

A brief idea for Shabbat

This week, we read of the rebellion of Korach. Korach was an individual, the Rabbis insist, who had tremendous spiritual potential - he indeed had the capacity to be one of the great leaders of the Jewish people. So what went wrong?

Reading the second verse of the parsha, where Korach challenges Moshe over the leadership -

וַיִּמְדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשֵּׂא עַל־קֹהֵל ה'

Why do you lord it over the people?

Leaving aside the irony that Moshe was - by G-d's own testimony - the most humble man to ever live - how on earth could Korach have spoken to Moses like this. He challenges him as a peer, an equal. Moshe who split the sea, who ascended Har Sinai is obviously on a completely different level than even a person of potential as Korah.

So who gave Korach the idea that he and Moshe were in fact equals? That somehow he was of a similar standing to speak that way?

The Chidushei HaRim (R Yitzchak Meir Altar, founder of the Gerer chasidut) gives a direct and surprising answer to the question:

Who led Korach to think he was Moshe's equal? Moshe, did. "Such was the power of his ayin tov (good eye) to lift anyone's stature, with extraordinary strength."

Korach's downfall was not that he realized that he had the potential to be a leader. It was that he wished to use that power not to serve, but - as the opening word of the Parsha indicated - to take.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is fond of stating that people think that the job of a leader is to create followers. But they are wrong - the job of a leader is to create other leaders.

In that light, I want to quote an excerpt from Rabbi Sacks reminiscences of the first time he met the Lubavitcher Rebbe (whose Yahrtzeit was yesterday).

I have told the story of my first encounter with the Rebbe many times, and I mention it only briefly here simply as a reminder of how vast his impact was, and how early it was recognized. In 1968 I was a second-year undergraduate at Cambridge, studying philosophy at a time when being a philosopher with religious faith seemed, at least in Britain, almost a contradiction in terms. So that summer I traveled to America to see if I could meet the leading rabbis and Jewish intellectuals and hear from them how they wrestled with some of the problems I had encountered. What fascinated me from the outset was how many of those I met mentioned the Rebbe. Already then, he had assumed almost a legendary stature. It didn't matter where I went or whom I spoke to, somehow his name would come up in the conversation and it would be spoken of in awe, whether the person I was speaking to was Chassidic or not, Orthodox or not. People seemed to know that there was something special about this man that transcended the normal parameters of religious leadership.

I soon found out what it was, when I had the chance to meet the Rebbe in the course of that visit. He was the only person among the dozens I encountered who performed a role reversal in the course of our conversation. Within minutes I discovered that it was not me who was interviewing the Rebbe, but the Rebbe who was interviewing me. He wanted to know about the state of Jewish life in Cambridge, how many Jewish students there were, how many were engaged with Jewish life and what I was doing to increase their number.

This was wholly unexpected and life-changing. Here was one of the leaders of the Jewish world taking time—considerable time—to listen to an unknown undergraduate student from thousands of miles away and speak to him as if he mattered, as if he could make a difference. He was, powerfully and passionately, urging me to get involved. Years later, looking back on that encounter, I summed it up by saying that good leaders create followers. Great leaders create leaders. That was the Rebbe's greatness. Not only did he lead, he was a source of leadership in others.

Shabbat Shalom