

Relationship

By: Yanki Tauber

Bad ideas cause a lot of damage. Eventually they are debunked. Then they cause damage again, precisely because they have been so completely discredited.

It's the "baby with the bathwater" syndrome. Because we now know that the idea is wrong and destructive, we reject everything about it, everything it ostensibly resembles, and everything it reminds us of. We forget that the difference between "good" and "bad" and between "right" and "wrong" is often more nuanced than these decisive-sounding words suggest. So we end up with the right idea--and many wrong ways of using it.

For example: one idea that has caused much injustice and suffering throughout the ages is the idea that some people are intrinsically better and more deserving than others.

Betterness became illegal.

"I need you" became a dirty word. For much of human history, people have believed that the color of your skin marked you as a superior or inferior subset of the human race; that to strive to "rise above your class" is nothing less than sinful; that every sadistic imbecile sitting on a throne rules by "divine right" and must be obeyed and venerated.

All that eventually went out the window--to be replaced by a mindless, vapid "equality." We debunked racism and despotism and opened pathways out of poverty; but we also all but destroyed human relationships. Betterness became illegal. "I need you" became a dirty word.

"Korach was a smart man," says the Talmud. "What made him do such a stupid thing?"

Who was this smart man and what was the stupid thing he did? Korach was a cousin of Moses (his father Yitzhar was a younger brother of Moses' father, Amram). About a year and a half after the Children of Israel came out of Egypt--while they were encamped in the desert--Korach led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron's leadership of the people. "The entire congregation are holy," he argued, "and G-d is amongst them. Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of G-d?"

Revolutionary ideas for the 14th century BCE. Korach lived 850 years before Pericles and anticipated Paine and Jefferson by three thousand. Smart man, Korach.

But what if Korach would have had his way? What if the Children of Israel would have agreed with him and said, "What makes Moses greater than us? Aren't all men created equal? And if he does have something to teach us that we can't teach ourselves, why can't we interact as equals--what's this 'Moses our Teacher' and 'Moses our Master' business?" If Korach's equality pitch would have stuck, where would we be today? Where would the world be today?

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Korach

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The idea of inequality is distasteful to us. After all, it has been (and still is) the idea behind so much persecution and exploitation of one race by another, one class by another, one gender by the other. But in our single-minded crusade against this distasteful idea we have forgotten that inequality also lies at the core of the most beautiful, most gratifying and most enlightening facets of our lives: our relationships with each other.

Of course, we can form "partnerships" that are based on a supposed equality. But the most satisfying and productive human relationships are nurtured by inequality. Marriage, the teacher-disciple relationship, the parent-child bond--all are predicated upon the appreciation that, "You have something that I do not and which you can give to me. I want to be the recipient of that, and I'm prepared to make space in my own being to receive it."

Is the giver in the relationship superior to the receiver? Ultimately, our sages point out, the recipient does more for the giver than the giver does for the recipient. But it is also true that a receiver, by definition, senses him/herself to be inferior (at least in some area) to the giver. It is that sense of "inferiority"--referred to in chassidic teaching as *bittul*, or "self-abnegation"--that makes the receivership genuine, and makes the relationship meaningful and productive.

Korach was a visionary. But his vision was too bright and bold to see the nuances. To his eye, life is a flat terrain. Differences between individuals are parallel paths which, if and when they interact, do so in an equilibrated exchange of spiritual and/or material resources.

The truth of life is far more complex. Underlying all is the belief and conviction in our intrinsic, divinely-ordained equality. But upon this bedrock equality, our paths climb and dip, shaped by desire and need. We reach up and reach down to each other. We give because we feel empowered by our blessings; we receive because we sense a profound lack in ourselves that only the other can fulfill.

If our paths' trajectories belie their underlying equality, no matter. We take comfort in knowing that it is there, and that life's glorious inequalities all derives from, and lead back to, one unalienable truth: that we are all equally G-d's creations and are all of equal worth in G-d's eyes.

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