

CHUKAT 5768
July 4th

Rebellion seems to be the recurring theme in the Book of Bamidbar, Numbers, which we read this time of the year. 1st the Israelites wandering in the desert demanded meat in addition to the miraculous manna that rained down from the heavens every day. Manna was the perfect food. It supplied every nutritional need and it could taste like anything you wished—from shrimp and lobster to BBQ pork ribs, and all strictly kosher. It was better than tofu!

The 2nd rebellion was the breaking away of 2 of the 70 elders of Israel who were prophesying in the camp independently of Moses. The 3rd was probably one of the most painful for Moses to bear. It was when both his brother Aaron and Sister Miriam spoke *lashon hara*, evil talk, against him.

Then came the disaster of the report of the spies that convinced the people that they would never be able to enter the Promised Land because of all the fierce inhabitants and fortified cities. After this demonstration of a lack of faith in themselves and in Gd, Gd decreed that the people would have to wander in the desert for 40 years and a new generation would enter the land.

Last week we read of the rebellion of Korach. This was a rebellion bred of envy and jealousy. Korach, the son of one of the head families of Levy wanted to be head of the tribe and high priest. He defiantly challenged the rulership and authority of Moses and Aaron. Along with him were the elite of the tribe of Rueven, the 1st born of Jacob. As descendants of the 1st born they thought that they should be the leaders. This was a rebellion not only against Moses and Aaron, but against Gd who chose them to lead the people. And so Gd opened up the earth and swallowed Korach and his 250 supporters, and a plague broke out and killed 14,700 that continued Korach's challenge to Moses and Aaron.

Today's Torah portion takes place at the end of the 40-year journey to the Promised Land. Miriam dies and the people can't find water. The sages learn from this that it was because of Miriam's merit that they found water so easily during their journeys. They cry out to Moses in fear and outrage: "Why have you brought the congregation of Hashem to this wilderness to die there? And why did you bring us up from Egypt to this evil place? [as if Egypt was not an evil place]—not a place of seed, or fig, or grape, or pomegranate; and there is not water to drink?"

What's Moses' reaction? He's stunned. 40 years have gone by...40 years of learning Gd's Torah, of absorbing all that Gd had done for them—from the plagues in Egypt to the crossing of the Red Sea to the miracles in the desert they experienced every day. And now? Now the people are right back from where they started 40 years ago, making the very same complaints that they made then. What did Moses accomplish with all his efforts? What does he have to

show for all his years of leadership? And so Moses withdraws in shock and bewilderment, and, I imagine, in bitterness and anger as well. And can you blame him?

With all these rebellions, what did the people actually accomplish? Not very much. In fact they were sometimes punished very severely. But what did they hope to accomplish? I think these rebellions were more an expression of their misplaced feelings than actions designed to accomplish anything!

Let me give you an illustration of a rebellion that doesn't really accomplish anything from Paul Harvey's, "The Rest of the Story." It's an amazing rebellion story.

On a Saturday night in 1899, 4 newspaper reporters from Denver, Colorado, happened to meet at the Denver railway depot looking for a story for the Sunday edition. When no story presented itself they decided over beers in a local Hotel bar to make up a story and turn it in. Jack Tourney suggested that a domestic story would be too easy to verify, so they decided to fake a foreign story.

After several more beers John Lewis said, "Try this one on: Group of American engineers stopping over in Denver enroute to China. The Chinese government is making plans to demolish the Great Wall...our engineers are bidding on the job."

Another reporter asks, "Why would the Chinese want to destroy the Great Wall of China?"

John replied, "They are tearing it down to symbolize international goodwill, to welcome foreign trade."

All 4 Denver newspapers carried the stories on the front page. The Denver Times said, "Great Wall Doomed. China seeks world trade." The story was picked up nationwide. What the Chinese heard was that the Americans were sending a demolition crew to destroy their Great Wall. They were enraged. A secret society of militant Chinese patriots, wary of foreign intervention, fanned the flames and began killing missionaries, burning churches, and attacking foreign embassies in Peking. Within 2 months, 12,000 troops from 6 nations joined forces and invaded China for the stated purpose of protecting their own citizens.

The brutal war that followed, with incredible bloodshed, you will remember as the Boxer Rebellion. The scars of that tragedy has affected Chinese-Western relations for decades, and are still being felt—all because 4 alcohol-blinded, news-hungry reporters in Denver could not perceive the evil they were initiating.

Most rebellions seem to serve no purpose at all, except selfishness and greed! Can rebellion ever solve anything? Is there a place for rebellion? Is there such a thing as a righteous rebellion, a holy rebellion? We, who will fondly celebrate the 232nd anniversary of the ending of our rebellion and our formation as a nation this week, know that rebellion has its place. One must rebel against oppression and tyranny—as the Jews rebelled when they could in the Holocaust in places like the Warsaw Ghetto, Treblinka and Sobobor.

And just as we read each year of the pointless rebellions of the Israelites in the desert of old, so when July 4th comes around we should recount the story of a righteous rebellion, a rebellion that forged this, the greatest nation on earth.

In the fall, we celebrate Thanksgiving, thanking Gd for this great nation. The Thanksgiving holiday was modeled on the Jewish festival of Sukkot. It is customary on Sukkot to invite guests to sit with us and to thank God together for the blessings which surround us. The mystics of old added a wonderful custom of inviting spiritual guests—*Ushpizin*--to come visit the Sukkah, one guest for each of the festival's 7 days. Traditionally we invite the souls of the 3 patriarchs--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--plus Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. Others have invited leaders who have inspired and touched their lives: Miriam, Debra, Akiva, Rashi, Maimonides and the Baal Shem Tov.

Rabbi Rick Sherwin suggests that on July 4th, during our picnics and BBQ's with family and friends, we should have a special *Ushpizin* to invite the souls of those who have inspired us as Americans and as Jews in this great land. He suggests inviting the souls of great American Jews like Chayim Solomon, Rebecca Gratz, Emma Lazarus, Levi Strauss, Jonas Salk, and Albert Einstein.

This year, on the 232nd anniversary of the founding of this great nation, I would suggest we invite and honor the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence. Have you ever wondered what happened to these 56 men? Let me read you what I have found?

5 signers were captured by the British as traitors and tortured before they died. 12 had their homes ransacked and burned. 2 lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had 2 sons captured. 9 of the 56 signers fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. They signed and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. What kind of men were they?

24 were lawyers and jurists. 11 were merchants. 9 were farmers and large plantation owners. All were men of means, well educated. But they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured.

Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts and died in rags. Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served the Congress, without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him and poverty was his reward. Vandals, or soldiers, looted the properties of Dillery, Hall, Clymer, Walton, Gwinnett, Heyward, Rutledge, and Middleton.

At the Battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr. noted that British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt. Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months. John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their 13 children fled for their lives. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year he lived in forests and caves returning home to find his wife dead and his children vanished.

A few weeks later he died from exhaustion and a broken heart. Norris and Livingston suffered similar fates.

Such were the stories and sacrifices of the American Revolution. These were not wide-eyed, rabble-rousing ruffians. They were soft-spoken men of means, education and refinement. They had security, but they valued liberty more! Standing tall, straight and unwavering they pledged in the declaration: “For the support of this declaration, with firm reliance on the protection of the divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

They gave you and me a free and independent America—an America that saved the Jewish people by providing a safe and free home for them when no one else would, an America that has always stood behind the State of Israel. The history books generally reveal little of what happened in the Revolutionary War. We didn’t just “fight the British.” We were British subjects at that time, and we fought our own government! Today, some of us take these liberties so much for granted...We shouldn’t!

So, take a couple of minutes while enjoying your 4th of July weekend and think of and thank these patriots. It’s not much to ask for the price they paid giving their lives for the sake of a righteous rebellion, a holy rebellion. Gd bless America. Amen!

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