

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Bamidbar

Actually, We Aren't All the Same

What was Korach's problem, and what does it mean to us, now, as we commemorate Gimmel Tammuz?

The Car Factory

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) organization, the international anti-Israel movement, continues to make its evil inroads with an increasing number of countries around the world. Jews in general, and Israel in particular, continue to fight against it and try to stem the tide.

But unfortunately, BDS is nothing new—we have to remember that organized anti-Israel efforts go back as far the beginnings of Israel.

In 1948, the Ford auto company decided that Israel was a good market for vehicle manufacturing—it was a new country, its military would need transportation equipment, the government would need cars, and so on. Ford saw Israel as an excellent business opportunity—and the opportunity to be the first to build an automobile manufacturing plant in Israel.

And so, Ford announced that they were going to put up a factory in Israel, and the news spread around the world. But when that news got to the Middle East, the Arab League announced that if Ford built in Israel, all member countries would boycott Ford.

Unfortunately, the threat worked, and Ford capitulated and withdrew

its plans of building a plant in Israel.

That development was a personal blow to the entire young country. Everyone knew that with Ford submitting to Arab pressure, every other major international corporation would follow suit and refrain from doing business in Israel. What's more, Israel needed cars—and more important than that, Israel needed industry so that it could provide enough jobs to the thousands of Jewish Holocaust survivors who made it to the Jewish State.

In those days, there was an Israeli Jew living in Europe named Ephraim Illin. He was a big businessman who knew the ups and downs of it all. Before Israel's War of Independence, Ephraim had arranged for the purchase of a large vessel to transport illegal weaponry to Israel under the noses of the British, covered by sacks of potatoes and onions.

Now, after Ford announced that it was changing its mind about building in Israel, the vice president of another auto company happened to forge a business connection with Ephraim Illin, and Mr. Illin asked him if he'd be interested in putting up a similar plant in Israel.

In order to build such a plant, an investment of \$2.5 million would be required. Thankfully, though, a deal was struck, with the auto company obligating itself to invest half a million and Ephraim Illin obligating himself to recruit the remaining \$2 million in the form of investors. Mr. Illin was confident that it would be easy—who wouldn't understand that it was a golden opportunity for an excellent investment?

However, when it got down to signing dotted lines, Ephraim Illin didn't have even one investor—forcing him to put down \$2 million of his own money, which today is worth \$20 million and perhaps even more.

The night before he was going to sign off on his own personal \$2

million investment, he was lying in bed and unable to fall asleep. He knew that he wanted to sign on the deal—but he admitted to himself that he didn't have the courage to do it.

Still lying in bed, he recalled an episode from his youth.

He had been born in Russia to a family with Chabad roots; when he was a young child, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 broke out and his father decided that he'd send his son to the Holy Land before it was too late.

Ephraim's father had business interests in Russia and he didn't want to leave. But he knew that his son's future was not in Russia, and so he wanted to send him off. But Ephraim's mother invoked a veto: Either they all left together, or none of them went anywhere! She was not about to let her precious son sail off alone to some strange land.

Well, Mr. Illin didn't know what to do, and torn, he approached a rabbi (perhaps even the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who at the time would have been the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber Schneersohn), and the rabbi told him to sell his business and take his whole family to the Land of Israel—and that indeed is what the Illin family ultimately did.

But now, back to the present, Mr. Illin was lying in bed, felling perplexed and unable to decide what to do. So he decided that he'd do what his father did when his father couldn't decide what to do—he'd ask a rabbi.

It was the year 1950. The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Yosef Y. Schneersohn, 1880-1950, Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber's son) had passed away earlier that year, and our Rebbe had not yet accepted the mantle of leadership. So Ephraim Illin approached a person he greatly loved and admired, Rabbi Pinchas Althaus, who was his Chabad point man. Mr. Illin asked him to arrange an audience with the Rebbe for

him and indeed, within a few days, he was notified to be at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn at 11:00 in the morning.

When he entered the Rebbe's office, he immediately realized that he was standing before a giant of the spirit.

The Rebbe spoke to him in Russian, French and Hebrew. At first, the Rebbe was interested in his personal history. The Rebbe wanted to know about his Irgun fighting days, about his involvement in acquiring weapons for Israel, and so on—the Rebbe wanted to know everything.

And then the Rebbe got to the subject about which he had come. Mr. Illin told the Rebbe about the auto factory that he wanted to build. The Rebbe said to him that while every car is made out of some 30,000 parts, it doesn't mean that you need 30,000 factories.

However, continued the Rebbe, you will need to build 3,000 factories—meaning, the Rebbe explained, that an auto factory is much more than just one factory. It's a place that needs raw materials and pre-made items alike so that it can make its cars, and as such, a full-fledged auto plant would be the foundation for industry in Israel and would greatly strengthen the new economy.

The Rebbe then said that he saw many ups and downs in Ephraim Illin's life—and that despite them all, G-d was with him throughout. And so now, the Rebbe advised him, it would be good to sign on that dotted line and invest his money in the factory.

And then, the Rebbe added that even if the deal doesn't succeed (G-d forbid) the way he estimated that it would, he'd still find himself in Israel amongst fellow Jews and he'd always find a way to stand strong.

Sixty years later, Mr. Illin related that he remembered more how he felt at his meeting with the Rebbe than what the Rebbe actually said.

Being in the Rebbe's presence gave him a sense of calm and peace—the Rebbe gave him the confidence and the strength to sign off on the business.

And indeed, he listened to the Rebbe's advice and built the factory—and in the 20 years that the factory stood, all through the 50s and 60s, it produced close to 60,000 automobiles, with 60 percent of them sold outside the country. The factory proved to be a mighty success.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Korach's Accusation

This week, we read the Parshah of Korach—and right at the beginning, we read about Korach's complaint.

Korach is a man of few words—he speaks one sentence and lets it speak for itself. He comes with a complaint against Moshe Rabbeinu himself: “The entire congregation is holy and G-d is within them, and why do you raise yourselves above G-d's congregation?”

Rashi (Bamidbar 16:3) comes along and explains Korach in even simpler and clearer words: “Everyone heard the words of the All-Powerful One at Sinai!”

Essentially, Korach was arguing that everyone heard the Ten Commandments from G-d—so what makes Moshe (and Aharon) suddenly above everyone? That was his entire complaint. Later in the Parshah, we do hear Moshe Rabbeinu dealing with Dasan and Aviram and their complaints, but we hear not another word from Korach, who only had one complaint: “Everyone heard at Mt. Sinai, ‘I am the L-rd your G-d,’ and [so] why do you raise yourselves up?”

But the truth is, it was a chutzpah for Korach to raise this point. To a point, Moshe Rabbeinu initiated that the Torah being given on Mt.

Sinai to the whole nation and not to him alone.

You see, when G-d revealed Himself to Moshe at the legendary Burning Bush and requested that he go to Egypt to redeem the Jewish Nation, Moshe argued: “But they won’t believe me!” And so G-d promised him: “When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve the L-rd upon this mountain”—which Rashi (Shmos 3:14) elaborates to mean “that they are destined to receive the Torah upon this mountain.”

And the Rambam (Maimonides) adds and says that, yes, “at the Stand at Mt. Sinai, our eyes saw [G-d] and not a strange G-d, and our ears heard [G-d] and not another G-d... and the Voice speaking to him [i.e. Moshe] with us hearing, ‘Moshe, Moshe! Go say such-and-such to them!’” (Yesodei HaTorah 8:1). In other words, at the Stand at Mt. Sinai, the entire Nation of Israel heard how G-d spoke to Moshe—as if G-d allowed us to listen in on a conversation between Him and Moshe.

And that, by the way, is one of the reasons that the Ten Commandments are written in a singular form, not plural.

As the Midrash tells us, at the time of the Sin of the Golden Calf, when Moshe pleaded the case in defense of the Jewish Nation, he said to G-d: “When You gave the Ten Commandments, You didn’t give it to them—You didn’t say, ‘Anochi Hashem Elokeichem’ [“I am the L-rd Your G-d” in Hebrew plural] but rather, You said, ‘Anochi Hashem Elokecha’ [“I am the L-rd Your G-d” in Hebrew singular]. You said it to me!”

And the Midrash concludes, “G-d replied to him, ‘By your life, you have spoken well!’” (Midrash Rabbah, Bamidbar 21:33).

So what we see here is that Moshe was a “tov ayin,” a “good-eyed” person, and he let the Jewish Nation listen in on a conversation between him and G-d. And then, Korach suddenly comes along and

turns that on its head—arrogantly taking ownership of the event. He essentially tells Moshe that we are all equals—kind of like a house guest who stays with you long enough for everyone to get to like him, and then starts acting like he owns the house.

Miriam's Complaint

So let's take a minute to consider this concept of believing that everyone is equal. What's behind a person coming along and arguing, "Hey, wait a minute! Everyone heard the words of the All-Powerful One!"?

Does anyone know who was the first person in the Torah to lodge a similar complaint?

If we look into it, we'll find that a similar complaint was made a few Parshahs ago in the story of Miriam. When Miriam found out that Moshe had gone abstinent with his wife, she went and told their brother Aharon. And at that point (Bamidbar 12:2), the Torah tells us that she said to Aharon, "Was it just with Moshe that G-d spoke? Did He not also speak with us?" And while it is true that Miriam made her complaint with pure motives, but once you start with such complaints, "the bad students drink" (to borrow a phrase from the Sages)—and you eventually end up with a Korach.

And this also explains why G-d's reaction to the Miriam episode was so harsh.

As we know, G-d punished Miriam for gossiping by giving her Tzora'as. Now seemingly, her concern was genuine: she wanted her brother to continue living with his wife and have more children. So what was the punishment all about? (Sichos Kodosh 5740 Vol. III, pg. 424.) But when we get to the Torah portion of Korach, we understand why G-d got so "angry": even though Miriam's intentions really were good, her words planted the seeds of Korach's complaint, "Everyone heard G-d's words

at Sinai!”

And perhaps this is also why we do not find a response to Korach’s challenge in our Parshah— because the response was already provided in the Parshah of Behaalos’cha. There, with regards to Moshe, G-d says, “If there be prophets among you, [I] the L-rd will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak to him in a dream. Not so is My servant Moshe... With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of the L-rd” (Bamidbar 12:6-8).

And thus, Korach had to have already known that although he, too, had heard the Ten Commandments from G-d at Mt. Sinai, he still did not compare in any way to the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, on whom G-d Himself testifies, “With him I speak mouth to mouth.” But still, Korach came forward with the same complaint.

The Rebbe

We now stand before Gimmel Tammuz, the yahrzeit of the Rebbe. At this time, then, it is incumbent upon us to reinforce our belief in the tzadik of our generation.

One of the Rebbe’s amazing customs was that throughout the 40-plus years of his leadership, he would frequently visit the resting place of his father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, where he would often stand in prayer for long hours, reading the letters that people had sent him, asking that he pray for them. In his last years, the Rebbe went to the Previous Rebbe’s resting place over 100 times each year.

And so today, as we approach the Rebbe’s yahrzeit, it is incumbent upon us to connect to the Rebbe—to visit his resting place if we can and pray to G-d there and, most importantly, to continue the sacred work of his lifetime of bringing more Jews to Judaism.

And then we will merit to be keilim, vessels, for all the blessings and

solutions that G-d sends us, both materially and spiritually.

Good Shabbos!