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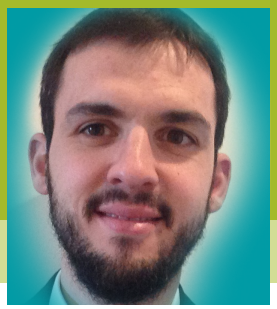

HE SAID WHAT ABOUT ME?!

Rabbi Zvi Portnoy | Loughton & Chigwell Federation Synagogue

In Parshas Korach, Dasan and Aviram accuse Moshe of usurping power from within the Jewish people. What is fascinating is the way in which Moshe responds to their false accusations. Moshe, in his response, claims " "I have not taken even a single donkey of theirs"[1]. A somewhat strange thing to say perhaps, in response? Why didn't Moshe simply lambast them for their incredibly cynical approach to his difficult and thankless leadership role? Why did Moshe feel compelled to deny having taken even a single donkey? Would anyone accuse Moshe of breaking into somebody's stable to steal a donkey?! Rashi therefore explains that Moshe sought to make it perfectly clear that his personal benefit was not part of his agenda. When Hashem told him to return to Egypt to save the Jews, he did not take anyone's donkey nor did he expect to be compensated for his expenses. Moshe was never interested in personal gain.

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l offers a fascinating insight. He asks why Moshe was so fearful of taking anything from anyone. As king of Bnei Yisrael, he was entitled to impose taxes on the people or even make use of their property if he so wished. Yet Moshe seemed determined to crush any doubts vis a vis his own person gain. The answer lies in a fundamental difference between Moshe and other Jewish kings. When one's rule is the result of having been appointed king, he may feel free to seize the people's property at will. However, Moshe's rule was based on his Torah knowledge and Hashem's will; he was never appointed by the people as such. Torah may never be exploited for one's personal benefit, in any form whatsoever. Therefore, Moshe refused to take anything from anyone, and made it abundantly clear to those pointing the figure at him.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz, the famed mashgiach of Mir Yeshiva sees in Moshe's reaction an important lesson in introspection and self-critique. Dasan and Aviram accused Moshe of seizing power for himself. Although their criticism was rooted in their in own insecurities and jealousy, Moshe felt compelled to examine whether their words contained even a mere slither of truth. He could have brushed the whole ordeal off as nothing more than a vicious plot from the within the ranks, a baseless attack on his character. Yet he gave thought as to whether he had ever abused his position for any sort of personal gain. His careful examination yielded that he had not. Rav Yisrael Salanter says that it is this readiness to engage in self-critique, based upon the criticism of one's enemies, that is reflected in the words of King David, "When those who would harm me rise up against me, my ears have heard"[2]. People are often unable or unwilling to accept criticism. We create all types of self-defense mechanisms. When others offer even constructive criticism, we rationalise that the person doesn't understand our situation and is mistaken in his assessment of us. Worse yet, we attribute their comments to jealousy or resentment. This even occurs when the critic is a close friend. Yet it is these friends that we need most, not those who tell us we are marvelous whatever we do!

It takes a someone with a healthy self-esteem to differentiate between the critic and the criticism. The critic may be an enemy, it may be a friend, but a great man will not ignore his criticism. We would do well to listen, even when our enemies speak, since they might be saying something that is worth hearing.

1 Bamidbar 16:15

2 Tehillim 92:12

CORRECTION
Challah should be taken without a bracha from 1.2kg of flour and not as stated in last week's article.
We apologise for any confusion caused.

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