

Korach took/separated himself. (16:1)

Korach had it all, but it was not enough for him. If someone else had something that he did not have, it angered him to the point of obsession. He, too, had to have it. When Elitzaphan ben Uziel was placed in charge of the family of Kehas, Korach became irrational. Why should his cousin have a role that placed him in the position of Korach's superior? Korach was a *rodef achar ha'kavod*, one who pursued honor, craved recognition, was obsessed with being in the limelight. This is the most corrosive desire that one can have. *Ramchal* (*Mesillas Yesharim*, end of *Perek II*) writes: "More potent than (the desire of wealth) is the craving for honor. Indeed, it would be possible for a person to conquer his *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, concerning wealth and other forms of gratification, but the craving for honor is what persistently drives him, as it is impossible for him to tolerate seeing himself stationed lower than his fellows".

Ramchal goes on to cite the downfalls of Yaravam *ben* Nevat and Korach as examples of great people who stumbled and were destroyed due to their obsession with glory. *Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl*, observes that *redifas ha'kavod*, the pursuit/craving of honor, remains with a person his entire life. While other *taavos*, cravings/desires, wane with age, his desire for honor becomes more acute. One would think that as a person ages and his mortality becomes more realistic, he would realize the futility of man. He would acknowledge that life is one long dream with no lasting reality to it. The only real *kavod*, honor, is the honor one receives for *yedias haTorah*, knowledge of Torah. One who really learns becomes acutely aware of how much more he must learn, thus the *kavod* he receives does not go to his head. Any other form of honor is simply worthless honor, meaningless glory, which quickly dissipates and is forgotten with time.

Korach was driven by a craving for glory, an intense desire to preserve and glorify his ego. It did not matter how old he was, how wealthy he had become, how much success he had achieved; his ego fueled and propelled him for more – and even greater status and recognition. The need for *kavod*, acclaim, is insatiable; it is relentless in its demands of the person. Such a person is ultra-sensitive, taking everything as a slight to his self-imagined honor. Indeed, one cannot satisfy such a person's ego. Whatever place he is given at an affair, if he perceives someone of equal or lesser stature (than what he has conceived in his subjective mind) sitting elsewhere, in a place which he (once again in his deluded mind) considers upper class/station in comparison to where he was placed, he will throw a tantrum -- either overtly, or covertly harbor resentment which will be the beginning of discord.

Rabbi Dr. Twersky observes the disparity which exists between our logical perception of others and the direct opposite when it pertains to us. It is interesting that, upon seeing someone else exerting himself to be noticed, to receive honor, we realize how ridiculous he is, how he is making an utter fool of himself. Yet, when we are the ones doing the same idiocy, we do not seem to have the same perspective. The desire for glory bribes us, thereby blinding our ability to see the truth in its stark reality. By desensitizing ourselves to public acclaim, we become so unmoved by applause and public veneration that they have no effect on us.

I must add that, at first blush, this seems totally unrealistic. After all, it is a *taavah*, craving, just like any other *taavah*. Desires are quite difficult to overcome. When we consider the frightening ramifications that result from our delusion with honor, it pays to introspect and ask ourselves: “Is it really worth it?” Furthermore, if we would know how many people laugh behind our backs as we run to the *mizrach vont*, eastern wall, to sit among the distinguished, some of whom share the same disease, we would perhaps make an attempt at desensitizing ourselves from honor.

Horav Shmelke, zl, m’Nikolsburg once arrived in a town where he was greeted by a large throng of his followers and admirers. Prior to meeting the crowd, he asked for a few moments of solitude. He entered a small room and secluded himself there. As it would be, one of his *chassidim* was curious to know what was taking place in this room, so he put his ear to the door and listened. He heard the *Rebbe* declare, “Welcome our esteemed leader; welcome holy *Rebbe*. It is such an honor that his eminence has come to our community. His presence in our town is a blessing”. There were other accolades which simply did not make sense. The *Rebbe* was talking to himself! Gathering up his courage, the *chasid* conceded to his eavesdropping and asked for an explanation for what seemed to be strange behavior.

Rav Shmelke said, “I knew what my *chassidim* were going to say. I have heard all the accolades. While they pain me to hear them, because I am undeserving of such praise, I know only too well how easy it is to fall into the trap of arrogance. I fear becoming a victim of the terrible trait of vanity. When one says such praises to himself, they sound utterly foolish, thereby reflecting no vanity whatsoever. I, therefore, said them to myself enough times for me to realize how nonsensical they are; how silly they sound. Thus, when my followers said the same thing to me, they had no impact”.

Yes, it takes training -- and even a strong dose of *seichel*-- but I feel that the greatest deterrent to vanity is to imagine that the people who are rendering the accolades are insincere and really laughing at him. Who has not been privy to the fellow who lives under the pretense of false humility – until he does not receive (what in his mind should be) his due? He wears the garb; he talks the talk; he even walks the walk, but, is it real? If he pursues *kavod* it is not real. Korach and Yaravam proved that for us.

The *Chida* was one of the greatest leaders of Sephardic Jewry. An unusual *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, he authored over seventy volumes of Torah commentary. As a *shlucha d’Rachamana*, agent on behalf of the Jewish community in the Holy Land, he had the unique opportunity to come in contact with Jews throughout the Diaspora. The *kavod*, honor, accorded to this extraordinary scholar was without peer. Despite all of these “superlatives,” the *Chida* remained a paragon of humility, whose lifelong goal was the spiritual and physical betterment of his people.

The *Chida* once visited France. Understandably, hosting such a distinguished scholar for the *Shabbos* meals was the envy of the community, and the wealthiest members vied for the honor. It was thus decided by the community’s leaders that the honor would go to the individual who was

willing to part with the largest contribution on behalf of *aniyei Eretz Yisrael*, the poor of the Holy Land. The Turkish/Ottoman government, under whose rule the Holy Land was subjected, was relentless in levying stiff taxes against its Jewish citizens. Hunger was a common occurrence. Indeed, the Jews of the Holy Land lived in a constant state of *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, relying on such individuals as the *Chida*, who traveled the world in search of funds on their behalf.

One of the town's wealthiest men paid for the opportunity to host the *Chida*. The meals proved to be an enormous spiritual experience, well worth the contribution the man had made for the merit of participating with the *Chida* in a *Shabbos* meal. At the end of the meal, the host walked the sage to the home, which he had arranged to be his office/sleeping quarters. It was a miserable night – freezing cold, with a howling wind, which was blowing snow all over. Yet, it was a *z'chus*, merit, to accompany such a holy man. The *Chida* bid the man good night and sat down to learn for most of the evening, as was his practice.

A few hours elapsed, and the *Chida* searched in his coat for his snuffbox. Apparently, tobacco cleared the senses, allowing the *Chida* to remain awake and astute longer. Unable to locate his snuffbox, the *Chida* figured that he must have left it at his host's home. He put on his coat and braved the elements, returning to his host's home to retrieve his snuffbox. Being that it was a few hours after the meal, everyone had already retired for the night. When he heard a knock at the door the host came running, to discover the snow-covered *Chida* standing there. "Honored *Rav*, is something wrong?" the host asked.

"No, no," replied the *Chida*. "I seem to have misplaced my snuff box. Perhaps I left it here?" A few moments later, the *Chida* was reunited with his snuffbox and on his way home, accompanied by the driving snow and cold. When the *Chida* returned home, he turned ashen as he realized that for a *shmek tabak*, a snuff of tobacco, he had woken up an entire household, a family already exhausted from a week's work. How devoid of sensitivity towards a fellow Jew; how low had he descended in order to satisfy a physical craving! The *Chida* was beside himself in shame. He refused to take that snuff, and he immediately went to bed. Unable to sleep, he tossed and turned the entire night (or what was left of it).

The following morning, the *Chida* asked the *gabbai*, sexton, of the *shul* to announce throughout the town that he would speak after the conclusion of the Torah reading. His reputation as a powerful and inspirational orator had preceded him, and by the time that he was to ascend to the lectern, nary a vacant seat was in the *shul*.

"My friends," the *Chida* began, "I was always aware of my low, shameful character. Only now, after something I did last night when I fell prey to my desire, do I realize how truly debased I am". The people became very silent, holding their collective breath for fear of what the illustrious *Chida* might have done. Imagine, the *Chida* publicly declaring his shame!

"Last night, to satisfy my craving for snuff, I woke up an entire family. O Hashem, forgive me! My

friends, I am no longer deserving of your honor. Please do not punish the Holy Land's poor because of the wretched agent, which they have dispatched to you. They are noble, virtuous and holy Jews, who are in dire need of your support. I am a sinner. Please, do not allow them to suffer because of me!"

The people all broke down in bitter weeping together with this saintly man. He cried because of his "sin". They cried, because they had just witnessed greatness at its apex.

"I accept upon myself from herein never to snuff tobacco. May the Almighty forgive me for what I have done!"

We now have an idea of the meaning of "running from honor".