

Korach

The Ark Care, Spirituality, Form, and Feelings

In the *Torah* portion *Korach* we learn about the great rebellion against Moshe's leadership, led by his cousin, Korach. Korach assembled a disparate groups in order to revolt against Moshe Rabbeinu. There were many groups of people who were dissatisfied at that time. The Jewish people generally were dissatisfied because they had just been informed, according to most rabbinic authorities, that they were going to have to wander in the desert for forty years. There was also the Tribe of Reuben which had received none of the firstborn rights. They were supposed to receive the political leadership, the double portion, and also the religious leadership of the Jewish people, but they received nothing. The firstborn double portion rights went to Joseph. That's why there are two tribes, Menashe and Ephraim, which come from Joseph. The political leadership went to Judah, and the religious leadership went to the Tribe of Levi. Then you had the firstborn generally who were disgruntled because they were supplanted by the Levites. Then you had among the Levites many people who were dissatisfied because they were not allowed to be priests in the Temple. They were only assistants to the priests, and among these disgruntled Levites were 250 of the very best of the Levites who could not understand why they could not serve as priests in the Temple. They were very dissatisfied. These Levites came up to Moshe, and they complained bitterly why they could not offer sacrifices in the Temple, so Moshe told them to take censors and to put in these censors incense and to offer their censors to Hashem. They did it. Each of these 250 Levites took their sensor, put incense into it, and offered it before G-d. A fire came out from G-d and consumed them all. They were, like Noson and Avihu before them, consumed by a fire from G-d. In this way G-d demonstrated to all the people that the priesthood function was reserved only for Aaron and his children.

Then we learn something very strange. We learn that G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Say to Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the *Kohen*, 'lift up these censors from among the burned'." What the Jewish people were supposed to do with these censors was to beat them into plates for a covering of the altar. These plates which covered the altar were supposed to be a *Zicoron*,

a monument to remind them that no strange man (which means here a person who is not a *Kohen*, not from the seed of Aaron) should offer incense before G-d.

It seems strange that the covering of the altar, one of the most holy of all objects in the Tabernacle, was to be made from these censurers of sinners. After all, the *Torah*, itself, calls them sinners, even though, according to certain rabbis, these people acted out of pure motives. They were not as Korach was, power hungry. They did not try to form a coalition of disaffected people so they could seize leadership. These Levites actually had spiritual longings. They could not understand why they could not offer sacrifices to G-d as Aaron and his children were going to be able to do, but, yet, they were called by the *Torah* sinners. They went beyond the limits of what they were supposed to do. Yet, their censurers, the objects with which they sinned, were to be the covering for the altar, one of the most holy of all objects in the Tabernacle. How are we to explain this?

Perhaps we can understand this if we understand that one of Judaism's main concepts is that there are limits. Man cannot do anything he wants to whenever he wants to however he likes to. Modern man generally does not believe this. He believes that the limits apply to other people. They do not apply to him. He's special. One of the reasons why people have a hard time in the world today is that they think they are special. They think that things that happen to other people will not happen to them, that they can do all sorts of things, and they will not suffer from the consequences. We find this especially with alcohol and drug addicts. They will make all sorts of excuses. They will say, "This time it will be different. I can drink and get away with it because I have put up all sorts of defenses which will cause me to stop at a certain point and not do all those terrible things that I did before." Rabbi Twersky, who is the head of the Gateway Rehabilitation Center and one of the world's experts on alcohol and drug rehabilitation, reports that when he treats addicts, that that is the hardest thing to convince them, and that is that they are not special. They think that this time it will be different, that they can set up certain barriers that will still allow them to drink and not be alcoholics. Even when other people tell them how there are terrible consequences for thinking this way, they do not believe them, because they say, "We are special. We can overcome all

these types of problems," but the truth of the matter is that human beings are not that special. We are all subject to the laws of biology, psychology, and morality. It is true that each of us has individual characteristics but, basically, we are all the same. Basically, when we are put in similar circumstances, we are going to react in much the same way.

We all know that this is true from medicine. After all, if this were not true, then there would be no point in going to doctors. But we all know that when people have certain symptoms, they are going to have certain diseases. We know that if you put people under certain kinds of stress that they are going to come out with the same type of mental illnesses because human beings are basically the same. We share many things together. Of course, there are differences between us. Men and women sometimes will react differently to certain types of stimulants. We know that there are certain genetic groups which may react differently but, basically, we know that we all react to the same type of stimuli in the same way. Otherwise, we could not take any medical tests. If everybody's body chemistry were all so unique and special and different, then all blood tests would be useless. We are unique and special, but within a very small range. This, of course, applies to our mental makeup, too. That's why we all need help if we get involved in abusive situations, because we are all going to crack under these conditions. It is true some people crack a little earlier than other people, but every person, if he is subjected to certain pressures, is eventually going to crack. That is why it is important that, when we encounter major stress, we consult psychologists and psychiatrists. A person who was abused as a child will probably demonstrate certain types of symptoms which, unless alleviated, will cause him also to be an abusive parent. We know that we human beings are more or less constructed the same way and that if we have different types of symptoms, it means we have certain types of diseases. If we are exposed to certain viruses or bacteria, we are going to become sick unless we take the special precautions that are necessary in every given situation.

The Levites in this *Torah* portion thought that they were unique and special. They thought that their spirituality was so unique and special that it had to be expressed in a special and unique way. We know that this was not so. Three thousand five hundred years of Jewish history have taught us

that spirituality can only be obtained by doing certain things, doing certain *mitzvahs*. If you think that you can achieve spirituality by doing other things, you are going to fail.

In our day we are experiencing a type of spiritual awakening in this country. People are beginning to realize that physical things are not enough, that they need spiritual things as well. But there is a great confusion as to how to achieve this spirituality. We find that some people are engaging in all sorts of orgiastic and cultic types of activities in order to stimulate a spiritual experience. We know that a spiritual feeling is hard to come by and something you have to work at, but many people do not realize this and try to use all sorts of immoral and strange practices to get this experience. In Jewish life, we know that if we observe certain *mitzvahs*, we are going to obtain a spiritual experience.

The Levites made the fundamental error of thinking that it is feelings which create spiritual norms when the truth of the matter is that it is performing certain religious forms which create the spiritual feelings. We all know that this is true. I do not feel healthy because I feel healthy and then, because I feel healthy, eat a balanced meal and get rest and do exercise. We feel healthy because we get adequate rest, eat balanced meals, and exercise. Only then do we feel healthy. Doing must come before feeling. It is the form which determines the feeling.

Now it is true that sometimes we will do the forms and we will not have the same intense feelings, but we will experience some feelings all the time. Feelings will fluctuate but we all know that by acting in a certain way, we can receive spiritual feelings. When we observe certain *mitzvahs*, we obtain a spiritual experience. People who keep kashruth and *Shabbos* get a spiritual experience which transcends the mundane. Sometimes if you keep *Shabbos* for the first time or even the second time, you might not seem to feel anything, but if you keep it for several months and all of a sudden you stop keeping it, you will feel a void in your life. We all know too, that by and large, Jews throughout the ages have been immune from certain social pathologies which are really caused by spiritual frustration. We were immune from juvenile delinquency and wife beating and abusive behavior of all sorts. Part of this was because we experienced a spiritual satisfying existence. Many times, because the Jewish way of life is so natu-

ral, many Jews did not know where this spiritual satisfaction came from. It came from observing the terms of Judaism *mitzvahs*. We know now that it was these forms which created this spiritually satisfying experience. When Jews drop these forms, then all of a sudden they do not have this spiritually satisfying experience.

This was the sin of the Levites. They thought that they could create their own forms, but you cannot create your own forms. When you keep the forms of Judaism, then you will achieve this great spiritual goal of feeling spirituality. We cannot base spirituality on our feelings because our feelings fluctuate from day to day. We also know that everybody has different feelings, so how are we going to have a spiritual community if we only base it on our fleeting feelings of that moment? Also, many times our feelings can be deceptive. We can think we are having a spiritual experience when really what we are having is a selfish or orgiastic or cultic experience. True spirituality is a steady experience which leads us also to upright and moral behavior.

Eliezer, the son of Aaron the high priest, was commanded to take these censured of the Levites who had been struck down and beat them into plates which would cover the altar in order to demonstrate to the Jewish people that in order to have a Jewish spiritual experience, you had to observe the Jewish forms first. By observing these forms, we can create spiritual feelings. We can experience spirituality. We cannot have the feelings and then create the forms. That does not work. We observe the forms, and the forms create the feelings. This is why Judaism many times has been branded as legalistic and formalistic. We do know that there are different intensities of spiritual feelings when we observe the *mitzvah*. But that Judaism is a legalistic religion is a false accusation. In the physical world we do not feel healthy because we feel healthy. In order to feel healthy, we first have to observe the forms. We have to get adequate rest and have a proper diet, exercise, and then we are going to feel healthy. But unless we do these things, we are not going to feel healthy. The same thing is true for spirituality. If we keep *Shabbos* and *daven* and keep *kosher*, then we are going to have spiritual experiences which will allow us to feel, so to speak, spiritually healthy but without observing these things, we are not going to be able to.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a captain who was steering his ship in the dark of night. All of a sudden he saw a light in front of him. He signalled to the light ahead of him saying, "Bear to the east 10 degrees." He got a signal back saying, "you bear to the west 10 degrees." The captain said, "I am a captain in the U. S. Navy. Bear to the east 10 degrees." He got a message back saying, "I am a seaman second class. Bear to the west 10 degrees." This time the captain really got mad. He said, "Listen here. I am a captain of a battleship. Veer to the east 10 degrees." He got a reply saying, "I am the commander of a lighthouse. Veer 10 degrees to the west." We know that we can live life on a collision course. This happens when we believe that everything depends upon our momentary feelings, when we believe that feelings can create adequate spiritual forms, but this is not so. What we need instead is first to observe the forms and they will create spirituality. If we will do this, then we will be able to lead balanced lives, lives filled with both physical and spiritual health. Let us all hope that we will have such lives so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.