

"RE-ENACTING AN OLD DRAMA"

The rebellion of Korah and his co-conspirators against Moses and Aaron, of which we read this morning, is the first great, direct test of the leadership of Moses. The quelling of the rebellion of this band of malcontents re-establishes and re-affirms the leadership of Moses of his people in the desert.

And yet, according to "Yalkut Reuveni" the Hakhmei ha-Emet -- that is, the Sages of the Kabbalah -- have taught that this great battle between Moses and Korah had ancient roots. The struggle between these two, they say, was merely the re-enactment of the old drama of the strife between Cain and Abel. They identify Moses with Abel and Korah with Cain.

The detailed Kabbalistic analogy is beyond our limited comprehension. Nevertheless, it is obvious to all of us that the Sages of the Kabbalah have here enunciated a great truth. For indeed, as we analyze the two dramas, we find confirmed the similarities between these two sets of biblical characters.

Thus, for instance, we can detect at least three elements which unite Moses with Abel and Korah with Cain. The first of these is: kinah, jealousy or envy. The fratricide committed by Cain against Abel had its roots in Cain's envy of Abel: the Lord accepted the offering of Abel, but v'el Kayin v'el minhato lo sha'ah _ God did not accept the offering of Cain. The same feelings

provoked Korah to his abortive insurrection. Both Moses and Korah were brothers in the sense of being members of the same tribe of Levi. Yet Moses was the undisputed leader of the people, while Korah was not. He was consumed by the fire of jealousy _ even as later he was consumed by the fire of the Lord when he met his end.

The second observable element that unites these two pairs is: ta'avah, concupiscence, desire, a ravenous appetite for more and more. In the story of the sons of Adam, the Sages tell us that they divided the world between the two of them. Cain owned a full half of the world - yet he begrudged his brother the other half and desired it for himself. Korah, according to Jewish tradition, was exceedingly wealthy, so much so that "as rich as Korah" has become a byword in Yiddish. Yet Korah was not satisfied with his wealth, and instead he was overwhelmed by a ta'avah for political power as well.

A third similarity is the striving for kavod, for honor and recognition. More than envy or desire motivated Cain to his tragic act. He was, in addition, the older brother of Abel - and he regarded Abel's distinction as an insult and an offense against his position. He did not receive the kavod he thought was his due. So, Korah felt deeply unhappy because of the lack of recognition he felt he deserved. He wanted kavod, and did not receive all that he expected. How clearly this comes out in the first accusation that Korah publicly directs against Moses in his denunciation: u-madua titna's'u al kehal ha-Shem, loosely translated: wherefore do you presume to raise yourselves over the congregation of the Lord?

The Abels and the Moseses, the people of good will, must always be prepared to cope with the malcontents, the dissatisfied, those who always grasp for more than they deserve. As the Rabbis taught us in this week's chapter of "The Ethics of the Fathers," ha-Kinah ha-taavah ve'ha-kavod motziin et ha-adam min ha-olam - envy, desire, and undeserved honor drive a man out of the world. This was literally true in both our cases. Cain was forced out of his world - he was sent into exile, wandering over the face of the earth. No place could he call his own, no house could he identify as his home. Korah too was driven out of the world - indeed, he literally was swallowed up by the earth and vanished from the world of men.

The quarrel between Moses and Korah was not something localized in ancient history; it is a universal drama, as old as man himself. So long as there will be people who will allow themselves to be dominated by unworthy aspirations, someone is going to be terrorized and victimized. The two cases of Cain and Korah are, in essence, a biblical insight into the personality of the aggressor.

Yet there is one question that remains to be answered. If indeed the story of Korah and Moses is but the reenactment of the old drama of Cain and Abel, why are the results so different? Why is it that Abel was the victim of Cain in that ancient story, while the man identified with Abel, Moses, is the victor over Cain's representative, - Korah! Why does the good lose in one case, and triumph in the other?

Before we answer that question, we must find yet one more similarity between these two couples. And that lies in the element of disguise, of cloaking evil in piety. The most characteristic element in both stories is the projection of selfish, ~~egotistical~~, aggressive intentions in the guise of the noble, the good, the decent. For his own nefarious purposes, the Devil will quote scripture, and the aggressor nation will announce himself "leader of the peace-loving camp." Thus, Cain's motivations were, as we have seen, completely selfish in nature. Yet, Cain did not announce his intentions as boldly as all that. Tradition teaches that Cain and Abel divided the world in the following manner: Abel was to receive all chattel, or moveable objects, while Cain was to possess all land, all real estate. Therefore, Cain decided to press his claims in the form of justice and righteousness. Wherever Abel went, Cain told him: you are standing on my land. Please move on. If you continue to trespass I shall protect my rights against you. From a formal, conventional, point of view, Cain was apparently within his

rights. He had justice on his side. If that was the agreement between the two brothers, Cain had the right to insist upon its complete execution. So that his kinah and ta'avah and kavod were all wrapped up in the cloak of Pegalism, piety, righteousness.

Korah, according to the Bible and the Rabbis, did the very same thing. He did not call a Press conference and announce that he was going to initiate a coup d'etat in order to satisfy his ambition for greater power and influence. He did turn his eyes heavenward and act as the protector of the people, as the man who is far holier than Moses. In the fashion of a true demagogue, he denounced Moses and Aaron saying: rav la-khem ki kol ha-edah kulam kedushim - have you not taken enough power for yourselves, do you not realize that all these people are holy, that not only the two of you are holy? He set himself up as the great democrat, defender of the people. Jewish tradition further records that Korah tried to make Moses and Aaron appear as tyrants who needlessly exploited the people for their personal gain and profit. He cast himself in the role of the advocate of the ordinary, common man against the tyranny of Moses.

So that both in the case of Cain and that of Korah, the real motives of envy, desire for power, and the grasping for honor, are disguised in a veneer of righteousness. They are hypocrites.

Perhaps this is the reason we find in both these stories, a strange grammatical construction: a verb without an object. Thus, in the story of Cain and Abel we read: va-yomer Kayin el Hevel ahiv, va-yehi bi-heyotam ba-sadeh va-yakam Kayin el Hevel ahiv va-yehargehu - and Cain said to his brother Abel, and it was when they were in the field that Cain rose and killed his brother Abel. What did he "say?" We read that va-yomer, "he said" but we do not read what he said. So, in today's Sidra we read: va-yikah Korah, Korah and the people who were conspiring with him, took...

va-yukumu and they rose up and rebelled against Moses. But what or whom did they "take?" We are not told.

Perhaps what the Torah means to tell us with these unusual constructions is that the reasons they gave, what they said, the "front" they presented, the excuses they offered - were all empty, meaningless, and of no concern to us. What Cain said was totally irrelevant; he never said what he really meant. The fact is that he was fraudulent and hypocritical. What Korah said or whom he took along with him was equally inconsequential; the important thing is that in order to satisfy his own desire for power he deceived and almost destroyed his entire people. It is the action, the deeper motive, unspoken and unarticulated, but disguised in the cloak of piety, that is so terribly and unspeakably evil. It is that which really counts. The rest is unworthy of being recorded in Scripture.

Here, then, we can discover why Moses was the victor, while Abel was the victim of his aggressive brother. In all our readings of the Torah and our Midrash we do not find that Abel truly fought back against Cain. We do not find him calling Cain's bluff. Instead, in all likelihood, he tried to counter his brother, Cain on his, Cain's, terms. No doubt he rebutted his arguments with legal arguments of his own. And when you try to fight the devil on the devil's terms, you are bound to lose.

But Moses had learned the lesson of Abel. He refused to discuss Korah's complaints in the manner they were presented. Instead he pierced the mask, he went straight to the heart of the matter, and ripped off the disguises of these evil men. He said to them, shim'u na bnei Levi: ha-me'at mikhem, listen here you sons of Levi, is it not enough for you that God has chosen your tribe above all others, that u-vikashtem gam kenunah, you seek as well to become the priests, the sole leaders? He stripped them of all their pious pretensions and let all the people see what they really wanted:

power, power, and more power. And then he turned to the people and said to them, suru na me'al ahalei ha'anashim ha'resha'im ha'elah - depart from the tents of these evil, wicked people. That is all that they really are. Moses learned from the story of Cain and Abel - and we must learn from the story of Korah and Moses - never to be impressed by pious frauds, for even their piety is fraudulent. Evil should not be debated; it should be exposed.

This is a lesson for us in all aspects of life. In order to survive, physically and morally and spiritually we must insist upon the truth and look for it with all the power at our command.

The negroes of America have finally learned that lesson well. They have learned that "gradualism" and tokenism" are mere euphemisms. They are not the programs of action that are meant seriously for the benefit of ~~the~~ Negro or for that which that is right in general. They are only facades for further persecution, discrimination, and bigotry. They will not fight the bigot on the bigot's terms. They will expose him for what he really is.

In recent years, Jewish writers and "intellectuals," who are very uncomfortable with their Judaism, have pronounced publicly on our faith in many ways.

Worse yet, certain organizations which should know better have turned to them as the oracles who will decide for us the real nature and future of Judaism. The magazine Commentary started this with a symposium, and the sad results were/indeed. Now the American Jewish Congress has instituted a

"dialogue" between American and Israeli Jews in Jerusalem. From the most recent reports of The New York Times, the dialogue this week included American writers, novelists, and columnists. All of them, according to the report, were "rather nebulous about their identification as Jews."

One author -- whose recent book portrays a Rabbi in a role that would make any sensitive reader blush with embarrassment declared the "essential nature of Jewishness" to be a feeling of alienation, of being in exile,

an outsider. Thus, he declared, most Jews in Israel and the United States, being insiders, in their respective societies have "ceased to be Jews."

What a romantic definition! It certainly sounds appealing. But then, by this definition, King David, King Solomon, the Gaon of Vilna and countless others - were not Jews! They were not alienated from their own society. This particular writer is a Jew, but they are not. Furthermore a Jewish society is impossible - for a society cannot be alienated from itself!

Another writer, who recently no doubt made a great deal of money with his "best seller," declared that to be a Jew one must be a "dissenter from the affluent society." By such terms, Rabbi Judah the Prince who according to the reports of our Tradition was very wealthy, was not a Jew - although he was the editor of the Mishnah!

It is useless to show the emptiness of this dilletantism. It is humiliating to hear Jews alienated from Judaism describe Judaism as a state of being alienated from Jews. It is embarrassing that the American Jewish Congress saw fit to invite only one observant Jew - a Professor of Physics from the Hebrew University - to participate in this "dialogue."

We must learn, and should have learned by now, that all this is a facade. It is an elaborate circumlocution[?] for assimilation - a word no longer popular nowadays. It is a roundabout way for saying "I desire to commit spiritual suicide but haven't the courage to face up to it. I would like to forget that I am a Jew, but the cruel world won't let me. In my heart of hearts I want to be reborn a 'WASP' - a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant - but my infantile wishes are constantly frustrated."

It is a sad but true fact that those who ponder the definition of his Jewishness have usually lost it by that time. The Jew who practices Torah

and Mitzvot does not normally concern himself about the definition of his Jewishness. It is when a man has assimilated in fact, but is unwilling to acknowledge it in words, that he wraps up his assimilation in this existentialist rhetoric of "alienation."

Our policy ought to be not to discuss "Who is a Jew?" on such terms. We should rather, recognize assimilation for what it is, call it by its real name, and avoid unnecessary dialectic.

Those of us who are true to the Jewish tradition and loyal to our Torah need not participate in this new fad and fashion on inventing new definitions of Jewishness. Like Moses, we prefer to go straight to the truth. We will not call Judaism "alienation" or "dissent." We will recognize such terms merely as ~~excuse~~ for assimilation, for the surrender of Torah and Mitzvot -- which alone constitute Judaism.

It is for good reason that the aggadah tells us of Rabbah bar bar Hannah putting his ear to the ground, in a spot in the desert pointed out to him by an Arab as the burial place of Korah and his cohorts, and hearing them declare from the bowels of the earth, Mosheh emet ve'torato emet - Moses is true and his Torah is true. Our Torah is truth, and our truth is Torah. We shall not become ensnared by the slogans, "images," and posturing of the Cain's and Korah's and others of their ilk. Through our Torah of truth we shall become perceptive. With its wisdom, its insights, and its eternal blessings we shall learn to live our lives in a manner pleasing to God. We shall forever proclaim, through all time and all the world, "Moses is true and his Torah is true."