

I have not taken even a donkey of theirs, nor have I wronged one of them. (16:15)

This is the sordid path of controversy. It begins with a simple dispute concerning a communal or congregational issue and quickly expands and erupts into character assassination. Moshe *Rabbeinu* says, "I took nothing from them. Even when I transported my wife and sons from Midyan, I neither expected nor received reimbursement." He was traveling for the nation. His expenses should have been paid. He wanted nothing, understanding that, when a community seeks to impugn its leadership, its first salvo will be concerning money. He uses their hard-earned funds for his own personal benefit, etc. Moshe declares emphatically, "I took nothing from them!" We wonder why he mentioned the lack of travel expenses (donkey) when the dispute had already elevated to Korach's seeking a change in *Klal Yisrael's* leadership – with him as its leader.

The saintly *Ruzhiner, zl*, had a dialogue with a secular *maskil*, "enlightened" Jew. (Veritably, there was nothing enlightened about the secular *maskilim*. They were in darkness concerning the manner in which a Jew should live.) The *maskil* presented the *Ruzhiner* with a quandary; "Why is it that the early *tzaddikim* (referring to the *Chassidic* leaders of the previous generations) lived very austere lives, residing in simple homes no different from those lived in by the poorest Jews?" His purpose was to critique the *Ruzhiner's* lifestyle, who outwardly lived like a fabulously wealthy man. His personal belongings were made of the most expensive materials. Even his every day cutlery was fashioned from precious metals. The buttons on his *bekeshe*, coat, were made of solid gold, studded with diamonds. He slept on a pillowcase woven of pure gold thread. People did not understand the reason for this display; he, however, was regarded as one of the greatest *tzaddikim*.

I take the liberty to digress from the *dvar Torah* in order to explain (in the *Ruzhiner's* own words) the reason for the *Rebbe's* superficially extravagant lifestyle. He explained: "We find two traits intertwined with one another: humility and wisdom. Only one who is truly wise can acquire the trait of humility. Likewise, only one who is truly humble can become wise. Moshe *Rabbeinu* was the humblest of all men. Shlomo *Hamelech* was the wisest of all men. In order for Shlomo *Hamelech* to be wise, he had to be humble. If Moshe was the paradigm of humility, he must also have been the wisest of men. Moshe is praised for his humility, because a *Rav* may be *mochel*, vindicate/pardon, on his honor. He may ignore an infraction against his esteem. A king may never, however, be *mochel* on his *kavod*. People must honor him under all circumstances, because he may not absolve anyone from rendering him utmost respect. If so, Shlomo *Hamelech* could be praised only for his wisdom (since he must receive honor despite his humility). "What can I do if Heaven has thrust upon me to take the *derech ha'malchus*, way of royalty. It was not my choice, and I have not been able to relinquish myself from this approach." Additionally, the *Ruzhiner* was wont to say, "A *Yid's* biggest *aveirah*, sin, is when he forgets that he is a *ben Melech*, son of the King (Hashem). As long as a person never loses sight of who he is, he is less likely to fall from his royal perch."

Let us return to the *dvar Torah* and the *Ruzhiner's* response to the insolence of the *maskil*. He said, "Three groups of Jews give a *pidyon nefesh* to the *Rebbe*. (*Pidyon nefesh* literally means redemption, whereby one's money, which the *Rebbe* uses for *tzedakah*, is a redemption for his soul. *Horav Nachman Breslover* teaches that the *pidyon nefesh*, redemption of the soul, is the 'sweetening' or mitigation of onerous dictates and serves as a salvation from harsh decrees.) We are aware of the truly righteous *chassidim*, pious Jews, whose intentions are noble and holy, whose money the *Rebbe* uses for charitable purposes. The *Rebbe* uses the money of the laymen – whose intention is personal and subjective, seeking health, welfare and livelihood – for the household's needs, such as food etc. The *tzaddik* uses the sinner's money, the source of which is altogether questionable – for his material needs, his home, carriage horses, etc.

"In previous generations, *Klal Yisrael* consisted of many righteous Jews and hardly any sinners. The *Rebbe* had limited money for his material needs. Thus, he would often live in a simple structure that was far from luxurious. The lifestyle was austere, with many of the *Rebbeim* living in abject poverty. Today, the sinner (referring to the *Haskalah*) have deteriorated and spread their malignant philosophy to so many unsuspecting Jews, that we have a surplus of funds to be used for palatial homes, and magnificent carriages pulled by the finest horses."

Moshe Rabbeinu taught Torah to *Klal Yisrael*. so that Torah would alter the spiritual trajectory of their lives and elevate them to the place in which their minds and hearts should be. Thus, when he saw the deleterious effect of one who is obsessed with *kavod*, pursuit of honor, he became ill at ease. Therefore, he said, "I did not take a donkey from them. I took absolutely nothing for my personal needs – not even a donkey upon which to ride. So many righteous people were among them that their money all went for holy needs. Sadly, *Moshe* saw that, despite his superhuman efforts to teach and guide the nation, there would always be those whose reprobate practices would not only destroy themselves, but they would even thwart the herculean efforts of the greatest of all *Rebbeim*.