



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Korach

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June 20, 2015

Korach

**If God Is Everywhere,
Why Do We Need Torah?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

God is everywhere, everything, omnipresent, omnipotent.

So why do we need religion? Why do we need Torah? Why do we need rules and commandments?

And why do we need leaders? Why do we need a Moses, a Rebbe?

This is especially relevant as we honor the 21st anniversary of Gimmel Tammuz this Shabbat. What role does a Rebbe play in our lives?

Why don't we connect to God in anyway we deem fit? Why does someone have to tell us how to relate to our Creator?

The question is simple: Is it about you or is it about God?

Answer this and answer everything.

Answer this and you shall wipe the tears of the crying waters, and you shall wipe the tears of Israel.

IF GOD IS EVERYWHERE, WHY DO WE NEED TORAH?

1. Where is God? (Joke)

A couple had two mischievous twin boys, Aaron and Moshe, aged twelve, who listened to nothing and disrupted everything. As the boys were approaching Bar Mitzvah, their parents were at their wits' end, and so they contacted a local rabbi who had a reputation of successfully educating and disciplining cantankerous Bar-Mitzvah-aged children.

The rabbi asked to see the boys individually. Moshe was sent to meet with him first. The rabbi sat the boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy made no response, so the rabbi repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God?"

Again Moshe made no attempt to answer, so the rabbi raised his voice and shook his finger in the boys face, "WHERE IS GOD?"

At that, the boy bolted from the room, ran directly home, and shut himself in his room. His twin brother followed him in and asked what happened.

The boy replied, "We are in big trouble this time, Aaron! God is missing, and they think we did it!"

2. Missing God

What makes this anecdote humorous is that it isn't possible for God to go missing. Either, (as accepted by people of faith) God is reality and is everywhere, or (as atheists believe) God is nowhere and cannot thus be taken away.

Put another way: if God could be missing because two young boys stole him, then is such a "god" really God? What kind of omnipotent and om-

present deity allows two mischievous Bar Mitzvah boys to kidnap him? Herein lies the joke.

But it is a joke that leads us to ask some profound questions:

If God is everywhere, why can't we see God, and why do we need a system of specific dos and don'ts – also known as mitzvot – to have a relationship with Him? If God is everywhere, as we believe and know, then why can't we relate to Him in our own subjective way without needing religion and its rules to help us do so?

This is what a man named Korach asked more than 3,000 years ago.

And his question is relevant today more than ever, especially on this day of Gimmel Tammuz, when we honor the 21st anniversary of the Rebbe's passing: Why do we need a Rebbe, and what role does a Rebbe play in our lives today?

Today, we will explore the answer.

3. Korach – The Separatist

The first words of our Torah reading are, Vayikach Korach,¹ literally meaning, “And Korach took,” although Targum Onkelos translates it a little differently: Vayikach Korach – Vaitpaleg Korach, “And Korach separated,” or “And Korach divided.”

How did Korach take himself [away], separate himself, divide himself from Moses, Aaron, and the camp of Israel? By posing the exact question which we just posed. Said Korach to Moses:

“The entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?”²

If we are all holy – and we are! – why do we need a leader, a Moses, or an Aaron, a High Priest? Why do we need organized religion? If we are all homes brimming with holy books and holiness – and we are! – why

¹Numbers 14:1.

²Ibid 3.

do we need a mezuzah on our doorposts? If we are all sacred shawls saturated with the Divine – and we are! – why do we need to attach tzitzit/fringes to the corners?

4. Noam Elimelech's Explanation

Using Onkelos's translation, that Korach "separated/divided," Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk, in his famed work Noam Elimelech, compares Korach's separation and division to the first separation and division in the history of the world – the separation and division that begot all separations and divisions to follow.

What was that first separation? For this we go back to the beginning of creation, the opening of Genesis:

And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let there be a separation between water [above] and water [below]."³

The first day of creation was chessed, loving kindness, complete flow of energy, unfettered, unlimited, unleashed. Water, a metaphor for pleasure, for life, for sustenance, flowed everywhere.

But we all know what happens when you have non-stop flow: you get flooded. A deluge. And with flooding nothing can exist save for the waters themselves. An overabundance of goodness can be overwhelming and destructive. Rov tovah aynom yecholim l'kabel.⁴

Because the purpose was to have physical creation, God introduced a new, second ingredient on the second day. This ingredient was gevurah, separation, discipline, definition: a separation between water (above) and water (below).

Thus division/separation is not inherently negative; indeed, it is intrinsic and essential to the creation process and to existence, which is de-

³Genesis 1:6.

⁴See Talmud Taanis 23a. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 577:1.

finied by its diversity. All of existence is dependent on structural boundaries. But at the same time the diversity needs to be balanced by harmony. When taken too far, the separation and diversity of gevurah alone can turn into divisiveness.

And this is why Noam Elimelech compares Korach's separation to that of the waters on the second day of creation:

Korach was all about gevurah, definition, discipline, separation, while Aaron was chessed, a flow from on high, unlimited and indiscriminate.

Korach assumed the purpose of existence lay in the separation itself – the entire congregation are all holy; thus the purpose was to recognize Godliness in everything, with no need to do anything, and connect things together. Since everyone is already holy there is no need to refine yourself, no need to elevate and sanctify yourself through Torah and mitzvot, and no need to connect to leaders. Since God is everywhere and in everyone and everything, why should we need a system of Torah and mitzvot and spiritual leaders?

Aaron, the High Priest, represented chessed, which unites everything and brings it to an elevated state. He maintained that the purpose of existence lay in working on revealing the Divine holiness in everything by fulfilling Torah and its mitzvot, and aligning ourselves with Divine Will and the divine leaders God chose.

And it was this that Korach rebelled against.

5. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Elaboration

In the year 5718 (1958) the Lubavitcher Rebbe delivered a maamar, a discourse titled, *Hasam Nafsheinu Bachaim*, based on a verse from Psalms, He, who kept our souls alive and did not let our feet falter.⁵ Expounding on a maamar delivered by the Previous Rebbe in 5694 (1944), this discourse examines a profound level of life and living, one

⁵ Psalms 66:9.

that transcends our normal, conventional understanding of the subject.

The discourse elaborates at length upon the teaching of the Noam Elimelech.

Since today is Gimmel Tammuz – the third day in the month of Tammuz, when, in 1994, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s soul ascended from this mortal plane of physical existence – it is fitting that we should study his teachings. And this is what he taught:

Life is composed of two movements: revelations and concealments. There are times in life when there is complete revelation, like when a Moses descends down from the mountain to share words of the Living God, or like when a Jew does a mitzvah, or like when we dance with a Sefer Torah. These revelations stem from chessed.

But there are also concealments in life, when we don’t see God, when even Moses is hidden, when all we see is decaying flesh, decomposing matter, challenges, pain, suffering, hurt, tears and darkness. These concealments stem from gevurah, which defines and separates, at the same time introducing distance and delineating boundaries between objects. On its own, gevurah is a necessary component in defining the diversity of existence. But when these concealments are left unchecked and not balanced with revelations, it can lead to divisiveness. Concealments, in other words, is the major cause of all disagreements.

Korach (expressing gevurah) sadly gravitated to the undesirable results of definitions and concealments of the physical world and believed that this was the purpose of it all. Instead of appreciating the need to elevate the lower world to a higher state of divine consciousness, he felt that the world below should know God in its own way without the need of spiritual revelation.

Korach wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t right either. For the only way to know God in all things, even in concealment, is through Torah and mitzvot as taught and modeled to us by our leaders – by ensuring, in everything we do, that we bring the flow of -revelation, chessed, into the gevurah.

6. Harmony Through Bittul

After describing the first day of creation, the Torah states that it was “good.” The second day of creation, when the separation took place, the Torah does not refer to it as “good.” But after describing the third day, the Torah calls it “good” twice!

The first day is chessed, flow. The second is gevurah, separation. The third day is tiferet, the harmony between the two.

Korach lacked the third, tiferet, approach of balance and harmony.

There is the natural, the predicable, the normal. And there is the supernatural, the unpredictable, the miraculous. The former stems from gevurah, through which everything is defined, designated with parameters and specifications. That is nature. Then there is the latter – chessed, the abundant ceaseless flow of energy, of miracles, revelations, of light unfettered and unlimited.

As we said, Korach represents gevurah, separation, definition, limitation – and from his perspective everything is holy. Aaron represents chessed, flow, the miraculous – from this point of view the only way to serve the Creator is by touching the flow of God, the Will of God, namely by studying Torah and performing mitzvot.

And each on its own does not need the other. Chessed can flow on forever without ever being defined and disciplined. Gevurah can remain down below in a defined and limited world, never desiring or being privy to any flow or revelation from on high.

Only tiferet, harmony, can unite the two – the miraculous with the natural – so that the unlimited flow can be sent down in such a way that a finite hand may contain it.

This can only be only achieved through a key ingredient: bittul – suspending your own self for a higher purpose and deeper vision. If you are chessed prone, then suspend it to touch the concreteness of gevurah; if you are gevurah inclined, do likewise in order to infuse it with the flow of chessed.

This, as the Rebbe explains in the maamar, is the role of a Moses, of a divine leader, of a Rebbe – to unite the unpredictable energy flowing from above with the predictable nature of the world below, in such a way that nature retains its personality and characteristics, yet is inspired by and infused with revelations from on high.

7. Personal Lesson

Separation is inevitable and necessary for creation. Here are two simple examples to illustrate this point – the first from marriage, the second from birth.

The reason a soul is separated into two halves – man and woman – is not so that these two should remain separated and live apart and alone, but so that they should re-unite in marriage and create a new energy and oneness that would have been impossible without the separation.

Marriage is the reunification of two halves of one soul. And this reunification creates a greater energy than would otherwise be possible.

Birth, too, is separation. Birth, perhaps the greatest act of creation a human being can be involved in, happens when the newborn separates and is literally disconnected from its mother. For nine months, mother and child were one; then, suddenly, at birth they become two.

The focal point, however, isn't separation; rather the objective is birth, new life, new possibilities, energy and a new soul. Without the separation of birth, mother and child could never get to know each other, could never be close, could never smile and gaze into each other's eyes.

The separation of birth – as the separation of Adam and Eve, male and female – allows two entities to exist and, with hard work, achieve a greater unity, oneness and revelation than would otherwise be possible without the separation. With faith we know that the separation is not the purpose or driving factor; the separation is only so that we can reach a higher place.

Like the separation of the lower waters from the upper, when (according to the Midrash⁶) the lower waters wept bitter tears because they were heartbroken, separated from their source, we too weep bitter tears regarding the fact that we are separated from our source in God, from the upper waters.

But then we remember what God told the lower waters: “Weep not my children, for with this separation you will reach a place higher and deeper than you ever could have reached otherwise.”

And this is why the Torah describes the third day, tiferet, the beauty of harmony, as “good” twice. For the goodness that is achieved through unity after division, through harmony within diversity, is better than anything imaginable – it is double goodness.

8. Reb Elimelech and Reb Zushe (Story)

As mentioned, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk draws the parallel between the first separation in history, the division of the upper and lower waters, to the division between Korach and Aaron.

Many beautiful stories with tremendous life lessons in serving the Creator are related about Reb Elimelech and his brother, Reb Zushe of Anipoli.

One such story captures the idea of bittul, of serving God not because we desire to feel good or be spiritual, but because we simply desire to fulfill the Divine Will.

The two brothers, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk and Rabbi Zushe of Anipoli, often wandered about together, posing as simple beggars. They would mingle with the masses, listening, teaching, helping and guiding whomever and whenever they could.

Once, while they were traveling with a group of vagabonds, members of the group were accused of being thieves, and the entire bunch was thrown into jail. Confident of their innocence and eventual release, the

⁶Midrash Genesis Rabbah 5:4. Tikkunei Zohar 5 (19b).

two brothers sat quietly. As the afternoon progressed, Rabbi Elimelech stood up to prepare himself to pray the afternoon service.

“What are you doing?” his brother asked.

“I’m getting ready for Minchah,” replied Rabbi Elimelech.

“The same God who commanded you to pray commanded you not to pray in a room unfit for prayer!” advised Rabbi Zushe, “It is forbidden to pray in this cell, because there is a pail that serves as a toilet nearby, making the room unfit for prayer.”

Dejected, the holy Rabbi Elimelech sat down.

Soon after, Rabbi Elimelech began to cry. “Why are you crying?” asked Rabbi Zushe. “Is it because you are unable to pray?” Reb Elimelech answered affirmatively.

“But why weep?” continued Rabbi Zushe. “Don’t you know that the same God who commanded you to pray, also commanded you not to pray when the room is unfit for prayer? By not praying in this room, you have obeyed God’s will and achieved a connection with Him. True, it is not the connection that you sought. Yet, if you truly want a connection with the Divine, you should be happy that God has afforded you the opportunity to obey His law at this time, no matter what it is.”

“You are right, my brother!” exclaimed Rabbi Elimelech, suddenly smiling. The feelings of dejection banished from his heart and mind, Rabbi Elimelech took his brother’s arm and began to dance from happiness that he was performing the mitzvah of not praying in an inappropriate place.

The guards heard the commotion and came running. Witnessing the two brothers dancing – with their long beards and fringes flowing – the guards asked the other prisoners what had happened. “We have no idea!” they answered, mystified. “Those two Jews were discussing the pail in the corner, when all of a sudden they came to some happy conclusion and began to dance.”

“Is that right?” sneered the guards. “They’re happy because of the pail, are they? We’ll show them!” They promptly removed the pail from the cell.

The holy brothers then prayed Minchah undisturbed...⁷

9. What's It All About? (Conclusion)

If it's about you, then you will be limited by your nature, whether chessed or gevurah, flow or definition. But if it's about God, then you can have both fused as one, you can have the beauty of harmony.

This is what a Moses, a Rebbe, a true leader teaches us. And this is the epitome of life.

The Rebbe personified this approach and trained us to think in this manner. In a fascinating interview with Gershon Kranzler,⁸ just after he assumed leadership of Chabad, Kranzler quotes the Rebbe addressing a gathering of young workers for the furtherance of Jewish education: "It is not we that count, we with our weaknesses and capabilities. It is our will to do a job that we realize is important. Success is not in our hands, it is in G-d's. But we have to will to do what He demands of us, and in that will all our weaknesses and insufficiencies wane and become insignificant."

Life is a prison, cynically adorned with many a putrid pail. Like Reb Elimelech and Reb Zushe, we desire to worship, to connect, to pray to our Maker. But how can we, when we are surrounded by toxicity, when we are busy trying to survive, when all we see is dirt, waste and pain? We want to connect, but it's so hard, bordering on impossible. So we cry, we weep...

To which Reb Zushe responds: Don't cry my brother; it's simply about doing the Creator's will, whatever the situation may call for. If it's praying, pray; if it's giving charity, give charity; if it's not yelling at your spouse, don't yell at your spouse; if it's visiting your parents, visit your parents; if it's dancing around a pail of waste, dance around a pail of waste. Don't weep; simply find the means to serve your Creator in the appropriate manner, considering the circumstances at hand.

⁷ www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/619475/jewish/The-Joy-of-a-Mitzvah.htm.

⁸ Printed at www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/66877/jewish/The-New-Lubavitcher-Rebbe.htm.

How then can you not dance? How can you not celebrate the divine power vested and gifted within you?

In whatever situation we find ourselves we must see ourselves as emissaries of the Rebbe to bring light to the darkest places and warmth to the coldest environments.

And then, surely and miraculously, also the putrid pails of defilement will be forever removed, leaving only a place of cleanliness and purity, turning the confining prisons of life into the stuff of freedom and redemption.

This is called a level of life that does not let our feet falter. May it happen speedily in our days. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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