

"TOO WISE, TOO FOOLISH"

The rebellion of Korah constituted a trauma of major proportions in biblical history. The whole enterprise of Moses -- the spiritual reconstruction of his people, their political liberation, their psychological emancipation from a slave mentality, the development of a "holy nation and kingdom of priests" -- was jeopardized by the demagogic Korah and his band of malcontents.

In retrospect, Korah was doomed from the outset. Moses, after all, was not a leader by his own choice, but had this mission imposed on him by Providence. So, in effect, Korah was rebelling against God. Hence, Rashi was moved to quote the Sages in exclaiming: קִרְחָה מְאִידָה הָיָה עִלְמוֹתָיו שֶׁל קָרַח? "Korah, who was so clever, how did he become involved in such foolishness?"

But the Kotzker Rebbe adds two or three words to that quotation from Rashi which provide us with a new insight. To Rashi's words, he adds: עִלְמוֹתָיו בִּיקָר -- how did Korah, such a clever man, get involved in the foolishness of being clever!

He means to say that, at the time, Korah appeared to have everything going for him. The people were afflicted with widespread discontent, with fear, with want, with jealousy of Moses, with feelings

that Moses and Aaron and Miriam were nepotistic. Yet the fatal mistake of Korah was not ח'סו (foolishness) as such, but quite the opposite: he was too sharp, too brilliant, too capable.

Is this contravened by the Yiddish proverb חסו'ס א'ס א'ס (the bride is too beautiful...)? Not quite.

Korah, according to the Kotzker Rebbe, is teaching us that it is foolish to be too clever. Korah's very sharpness was a sign of his dullness; his very astuteness was a symptom of his want of intelligence; his very shrewdness was the stuff of stupidity.

It is an old truth (and truth does not dilute with age) that was known to the sages of all cultures and all times. Thus, Jeremiah taught us לא יגאור חכם ב'סו, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom." And his contemporary Aristotle taught that vice is virtue taken to excess. Earlier yet, the Greeks were aware that hubris (pride, arrogance) leads to the revenge of Nemesis...

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Our whole society suffers from this tendency to value intelligence as an end in itself, without moral dimensions. It is true of our science and technology, which have for so long proclaimed an indifference to the moral consequences and social implications of their activities; to business, which piously proclaims only one goal, that of profit; to law and to journalism and to hundred other professions.

That is why I personally subscribe to the thesis of James Madison, one of our Founding Fathers, that democracy is based not on the naive and romantic faith in man's innate goodness, but quite the contrary, on an expectation that groups of men, like individuals, will be motivated only by their self-interest. Each group tends to extremes in order to achieve its aims. Democracy means that we allow all the groups of society to come into a tension with each other, and in the interplay of forces, each group cancels the overreaching of other groups. This is the theory of checks and balances. Yet, despite all of this, it sometimes happens that one or several groups rip apart the social and political fabric by just being too smart and too successful.

The Yom Kippur War proved it for Israel. The Israelis fought valiantly and heroically. But they realize now, as do all of us, the danger of the **שטות של נקחות**, the arrogance that comes from being too smart. We foolishly tried to be clever, and imagined that our superiority was unmovable, ingrained, and permanent. We therefore become negligent and careless.

But if for Israel our overshrewdness was expressed in negligence, no such mitigation can be provided for what happened in the USA.

Here, a band of sharp-headed but small-minded men overreached themselves by trying to do in the opposition with impunity. But the Watergate gangsters succeeded only in out-smarting themselves. During the entire course of the exposure of this sordid affair, we are often moved to wonder:

**מה ראו לשטות זו**

**זהיוות פיקח --** how foolish of them to be so

smart! At every step, at every fresh revelation, in this sordid and dirty business, I have been shocked at how supposedly brilliant men do such foolish things. But I am convinced the solution lies

in the Kotzker formula:

שטות להיות פיקח

They are being too smart, too shrewd -- foolishly so!

~~Knowledge remains the highest goal of the Jewish spiritual enterprise. But never is it valued without a spiritual-moral commitment, and never with arrogance.~~

The same worry about an excess of success, a superfluity of brilliance, leads one to apprehension and ambiguity about our Secretary of State. One must of course admire his unquestioned genius. But is that a guarantee of peace? -- of the welfare of the United States? - of the survival of Israel?

His recently proposed compromise figure of 45,000 Jews to emigrate from Russia every year sounds good, yet it also sounds quite hollow when you read that, in anticipation of President Nixon's arrival in Moscow, Russian-Jewish activists are being chased, persecuted, arrested. Some good omen for the success of Kissinger's policy!

In religious life per se, too, we must beware of the שטות להיות פיקח, the foolishness of being too wise, too smart.

Knowledge remains the highest goal of the Jewish spiritual enterprise. But never is it valued without a spiritual-moral commitment, and never with arrogance.

I have always been fond of the statement of R. Nachman Bratzlaver that no matter how educated a man is in the ways of Torah, in the ways of God, and in the ways of the world, when he rises for prayer ישיך את כל החכמות אחר גבו, let him throw out all his knowledge, all his sophistication, all his wisdom, over his shoulder -- and stand before God childlike, simple, plain. All our philosophy, all our learning, all our

ratiocination is as naught before Him. Surely each of us knows some people who think they are sophisticated when they are only indulging in sophistry!

Permit me to cite a famous mishnah in Avot which I shall consciously misinterpret -- in order to illustrate my point.

The Rabbis said: **אִיזוֹ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם**

"Who is a wise man? One who learns from every man." My

"misinterpretation" (in the sense that this was obviously not the original intent of the author) is to read that: **אִיזוֹ חָכָם**

"Who is a wise man?" **הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל**, "One who learns from everything" -- from all of life, from all of experience, from all individuals -- that: **אָדָם**, "man." We are only human. We are only men and women. We are limited and mortal and finite and inadequate and fallible.

The merely **לֵיָקָה** (the shrewd man) thinks he has monopolized understanding and learning. The **חָכָם** (wise man) is one who knows how much remains inaccessible to man and forever closed to his probing intellect. The foolish "sharpie" imagines that his smartness will save him. The **חָכָם** distrusts an exaggerated view of wisdom itself.

Korah was only a **לֵיָקָה**, a "shrewdie," and he thought he could outsmart the whole world. So he proved to be a **שׁוֹטֵה**, a fool. But the **חָכָם**, the truly wise man, knows how easy it is to fall into the pit of **שׁטוּת**, or stupidity; he knows that with every advance in knowledge or insight we walk on a thin line, on the rim of an abyss of foolishness, so that one error, one misstep -- and our wisdom has begotten us eternal folly. Therefore, the truly wise man humbly acknowledges that there is

no true knowledge without faith, no wisdom without morality, no advancement of man without the greater knowledge that he is also a שוטה, a fool.

Perhaps this is what Isaiah meant in his great Messianic vision: **וּמְלֵאקָה הָאָרֶץ דַּעַת אֱתֵי ה'**, usually translated, "The world will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord." But then the Hebrew should have read **דַּעַת ה'**, not **דַּעַת**.

**אֱתֵי ה'**. Why the **אֱתֵי**? That small word sometimes means "with." Hence: the world will be filled with knowledge -- all kinds of knowledge: religious and secular, spiritual and scientific, economic and psychological -- **אֱתֵי ה'**, with the Lord, accompanied by and restrained by and graced by the healing trust and faith in God, and the humility that comes with it.

Only when faith is combined with knowledge, when ~~the~~ Lord is acknowledged along with the exercise of one's own intelligence, are we ready for the Messiah. Only then are we worthy of redemption.