Stiff-necked

The Soul of Man

by

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*In the heart of winter an almond tree sprouted blossoms and all the trees around jeered, “What vanity! What insolence!” Imagine, it believes it can bring Spring in this way! The flowers of the almond tree blushed in shame. “Forgive me, my sisters. I swear, I did not want to blossom, but suddenly I felt a warm springtime breeze in my heart.”*

                                  Nikos Kazantzakis

What will it take to convince us?

What will it take to convince us that Aaron was chosen by God to serve as Kohen Gadol? Even after Korach’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron; even after the earth swallowed them and all that was theirs… we doubted. Even after God sent a fire to consume another two hundred and fifty. Even *then*, we doubted!

We are a stiff-necked people, we people of Israel.

The day after God’s fire, we railed against Moshe and Aaron yet again. “You have killed the people of Hashem!” God’s subsequent anger was frightening to behold, another fifteen thousand destroyed… Aaron rushed to stop the plague and offer the Ketoret  atonement, seeking forgiveness even for those who stood against him.

And still we remained unconvinced and stubborn.

Even when God makes His will clear, man resists, standing before the all-knowing, all-powerful God *persisting* in his stubbornness and arrogance. What drives his behavior? Is it pride? Foolishness? Blindness? Simple willfulness?

Objectively, there could be no doubt, Aaron was *the man*. He – and no one else – was to be the Kohen Gadol and no tribe but the tribe of Levi was to do His service. It was as plain as the sun in the noonday sky and yet… and yet the people continued to resist.

It was not until the miracle of Aaron’s staff that the rebellion finally came to an end.

Speak to the Children of Israel and take from them - from the chieftains of their ancestral houses - one staff for each chieftain - twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each man’s name on his staff... also inscribe Aaron’s name on the staff of Levi. Deposit them in the Ohel Moed...The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you... The next day Moshe entered... and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted; it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds.

What is it that made us so stiff-necked? Why had the doubts persisted despite God’s punishments and retributions?

Ramban explores something of a middle ground, explaining that after all they saw and heard the people were able to accept Aaron’s legitimacy but continued to resist the Levites primacy in Avoda. Certainly, they argued, the first-borne of each tribe (*bechorim*)was capable of the Temple service. Why, they insisted, raise one tribe above the others?

None of us is comfortable accepting the authority of others; everyone wants a share of power. After all, are we not all “equal”? Are we not all children of the same God?

To answer this question, Ramban returns to the “staff test”. Aaron, Ramban makes clear, was chosen by God as an individual *but also and simultaneously* as the representative of the entire tribe of Levi; a tribe unique and loyal, a tribe that did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf.  Indeed, it was after the sin of the Golden Calf that the Levi’im were chosen by God to replace the *bechorim* as His servants.

In other words, God’s choice was now powerfully corroborated by the staff miracle.

*Or HaChaim* takes the position that the people did not only challenge the primacy of the Levites but, in fact, *persisted* in resisting Aaron as Kohen Gadol. Even *after* witnessing the horrific end suffered by Korach and his followers! Even then! Arrogant and defensive, they continued to “negotiate” their role with God, stubbornly, oh so stubbornly, refusing to bend. Korach’s downfall – so they reasoned – was deserved because he and his followers had vilified God’s prophet. But what, they argued, had this to do with Aaron’s worthiness as Kohen Gadol? They hinted that his elevation was merely nepotism. Wasn’t he *merely* Moses’ brother?

Man is so small, his nature is to seek control, to appear larger. Even when God’s clear response resounds plainly, man insists. So, God responded with the miracle of Aaron’s staff.

We did not bend in the face of God’s anger and retribution, so God responded with a more “poetic” lesson, the miracle of Aaron’s staff. God was clear, “The staff of the man whom I choose shall sprout.” *Malbim* explains, the one whose staff sprouts is the one in whom God’s holy spirit rests, and who will bring forth holy fruit.

What is it about God’s communication through the staffs that finally got through to us and stopped the rebellion? What lesson does it teach us, arrogant man?

Rabbi Avraham Wolfson (on the *Yeshivat Birkat* Moshe website) explains that, superficially, all the staffs were identical. But it quickly became apparent that there was a profound difference among them – only Aaron’s staff contained the *capacity* “to blossom, sprout buds and almonds ripen.”  Remember, the miracle of the staffs was in response to the clamor of, “we are all holy” and therefore no justification to single out Aaron and his tribe to do the holy service.

How often do we make this same, essential error? How often do we look at both things and people and think, “There is no difference here”? Our banner is “equality” by which we too often mean “sameness”. And, once we wave that banner it follows as night day that we are all equally worthy. And no sooner do we deem everyone equally worthy than we find ourselves looking down our noses at others and sneering, “Why them?” by which we mean, “Why not me?”

Our naked eyes see sameness; we see staffs uniform and indistinguishable, all wooden, all shtiklech holtz – mere pieces of wood. Unlike our naked eyes, God sees our inner essence. God is not fooled by fine clothes or beautiful hair; not fooled by “the sacred vestments” of the charlatan. He sees clearly beneath the disguisable surface and distinguishes between the charlatanand the *tzadik*. “Man looks at the outward appearance while God looks at the heart.”  (Samuel 1 16:7)

God’s choice of Aaron and his sons stemmed from His ability to see within.   We see twelve staffs, all the same. God sees the inner capacity of one of those staffs to sprout almonds. In God’s first prophetic communication with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:11-12) Jeremiah saw a branch of an almond tree (shaked) and was told by God that this was a sign that He, God, was “watching” (shoked) *to* see that His word was fulfilled.

God sees all, the plain and the hidden, the authentic and the phony. He is shoked.  We are limited to only the most obvious and superficial. Even then, our ability to discern is made more challenging when we are enveloped in a fog of words and ideas meant to make our ability to correctly discern even more limited.

Moshe did not simply “display” Aaron’s staff to the others. No, he showed the other chieftains’ staffs as well.  Even more, each of the other nesi’im took his own non-blossoming staffs.  “Moshe brought out all the staffs from before Hashem to all the Children of Israel; they saw, and they took, each man his staff.” Why show the other staffs, as well?  To allow the other eleven chieftains, who were highly-regarded men of standing and stature, to be able to publicly acknowledge that it was indeed Aaron who was the chosen one.  In this instance, they were able to “concede” without being brought low; they were able to acknowledge a clear sign from God.

This public acknowledgement not only affirmed Aaron’s being chosen but provided for an explicit and implicit rejection of the Korach mentality that had gotten them there in first place. After all, it was Korach who had refused *under any circumstances* to acknowledge the authority of God, His servant Moshe and the Godly appointment of Aaron.

With Aaron’s staff blossomed, the eleven *nesi’im* were at last ready to publicly proclaim, “It is not us.”  From our vantage, we might think, “Well, yes, of course!” but the truth is, it takes big people to acknowledge that they are not the chosen ones; it takes people seeking peace and harmony and not *machlokes* and strife. It is this attitude and approach that finally and ultimately concluded the Korach saga.

It was not power or fire that brought about this welcome result but rather a staff sprouting almonds, symbol of peace and tranquility. “In the Near East,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells us, “it [the almond tree] is the first tree to blossom, its white flowers signaling the end of winter and the emergence of new life.”

Almonds speak of new beginnings, of fresh starts.

“The almond flowers,” Rabbi Sacks continues, “recall the gold flowers on the Menorah, lit daily by Aaron in the Sanctuary. The Hebrew word tzitz, used here to mean “blossom,” recalls the tzitz, the “frontlet” of pure gold worn as part of Aaron’s headdress, on which were inscribed the word ‘Holy to the Lord’.”

In this symbol we find an eternal lesson so necessary for all generations to embrace and internalize. God instructs Moshe to keep and preserve Aaron’s staff l’mishmeret – as a safekeeping, as a sign and warning for rebellious ones. Tradition tells us that the staff remained in bloom for centuries. The Talmud records that it was placed in front of the Holy Ark through most of the First Temple era, along with a flask of manna, until they were hidden by King Yoshiyahu.

Together, Aaron’s staff and the jar of manna were preserved for centuries; both manifestations of God’s direct intervention in our individual and collective lives, a lesson that requires daily review and reminders.  And what a lesson it is – peace before rebellion, humility before haughtiness.

Almonds – life, light, peace, tranquility, holiness.

Almonds – no rebellion, no more Korach.