

THE MAKINGS OF A MAN

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This morning I wish to take exception to the tenor of sermons customarily delivered on the Sabbath we read of Korah and his insurrection. The pulpit, on this day, usually expounds on the vice of rebelliousness, and regards the Rebel as an absolutely evil person. I do not want to plead in his defense. But I do believe the accusation should be modified. The Rebel is sometimes but not always a rogue. Rebelliousness is not necessarily at all times an unmitigated evil.

Actually, there are two strains of personality that are opposed to each other, and that characterize most human behavior. They are: conformity and rebelliousness. Every human being has both tendencies within him. Some of us express more of one quality than the other. There are some people who are almost completely the Conformist, others completely the Rebel.

The Conformist is the dedicated bourgeois. He submits to the majority, the popular, and finds security in being part of the nameless mass and the faceless crowd. He has suppressed whatever independence of judgment he might have possessed. He is a self-righteous person who has largely ceased to think for himself.

The Rebel is the Bohemian, the anarchist, the outsider. He worships at the shrine of protest. He proclaims the holiness of defiance. School, family, religion, society --- all forms of authority are considered by him The Enemy and he is dedicated to overthrow them.

Which of these two is the better man? Which is the midah, the attribute of character or personality that Judaism prefers and recommends to us? Shall we be the Conformist or the Rebel?

The answer is that the spiritually and psychologically mature personality must have elements of both, never only one. The authentic Jew must be neither "square" nor "beat," neither reactionary nor radical. He is, however, to have the capacity and the experience of both. For either one, by itself, is odious. When combined in one person, each has much to

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contribute to the growth of his character, to the makings of a true man.

Rebellion is a necessary ingredient of personality, an essential dimension of life. Rebellion implies the protest against stagnation, the promise of discovery, the quest for something new and more wholesome. Without the element of rebelliousness the soul ceases to speak, the spirit is somber and silent as a cemetery. Abraham was a rebel, an iconoclast. He broke his father's idols and revolted against the obscene, smug paganism of his world. Moses led a rebellion against Pharaoh and was a lonely outsider even within Israel. Without the French Revolution the Western World might have no democracy today. Only recently Justice Douglas pleaded for a renewal of the spirit of the American Revolution in the world, for rebellion can be healthy indeed. The State of Israel was created in the seething cauldron of revolution and protest against established authority.

Yet rebelliousness as such, alone and by itself, can smash to smithereens all that society has constructed since man emerged on earth. The man who can only protest, who is always and without reason a dissenter, who resents any and every authority, is an eternal adolescent who has no rightful place in civilized society. The rebelliousness of Southern demagogues who riot in Alabama or in Mississippi is not a good thing. It is a kind of Gastroitis. In our Torah the archetype of the Rebel who, in his viciousness, is destructive, is -- Korah. He knew no discipline, he was unscrupulous in his means, and he aimed at the overthrow of the authority of Moses, of Torah, of G-d Himself as it were. His rebellion was sinister. In punishment he was swallowed up by the earth, a sign that with rebelliousness alone life on this earth is impossible.

The same can be said for the opposite characteristic, Conformism. This too is a vital element of mankind. It is an attempt to turn chaos into order, uncertainty into stability. Without conformism there can be no love, for in love the two lovers must conform to each other's wishes, needs,

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demands. The Conformist, by restraining his will, allows law to operate and order to prevail. Without conformism there can be neither society nor government, neither Halakhah nor traffic regulation.

And yet conformity by itself can stifle the human spirit and utterly destroy it. In our day and age it is not necessary for me to elaborate on its dangers. The Conformist is The Organization Man, the robot of Huxley's Brave New World, the human machine of Orwell's 1984. The Conformist is a coward whose weakness has caused his spine to crumble, his blood to turn to water, his spirit to wither away. He is smug, bland, insipid, lifeless.

In our Torah it is no less a personage than Joshua who stands indirectly accused of conformity, of too great an emphasis on uniformity. Recall the portion of two weeks ago, when we read of the ruach ha-kodesh, the holy spirit, devolving upon the seventy elders gathered in the Ohel Moed. After a while they stopped prophecyng. But Eldad and Medad kept on their prophecyng even afterwards, and Joshua, the loyal disciple of Moses was enraged and pleaded with his master: Adoni Mosheh kela'em, "my master Moses, lock them up!" Why was he so upset? Because, our tradition tells us, the other prophesied in the Ohel Moed, whereas they remained ba-machaneh, in the camp. They refused to follow the others. They retained independence in this respect. They abhorred uniformity, which Joshua adored. Under the impress of the overwhelming, towering personality of Moses, Joshua had become rigid. It was a small, insignificant detail in which Eldad and Medad veered from the popular, the norm, the majority; yet Joshua was upset. Therefore Moses rebuked Joshua: it is not uniformity that G-d seeks, it is prophecy and holiness. Mi yiten ve'khol am ha-Shem neviim --- would that all Israel became prophets, wherever they are.

What is important to know, therefore, is that either of these extremes exclusively is dangerous. A mature Jewish personality must possess the ability both to rebel and to conform, to affirm and to protest, to be

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ja-sager and nsin-sager. In the personality of the ben Torah there must be a dialectic between the two. In the study of Torah itself, rebelliousness tells us not to have implicit faith in any authority whether a Rashi or a Rambam, but to question, probe, check on any and all authorities. All the Talmud is a testament to this free human spirit. And conformity tells the ben Torah that after all the discussion and dispute, the argument and the controversy, there is only one mode of practice, one Halakhah, one Shulchan Aruch which all accept and follow. In all of life is this true: through conformity we learn how not to be beasts; through rebelliousness, how not to be animals.

But in addition to possessing both character traits, what is most crucial is to know that neither conformity nor rebellion should be an end in itself. Only a coward will conform for the sake of conforming, only an eternal adolescent will rebel for the sake of rebelling. The critical question is: conform to what, rebel against what? To know how to direct these two powerful human forces is the essence of wisdom. It is because Korah did not use his rebelliousness properly, but was used by it, that our Rabbis referred to him not as a chakham, a wise man, but as pikeach, merely a shrewd fellow who was trapped by his own cleverness.

Certainly, it is the goal and the cause that make either the Conformist or the Rebel good or bad, worthy or unworthy. The Bohemian's anti-social flaunting of authority and convention is meaningless. A genuine democratic uprising against tyranny is an act of enduring praise. To conform in Nazi Germany is not the same as conforming in the company of angels.

Our Rabbis, in Pirkei Avot speak of a good kind of dissent and a bad kind. Machloket le'shem shamayin, protest "for the sake of Heaven," sefeh le'hikayem, will endure forever, while machloket which is not for the sake

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of Heaven will not endure. Rebellion with a good cause in back of it is worthy of great sacrifice. Its protest will be a contribution to the history of man's spiritual growth. But rebellion without a cause, simply for the sake of dissension and power -- that is of no value, it is destructive. And our Sages give an example of each kind of defiance or nachleket. The nachleket she'ensh le'shem shamayin, the purposeless dissension, is that of Korach ve'khol adato, Korah and his followers. The enduring kind is that of Hillel and Shammai, the great disputants who together transmitted the word of G-d as the Halakhah of Judaism.

One commentator asked: why in the case of Korah do we mention only one side of the dispute -- Korah and his group -- and omit the opposition, Moses, while in the case of the worthy nachleket we mention both disputants, Hillel and Shammai? He answered: because Korah did not really dispute any ideal of Moses; his rebellion was for its own sake, uninformed by higher purpose. Hillel and Shammai, however, did not argue for the sake of arguing or disagree for the sake of being disagreeable. They protested specific ideas presented by the other. They stood for something. There was a cause to which they conformed, another against which they rebelled. Each protested the legal decision of the other -- as Rebels: both swore allegiance to the same G-d, the same Torah, the same Halakhah -- as Conformists.

This indeed spells out for us the manner in which we are to express the dual capacities we ought to have. G-d has given us the Torah: the blueprint for the kind of life to which we are to conform, and for which we are to rebel against the forces of evil and G-dlessness and tyranny. The genuine Jew is one who knows when to use these traits, his rebelliousness as well as his conformity. And his rebellion against a Torah-less Jewry and a G-dless society is undertaken by him not out of unqualified hate and bitter protest, but out of love for the cause of Torah, of decency, of

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reverence for the Divine Image of man. He will be a rebel with a cause. "The Rebel," wrote the late French author Albert Camus, "is a man who cares. Rebellion is an act of love and a confirmation that existence is worth fighting for ... Rebellion is not an act of hating unless it is also an act of loving." Indeed, the Jewish Rebel will not only hate the evil he battles; he will do it out of love of G-d, le'shem shamayim.

At the beginning of our talk, we mentioned two people, each of them an archetype: Korah the Rebel and Joshua the Conformist. We know that Korah, the rebel without a cause, was destroyed. What happened to Joshua?

Joshua was cured of his sickness by Moses. The rebuke of the master healed the disciple. Joshua's passion for uniformity hardened into a dedication to principle which could be expressed in dissent and rebellion if necessary. Shortly after the episode we mentioned, Joshua was sent along with Kaleb and ten princes of Israel as the meraglim to spy out Canaan for the Israelites. The great majority of them brought back a diffident, discouraging report. The old Joshua, Joshua the Conformist, might have gone along with the majority. He might have submitted to the opinions of those older than he, those he considered wiser. He might have swallowed his pride, his freedom of will, his independence of judgment. But Joshua was no longer the conformist. He now knew the essence of being a rebel with a cause where necessary -- machloket le'shem shamayim, and so, without fear or trepidation, without hesitation or equivocation, Joshua and Kaleb defied the majority and submitted a strong, stinging minority report. The majority was wrong and perished, Joshua, in the minority, having newly discovered the virtue of proper rebellion, survived and became one of the immortals of the human race.

It is Joshua -- who ultimately combined both features and knew when to call on each for the lofty purposes to which he was dedicated -- who is our model. That is why, when Moses pleads with G-d for a worthy successor,

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he says: yifked ha-Shem Elokei ha-ruchot le'khol bassar ish al ha-edah,^a
 "Let the Lord, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the
 congregation," and G-d responds by offering Joshua, ish asher ruach bo, "a man
 who has the spirit in him." Moses wanted a man capable of ruchot, of both
 spirits, of both conformity and rebelliousness. G-d granted him that man --
 Joshua, who sometimes would display the ruach of the Rebel, sometimes the
ruach of the Conformist, as the occasion and the cause demanded it. He was
 truly an ish, a man, in the full, human sense.

It is his example we must adopt for ourselves. To be capable of both
 "spirits," to use each as needed and as his sacred causes demand -- that is
 what makes a man worthy of leading the congregation of Israel as successor
 to Moses.

Let each of us strive to become that kind of ish, even as Joshua became
 an ish under the tutelage of Moses, himself an ish -- ish ha-Elokim, the
 "Man of G-d."