

“Rebel and Revolutionary”

The Power Of A Positive “No”

a sermon

preached by

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on

Shabbat Korah

June 14, 1964

at

THE JEWISH CENTER

131 West 86th Street

New York City

The rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Numbers, ch. XVI) is one which had tragic consequences and which left an indelible impression upon the collective Jewish memory. The Torah lists the names of those involved in the conspiracy in the desert. But who indeed were the members of this conglomeration of the displaced, the dissatisfied, and the disaffected? What motivated them, and what was their relation to each other?

Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the *Netziv*, finds three distinct groups in this mutiny of malcontents, and he describes them to us in his commentary *Haamek Davar*. The first consists of the two hundred and fifty princes of the congregation. These community leaders were not at all malicious people. They were well-intentioned, but misguided. They were great Jews, great even in their piety. That is why the Torah refers to them as “princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown.” They were Levites who desired to be *Kohanim* not because the priesthood offered them positions of influence and status, but because it represented an opportunity to come closer to God in the course of serving Him in the Sanctuary.

The second group consisted of two brothers from the tribe of Reuben: Dathan and Abiram. These two were known as trouble-makers even before the exodus from Egypt. They were not at all people of ideals or convictions. They were merely power-hungry schemers — nothing more, nothing less.

The third element in this mutiny was Korah himself. He was a man of great fame in Israel and yet was, in a way, the worst of all. For he tried to appear to the people a man of sincerity and genuineness, who had legitimate and selfless complaints, like the two hundred and fifty princes; but in fact he had the same base ends as Dathan and Abiram: the usurpation of the authority of Moses and Aaron.

This analysis—of which we have mentioned but the bare outline—is not only brilliant exegesis, but also a valid insight into character that is relevant to the human condition in general, whether in the days of Moses or our very own times.

Permit me to expand on this by referring to a recent essay by Dr. Erich Fromm (“The Revolutionary Character”), whose ideas we shall accept in part. Fromm distinguishes between two types: the rebel and the revolutionary. The need is one who is innocent of any ideological convictions. He is resentful of authority and wants to overthrow it so that he can himself become the authority. He is dissatisfied not with the office, but with the office-holder. His goal is a naked power-grab.

The revolutionary is completely different. He is not necessarily a person who participates in revolutions; the term is used psychologically, not politically. The revolutionary is one who thinks independently. He is unimpressed by those in control, and will not accept an idea just because it was pronounced by someone in authority. His is the critical mood, not that of bland acceptance. He will even be able to see through "common sense" when that is used to describe what is but nonsense repeated often enough by those who are influential enough. He is one who can transcend the parochial limits of his own society and milieu, and thus criticize both his own and any other society. The revolutionary character is one that enables a man to say "no," and not automatically assent to authority, to the status quo, to his environment, to "conditions."

Of course, not always is the revolutionary an angel. He can be right or wrong, good or evil, constructive or destructive, depending upon what he says "no" to, and upon whether his criticism is valid or invalid. Simple "orneriness" is not a virtue. But at least the mood of the revolutionary character is authentic. He thinks and reacts as an individual, not a cipher, not just another sheep in the flock.

With this distinction we can, I believe, better appreciate the *Netziv's* analysis of the Korah episode. Dathan and Abiram were what we have called rebels. No ideals or principles or ideologies informed their treachery. They lusted for power directly and without inhibition. The two hundred and fifty princes were revolutionaries. They refused to accept without question the denial to them of the *kehunah* or priesthood. But they misplaced their energies. Their criticism was well-intentioned but greivously misdirected. And Korah played an opportunistic, political, demagogic game. He cloaked himself in piety and tried to disguise himself as a revolutionary character, like the 250 princes. But in essence he was no different from the rebels Dathan and Abiram. He was the McCarthy of the Biblical period.

Indeed, the Korah-type is no stranger to our contemporary world. Far too many greedy, corrupt, and power-hungry men, from Iraq to Ghana and from Indonesia to Latin America, have taken over the reins of government without in the least benefiting their own people—and all this under the pretense of nationalism and anti-imperialism. The slogans are the slogans of revolution, but the goals are the goals of rebellion. Our age, so stormy and tempestuous—born in the French and American revolutions, sired by the industrial revolution, agonizing now in the scientific and nationalistic and civil-rights revolutions—offers great temptations to the Korah-type character. As Fromm puts it, "twentieth century political life is a cemetery containing the moral graves of people who started out as alleged revolutionaries and who turned out to be nothing more than opportunistic rebels."

Now these three classes represent what is wrong with the protest against power and authority: the 250 princes who were misguided revolutionaries; the avaricious rebels Dathan and Abiram; and the demagogic and deceiving Korah. But the constructive, creative aspect of the revolutionary character also has a place of honor in the Jewish tradition. In fact, it is a distinguishing feature of Judaism in the world and one of the major functions of Orthodoxy within the Jewish community. .

What is the Prophetic tradition if not the expression of a revolutionary character? It had its genesis in Abraham—who was an iconoclast. It reached its heights in Moses—who defied Pharaoh and both the military might and cultural hegemony of Egypt. Elijah was a revolutionary when he challenged Ahab, and Isaiah when he thundered against the drunkards who ruled the northern Kingdom of Israel, and Ezekiel when he dissented from the popular worship of Bel and Marduk. For three and a half thousand years Judaism has been out of step with the world—and has thus managed to be its repository of sanity and sanctity.

In like manner, today it is the mission of Orthodoxy to perpetuate this tradition of dissent and the revolutionary character within the Jewish community. Of course, if there are those who believe that this is the best of all possible worlds, that our American-Jewish community leaves nothing to be desired, that synagogue services must be rallies and Rabbis propagandists, then there is nothing more to be said. But for those whose love for Jews does not leave them blind, who are painfully aware of some of our faults and defects, there remains the problem of who will fulfill the role of the little boy who dared to proclaim that the emperor was naked. That role, I submit, is incumbent upon Orthodox Jews whose convictions force them to measure men and events by the criteria of Torah rather than by their own subjective tastes and shifting contemporary standards. It is we who have the obligation—painful though it be—of being the critics; constructive critics, of course, but critics none the less. It is part of the fate, the destiny, and the mission of the Torah Jew to say “no” when others sheepishly nod their heads in agreement, to arouse whilst others drowse in moral stupor, to irritate and goad when others seek only to pacify and tranquilize.

The founder of *Habad* Hasidism, R. Shneur Zalman, (in his *Likutei Torah*) saw this idea implicit in the famous words of the Prophet in the 2nd chapter of Jeremiah, “Thus saith the Lord, I remember for thee the affection of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, *lekhtekh aharei ba-midbar b’eretz lo zaruah*, how thou wentest after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.” Those last three words, *b’eretz lo zaruah*, says R. Shneur Zalman, mean not only “a land not

sown," but also a land in which the word and idea and imperative *lo* or "no" was sown! The most memorable achievement of our people was our willingness to accept a Torah and a tradition that emphasized the "no," that enshrined the power of dissent, that glorified non-conformism with the popular and the conventional. *Eretz lo zaruah*—the "ground"-principle of Judaism is: *lo*, "No." There in the desert, the vast and lonely *midbar*, we learned to be ourselves, to forge our own souls and characters under the tutelage of God alone. There we learned to say *No* to the idols worshipped by the crowds; *No* to the ever-present threat of assimilation; *No* to the passions and lusts that tyrannize a man; *No* to the avarice which inheres in his character. There, in that *eretz lo zaruah*, man learned to say *No* to the hidden fears that creep up on him in secret and threaten to paralyze his will and ruin his peace of mind; *No* to his grief when it turns excessive and overwhelms him; *No* to his worries and concerns when they give rise to despair and the kind of hopelessness that moves black clouds over his heart and his mind and his soul; *No* even to his perverse tendency to say "no" when there is no cause for it!

Today's American Orthodox Jew must not forget his ancient origins in the *eretz lo zaruah*. We must say *No* to the bankrupt Jewish secularism that surrounds us, often in clerical garb; *No* to the unreflective, obtuse, and self-disdaining tendency of certain Jewish organizations publicly to violate our most sacred tenets; *No* to Jews who dare call themselves observant or Orthodox but who perpetrate miserable, unethical business practices; *No* to renowned leaders of powerful Jewish organizations who seem to have lost every shred of self-respect. I refer, in this last instance, to the leaders of the American Jewish Committee who had an audience with the Pope in Rome, to discuss Jewish-Catholic affairs, just two weeks ago—*on Shabbat!* How horribly incongruous: leading Jews meeting with leaders of another religion on a day that they ought to be spending in the synagogue and in Sabbath rest! Can anyone blame church leaders for silently questioning whether they ought to take Jews seriously at all? Certainly we dissent. We counterpose a most vigorous *No* to this shameful exhibition of self-denigration and inferiority. "*Lo mit an Aleph!*"

There may be those who will complain that this is a "negative," unproductive attitude. But that is a shallow conclusion. For, when it issues from a commitment to Torah, every *No* is really a *Yes*. *No* to the idol is *Yes* to God. *No* to assimilation is *Yes* to the promise of a Jewish future. *No* to Jewish self-denigration is *Yes* to Jewish dignity and self-respect. *No* to despair and fear and hopelessness is *Yes* to faith and trust in God. Our *lo zaruah* issues from *hessed ne'urayikh* and *ahavat kelulotayikh*, from a relationship of love and affection. Our revolutionary character, unlike the rebellious character, seeks to correct, not abolish; to build, not to destroy. It is motivated by love, not enmity.

It is a difficult challenge which our historic tradition places before us: to be revolutionary without being rebellious; to know when to be critical and when to conform, when to dissent and when to assent, when to say *Yes* and when to say *No*. But God in His goodness has given us a standard by which to judge. It is something Korah and his children learned, albeit too late. For, as the Talmud tells us in a most meaningful legend, when centuries later Rabba bar bar Hannah put his ear to the ground where Korah and his cohorts had been swallowed alive, he heard a voice that issued from the bowels of the earth. And that voice called out, *Mosheh emet ve'torato emet*—"Moses is true and his Torah is true."

That is our measure, our criterion. With that truth we shall know when to say *Yes*—and when to say *No*.