



# THE PERSON

# IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

## The Secret of Remaining Correct

Very often, we think that if a person is especially spiritual, he cannot possibly be very practical. It is as if religious devotion and good common sense just don't go together.

My own experience has taught me that, on the contrary, some of the soundest advice I have ever received came from people who spent most of their time in sacred practice, and who seemed, on the surface, to be quite detached from everyday affairs. Indeed, it was an old pious *Chasid* who encouraged me to embark upon my career as a psychologist, and it was a Chassidic Rebbe who, much later in my life, advised me to make a mid-career change and assume a rabbinic pulpit.

In my study of Jewish sources, I have

encountered individuals who devoted their lives to very lofty ideals, but who had sage counsel to offer those who were engaged in much more worldly matters.

One such person was Rabbi Israel Salanter (November 3, 1810 - February 2, 1883). Reb Yisrael, as he was known by his many disciples, founded the Mussar Movement, which endeavored to inspire the public to be more conscious of the ethical components of our faith. Whereas his "curriculum" consisted of sacred writings, some of which bordered on the mystical, he used techniques which were extremely down to earth. Indeed, it seems clear that he was aware of the theories of psychology that were just beginning to be introduced during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when he began to spread his teachings.

Reb Yisrael had much sound advice to give, even to those who were not members of his movement, and one such piece of advice always struck me as being unusually insightful and very useful, even in quite mundane situations. This is what he said, with reference to someone who is involved in an argument with another:

"If you are right, make sure that you remain right."

What he meant was that it is human nature that when a person is right and utterly convinced that his cause is just, he often goes to ridiculous extremes to justify his position—so much so that he goes on

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to say or do things which undermine his position. He says things he shouldn't have said, attacks his enemies in an unseemly fashion, and further conducts himself in a manner which eventually proves to be his own undoing.

It is much better, suggested Reb Yisrael, to state your case succinctly and cogently, and leave it at that. It is even advisable to yield a bit to your opponent, losing a small battle or two, but winning the bigger war. It is best to remain relatively silent after expressing the essentials of your case and to realize that, in the end, "truth springs up from the earth, and justice looks down from heaven" (*Psalms* 85:12).

Knowing about his magisterial erudition, when I first came upon Reb Yisrael's helpful admonition, I knew that he must have had sources in sacred Jewish texts for all that he said. Over the years, I have collected quite a few citations in our literature that might have served as the basis for his words.

One such source occurs in our Torah portion this week, *Parshat Korach* (*Numbers* 16:1-18:32). I am indebted to a precious little book of Torah commentary, *Zichron Meyer*, by Rabbi Dov Meyer Rubman, of blessed memory, who was a pupil of a pupil of Rabbi Salanter, and who helped establish a *yeshiva* in Haifa.

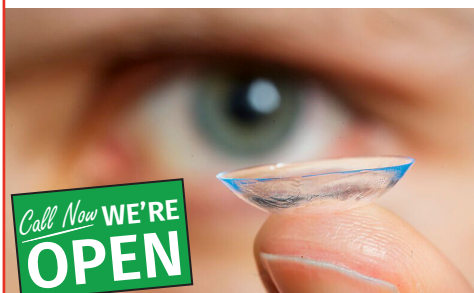
The story is a familiar one. Korach rebels

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against the authority of Moses and Aaron, and rallies two hundred and fifty “chiefs of Sanhedrin” to his cause. The opening words of the story, “And Korach took himself...,” imply that, rather than expressing his complaint privately and respectfully to Moses, Korach chose to incite a crowd of others to publicly and brazenly protest.

Rabbi Rubman quotes from the collection known as Midrash Tanchuma:

“‘And Korach took...’ This bears out the verse, “A brother offended is more formidable than a stronghold; such strife is like the bars of a fortress” (Proverbs 18:19). It refers to Korach, who disputed with Moses and rebelled, and descended from the prestige he already had in hand.”

Korach, explains Rabbi Rubman, had some valid and persuasive arguments—so much so that he was able to gain the allegiance of two hundred and fifty “chiefs of Sanhedrin,” each of whom was a qualified judge. He was a “formidable stronghold.”

Had he addressed Moses and Aaron properly, those aspects of his complaint that had legitimacy would have been heard. They may have been able to find an appropriate leadership capacity in which he could serve. Was this not the case when others, such as those who were ritually

unqualified to bring the Paschal offering, or the daughters of Zelafchad, approached Moses with their complaints? Did Moses, under Divine guidance, not find an adequate solution to their complaints?

Initially, there was some merit to Korach’s dissatisfaction. In some sense, he was “right.” But he was not satisfied with that. He had to push forward, involve others, speak blasphemously, and enter into a full-fledged revolt. He thus “descended from the prestige he had in hand.”

Had he heeded the very practical counsel of Rabbi Salanter, “if you are right make sure you remain right,” his story would have turned out very differently. Instead of being one of the rogues of Jewish history, he may have become one of its heroes.

Here you have it. Rabbi Israel Salanter may have been considered a naïve *luft-mensch* by his contemporaries, a man with his head in the clouds, whose words can be useful to even the most practical of men.

When we are convinced that we are right we tend to invest as much energy as we can to prove ourselves right. Reb Yisrael advises us to spare ourselves the effort and trust more in our convictions. If they are indeed warranted they will speak for themselves. ■

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