own sake, voraciously pursuing power, honor, and renown. Indeed, our Sages (Avot 5:17) identify Korach as the epitome of one who acts "שלא לשם שמים" -- not for the sake of Heaven, but rather, for his own immediate pleasure and gain. Moshe and Aharon, on the other hand, embodied "ביטול," self-nullification. They shunned honor and prestige, reluctantly accepting their leadership positions solely in fulfillment of G-d's will. Moshe therefore showed no hesitation when G-d eventually instructed him to cede his position to a successor. When Moshe's character is publicly attacked, his sense of self-nullification, devoid of personal attachment, allows him to calmly reach out to the offenders in an attempt to reconcile. Similarly, in response to the maligning of Aharon's character, Moshe states (Bamidbar 16:11), "ואהרן מה הוא כי תלינו עליו" -- "Aharon, "what" (מה) is he, that you should complain against him?" The Kabbalists teach that the Hebrew term "מה" alludes to this concept of ביטול. In essence, Moshe was responding to the mob about Aharon: "what is he?" -- Aharon's ego is completely nullified, and he sees himself as nothing in and of himself, but rather acts solely for the sake of Heaven. He is not an appropriate subject for your attack.

Few things affect a person's spiritual state in this world more than the degree to which he or she nullifies his or her ego. The more my life is driven by ego, the more my life focuses on "me" as an end unto itself -- my preferences, my aggrandizement, my happiness -- the more angry, envious, and discontented I will become. Little slights, such as being passed over for a certain honor or not being invited to a party, may trigger despair. Any imperfection in myself or others becomes catastrophic, and I am chronically unsettled. Ironically, in living a life like this which focuses on myself, *I lose myself*. But the more my life is not about me, but about living the Divine will and bringing kindness to others, the more *I find my true self* -- my soul -- which is a חלק אלוקה ממעל, an aspect of the Divine. The more time one spends living in touch with one's soul, the more elevated and whole a person's life will feel. Public perception, social status, and honor become far less significant. Such a person lives for far loftier ambitions, and is simply not interested in the relative pettiness that causes so much anguish for so many people.

Perhaps this approach may explain the Hassidic teaching that the letters of the word "חכמה" -- wisdom, can be rearranged to "כח מה" -- literally, "the power of מה" (see Likuttei Amarim 19). A truly wise person recognizes the power that comes from "מה," complete nullification of ego before the Almighty. Similarly, when Hillel teaches (Avot 1:14) "וכשאני לעצמי מה אני" -- "when I

am for myself, what am I?", perhaps on a deeper level, he is conveying that the ultimate way to be "for yourself" in this world -- your *true* self, that is -- is through "מה", nullification of the ego, to allow your soul to shine.

It is important to note that self-nullification does not mean that one does not advocate or take care of oneself. As Hillel teaches in the aforementioned statement, "אם אין אני לי מי לי" -- "if I am not for myself, who will be for me?" A holy person must never neglect him or herself, and must be vigilant to avoid being exploited or taken advantage of. One should not, for example, accept a grossly underpaid salary at work simply because "I'm nothing" and therefore undeserving. Rather, one should stand up for oneself -- for example, by negotiating for the salary that he or she deserves -- but in doing so, it should be in the spirit of Moshe and Aharon, for the sake of Heaven. The motivation should be to earn sufficient money to be able to have the security and means to live a life that fulfills the will of G-d and brings kindness to others, not ego-driven greed.

It is fascinating that the very same action can be experienced as an egotistical act of self-indulgence, or a Divine act of self-nullification, depending purely on the mindset of the individual. If I eat at a fancy restaurant for the purpose of satisfying my own cravings, focusing on "me," the pleasure is transient, and I may leave with a sensation of self-disgust at having overeaten, as well as a feeling of regret over the amount of money I've lost. But if I go to the same restaurant to eat in honor of the holiday of Rosh Chodesh (there is a Mitzvah to have a special meal every Rosh Chodesh), or even on a regular day to lift my spirit so I can better serve Hashem, I leave with a feeling of elevation -- having satisfied body and soul -- and the joy and accomplishment of that experience stay with me long after I leave. The same holds true for how one goes about working each day, taking vacations, and building relationships: whether these become acts of ego-driven selfishness or self-nullification depends purely on consciousness. This is of particular relevance every week when it comes to the Shabbat meals. One should certainly enjoy the finest delicacies, challahs, and wines at the Shabbat table, but with the deep awareness that one is consuming these to show honor to the Shabbat, as opposed to gluttonously satisfying one's own cravings. Food always tastes better with awareness.

May we merit to live a selfless life that is holistically for the sake of Heaven, in the spirit of Moshe and Aharon over Korach, Divine will over ego, and in doing so experience tranquility in this world and the next.