

Cross Currents

My Two Cents on the Great Debate About OTD

BY YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN · JULY 8, 2016



I would have resisted the temptation to comment, were it not for an irresistible opportunity to tie it all in to the parsha.

We've seen a huge debate over the last week or so between our own Rabbi Dov Fischer and Mark Trencher of Nishma Research regarding the validity of the findings of a survey about why people leave observance. The debate garnered hundreds of responses, here and at Haemtza, Harry Maryles' fine blog. (In a welcome departure from Cross-Currents practice, it was impossible

for commenters to place the blame for anything they did not like on haredim – both protagonists identify with Modern Orthodoxy – Barack Obama, or Islamists.)

Never has it been easier for me to weigh in on who was correct. It is more than obvious. No question at all. Rabbi Fischer is absolutely correct.

There is no gainsaying his central point – probably the only one he was really interested in, despite the best attempts of critics to impute all sorts of base motives to him. R. Fischer argued [in his original essay](#) that people often do not understand their own motives, especially regarding major decisions. Our subconscious needs often dictate what our conscious minds report to ourselves and others. We are far more subjective than we would like to believe. The analysis of the data was wrong in allowing a binary choice between push- and pull-factors. Proper analysis would have to allow for a third factor: subconscious need. When we invest resources in trying to keep our retention rate high, we would be well-advised to look beyond self-reported motives, and examine those subconscious needs as well. If



we fail to do so, we will be applying band-aids to the wrong wounds.

It is impossible for a traditional Torah Jew to disagree with that analysis. Scores of *maamarei Chazal* point in this direction. The thrust of Rav Yisroel Salanter's mussar movement was predicated on a Socratic "know thyself," particularly in regard to subconscious strong forces that skewed decisions. Rav Elchonon Wasserman's famous essay in Kovetz Maamarim went so far as to see all defection from belief as capitulation to the need for autonomy and freedom from authority. (NB – Most people I respect have a hard time squaring that position with our experience with people. Even so, it is arguably correct in some cases.)



And then there is this week's parshah, which seems to be the home room for those who have intellectual hesitations about traditional beliefs. Korach certainly did. So did the 250 *avodah*-aspirants, and the rabble led by Doston and Aviram. Many beautiful reconstructions of the arguments have come down to us. Within the approaches of Shalah, the Malbim, R. Eliyahu Kitov, Rav Soloveitchik and others, we find arguments for

egalitarianism (the people, “all of them are holy!”), for mistrusting halachic conclusions that seem to make no sense (does a garment of *techeles* really require an additional *techeles* string?), for challenging nepotism in communal hierarchies (was this appointment really supposed to go to Elitzafon ben Uziel?).

Orchestrating it all was the puppet-master of the would-be heretics: Korach. We could speculate which of these arguments drove him off the derech. Whatever argument we would come up with, however, would be incorrect. Chazal ignore all of them. What motivated him, they tell us, was jealousy. He was jealous that he had been passed over for the next available position of prominence. What he told himself, and what was really happening in his subconscious decision making, did not overlap.

Rabbi Fischer, clearly, is correct. Our needs and desires drive our decisions.

But wait. There is also no question that Mark Trencher is utterly and absolutely correct! He later explained that all he wanted was that people should read the report, and listen thereby to the voices of those who



have left observance.

He cannot possibly be wrong! The first step in understanding why observance hasn't worked for everyone, is to listen carefully to those who have voted with their feet. We can look for patterns, explanations, deeper meanings later. But the very first step has to be to listen to those who made the fateful decision, and see what we can learn from them. If we see that many people report that a particular group of questions about G-d, about halacha, about theodicy, about mesorah were not answered to their satisfaction, would we not want to at least take a much harder look at the way these are taught? Would we not lose patience a bit quicker with those rabbeim who suppress questions, or deliver answers that are shallow and unbelievable?

(My own feelings are a matter of record. There is no question in my mind that there are people who decide to leave practice for purely intellectual reasons, after spending years struggling with issues. They are outnumbered by those whose reasons follow – rather than precede – the decision to drop out. But they are a sizeable minority, and cannot



be ignored.)

Yes, it does sound like an ancient Jewish joke about a rabbi, two litigants, and an incredulous shamash: “You’re right; you’re right; you’re right too.” But to stanch the flow of *nefashos* out of the community, we need to listen to both R. Fischer and Mark Trencher.

