



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

"Better They Learn from Me..."

Conflict resolution is one of the most important tasks in human relations at every level. Open up any newspaper, and you will read of schoolchildren bullying each other, of married couples who are in bitter conflict, of political parties enmeshed in verbal warfare, and of nations literally at war. What are some of the strategies available to foster conflict resolution?

One of the most interesting strategies can be found in an ancient endeavor known by the generic term of martial arts. I once watched a brief film on the subject in which I observed a fascinating technique. The participant in the battle was instructed not to fight his opponent head on, not to counter aggression with aggression. Rather, he was instructed to yield to the attack, to move paradoxically backwards as if to surrender, and not to move forward in the attack mode. In a sense, he was directed to surprise his opponent by reacting

unpredictably. This strategy can be applied to many situations in life in which there is strife and discord.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Korach*, we read of such discord. We study the story of the rebellion led by Korach and his cohorts against Moses. Among this band are Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliav, who have long been thorns in Moses' side. They challenge his authority and threaten outright revolt against his leadership. A civil war looms.

Interestingly, Moses' initial response is not one of anger. He tries verbal persuasion, he calls for Divine intervention, and only then does he eventually indignantly express his anger. But before he reaches that point, he tries something which goes almost unnoticed by most commentators.

He sends for them. He adopts a conciliatory attitude, and invites them into dialogue. "And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram..." (*Numbers 16:12*)

Moses does not "come out fighting," at least not until his invitation to discussion and perhaps even compromise is rebuffed. "...And they said, 'We will not come up...Do you need to make yourself a prince over us?...Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!'"

Only after his attempt at conflict resolution does Moses become angry and does he appeal

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for Divine intervention. But first he signals his readiness to talk things over.

I have been reading a biography of a great Hasidic leader in early 20th century Poland. His name was Rabbi Israel Danziger, known today by the title of his book of inspirational homilies, *Yismach Yisrael*. He was the heir to the leadership of the second largest Hasidic sect in pre-World War II Europe. That sect was known by the name of the town near Lodz where he and his father before him held court. His father's name was Rabbi Yechiel Danziger, and the name of the town was Alexandrow.

The biography contains documentation of several talks Rabbi Israel gave describing many of the lessons he learned from his sainted father. In one of those talks, he tells of the time that he was sent along with several of his father's emissaries to visit the court of another Hasidic Rebbe. He describes how that Rebbe's personal secretary made the delegation wait their turn on a long line. He describes how when they finally got into the Rebbe's reception room, they were treated perfunctorily, if not coldly. And the request that they were instructed to make of this Rebbe was callously rejected by him. They returned to Alexandrow feeling chastised. Rabbi Israel, who led the delegation, reported back to his father and relayed to him every detail of his disappointing experience.

About a year later, the other Hasidic Rebbe needed a great favor of Rabbi Yechiel. He sent a delegation to Alexandrow, headed by his own son. The delegation arrived, and much to Rabbi Israel's surprise, his father issued orders that they be welcomed warmly and be shown gracious hospitality. Rabbi Yechiel further instructed that the delegation be given an appointment during "prime time" and not be asked to wait on line at all. Rabbi Yechiel

himself waited at his door for them, ushered them into his private chambers, seated them comfortably, and personally served them refreshments. He listened to their request for a favor of him and granted it generously. Then, as Jewish tradition prescribes, he bid them farewell only after first escorting them part of the way along the route of their return journey.

In his narrative, as recorded in this fascinating biography, Rabbi Israel expresses amazement at his father's conduct. He describes how he approached his father and asked him directly, "Why did you treat them so well? Did you not recall how that Rebbe and his followers treated us not so long ago? Did you have to give them such an effusive welcome after they embarrassed us so much?"

I found Rabbi Yechiel's response, in Yiddish of course, so impressive that I committed it to memory verbatim. He said, "Better that they learn from me how to be *gute yidden* and *menschen*, than I learn from them how to be boors and brutes!"

The biography does not tell the rest of the story. But when I related the story to an audience of *chassidim* a short while ago, I found out about part of the rest of the story. An elderly man in the audience approached me and said, "I am a descendant of that other Rebbe. And our family tradition has it that when his delegation returned with news of their special treatment and of the granted favor, the Rebbe burst into tears and cried, 'He is a better Jew than I am. We must learn a *musar haskel* (a lesson in ethics) from him.'"

This is a lesson we can all benefit from as we attempt to resolve the conflicts we face, and as we strive to increase the numbers of *gute yidden* in our ranks and create more *menschen* in the world. ■