

Parashat Korach 5774

Dayenu. Each Seder, though I love the song, I find its presence peculiar.

I am unconvinced by its major premise, that we would have found each of God's actions on our behalf in the Exodus to be sufficient in its own right.

Human nature is to want more, to want what can be next. As gift, as entitlement, as achievement, as a means to power, as a means to match others. The fire of our yetzer hara, our evil inclination, is stoked.

Despite its best intentions, the Torah hierarchy filled by prophets, priests and princes at times feeds the beast of this malicious discontent -- and lends itself to political rebellion disguised as religious indignation.

We need go no further than parashat Korach and his challenge to the greatest of all our prophets, Moshe. We try so hard to distance ourselves from Korach and his band of rebels because they so closely pattern our yetzer hara gone awry. Korach and his rebels want more than they already have, are determined to pursue it, and deceitfully

align their efforts with a larger religious mission of the Israelites – to be holy.

The beginning of the parasha details a textbook mutiny and power grab, cloaked in religious garb.

א וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן-יִצְחָר בֶּן-קֵהָת בֶּן-לוֹי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיָּאָב וְאוֹן בֶּן-פִּלֵּת
בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: ב וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים זִמְאָתַיִם
נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קִרְאֵי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי-שָׁם: ג וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ
אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קְדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-
קְהַל יְהוָה:

There is a central ring-leader, a man already with religious stature, the Levite Korach. He sows the seeds of discontent among other elites and וַיִּקַּח, takes or recruits them, to buttress his rebellion. Still, they are hesitant to rise in mutiny. They have to וַיִּקְמוּ, stand up, to face the ruler, which is not easy to do, especially when the ruler is Moshe.

Confronted by the legitimacy of Moses' authority, they recognize how small they are in comparison. Hence, they remind themselves -- and we are reminded as well -- that they are quite formidable in their own right -- descendants of Reuben (Jacob's first born), princes of the

community, אַנְשֵׁי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, men of repute, empowered by Moshe himself in current leadership.

The group is strengthened in numbers and stature, which leads to the mutiny's climactic moment, when the mutineers וַיִּקְהָלוּ, gather together, as one community and address Moshe in no uncertain terms. They hit Moshe hard, where he has already demonstrated to be most vulnerable -- in matters of delegation, self-esteem as a leader, assertion of leadership, and the struggle to maintain his characteristic humility while being a leader.

רַב-לְכֶם, the mutineers say, notably in the plural, ostensibly addressing both Moshe and Aaron. Yet Aaron is invisible in the conversation. Their complaints center on Moshe -- the political and spiritual decider - - as opposed to Aaron, merely the functionary.

You have too much, Moshe, too much for you and too much for multiple people. Implied is, Moshe, what you have done to delegate has failed. כָּל-הָעֵדָה בְּלָמְךָ קֹדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְךָ יְהוָה. You stand in the way of the people's kedusha and their direct access to God. Implied, again, is, Moses, you just don't get it. It's not a matter of sharing your spirit with others -- it's a matter of recognizing the kedusha and spirit that already

dwells amongst the people. Good point, in the grand scheme, poorly taken and intentioned in the moment.

וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-קְהַל יְהוָה? The mutineers accent the severity of their accusations by carefully choosing their words. Listen closely. The rebels criticize Moshe -- and Aaron -- for תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ, raising himself above God's true congregation, his קְהַל, which they, the נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה, represent as they וַיִּקְהָלוּ, congregate against Moshe.

Cleverly, the rebels represent themselves as the democratic defender of the people's spiritual status, and criticize Moshe for being completely out of touch with the covenant, the people's relationship with God, and how God's presence rests amongst the people. They try to marshall a political coup in the disguise of being the faithful to God's word.

Moshe is Moshe, and he lives in an age of God's miracle-making, when it doesn't take long to expose Korach and his band for who they are -- and to maintain Moshe's integrity both as spiritual and political leader.

Yet God and Moshe realize the spiritual fault-line exposed by the rebels for all time, however, and they respond not with a band-aid but rather a cure -- a statement for the separation between religion and politics. In

the process of humiliating and punishing the rebels, God and Moshe raise Aaron's stature as a religious leader and animate his functions, positing the rebels' fraudulent spiritual claims -- and their incense and firepans -- against the true spiritual leadership of Aaron and the priests.

Moshe, though spiritual guide, is primarily a political leader. Aaron and his priests become the mediators of religious life for the people, the vehicles for the people's worship of and relationship with God.

Up until this point in the Torah, the roles of Aaron and the priests have been mostly a model, in the process of being set up and initiated. Here their roles are challenged, and they respond by doing something outside the box of the mishkan, demonstrating who they are and what they can do for the people, in contrast to Moshe's primary role as political leader. And their roles are reinforced and expanded in great detail toward the end of the parasha.

Tying back, Moshe sees Korach and his rebels for who they are, disguising their power grab, ambition and discontent within the cloak

of spiritual values and mission. Moshe says to Korach, in essence, Dayenu. Ha'mi'at mee-kem, "Is it not enough for you," that God has set you apart with the privileges of being a Levite, and now you want more? What a great religious role you already have, Korach. Appreciate it, be content with it. Political power is not the pinnacle, it's just one of many legitimate functions that need to be filled by the people -- in all areas of life.

But that's clearly not enough for Korach and his rebels. They are not happy with their lot, nor humble in their statured place, nor aligned with communal needs and aspirations.

Political power is mesmerizing, a drug. Thank God, in our country, there is a strong check against manipulating religion and God for political aims. Sadly, that is not the case elsewhere. Both religion and politics suffer.

Just look around the world today, and you will find infinite arguments against the mixing of religion and state. Demagogues harness a potent weapon when they manipulate the words of God and religion. Though some achieve their political aims, their approach comes back to haunt

them, as populations eventually see them for the religious frauds that they are.

Look at Iran and the gradual but definitive turn in popular attitudes toward the theocracy. Once again, Iranians are looking West. Look at those Palestinians who openly celebrate the crassly political kidnapping of three Israeli Israelis as being God's work. Look, even more close to home, at the Presbyterian Convention that took place this week in Detroit, which disguised political anti-Zionism in the language of one-sided, self-righteous, and religiously-based morality. Yesterday, the convention voted to divest Presbyterian holdings in 3 companies that do business with Israel.

And we are not immune, certainly. Just look at Israel, where the politicization of religion has given God and religion a bad name amongst a majority of the population -- stinking religious life for the many Israelis who desperately need it.

As Moshe retorts, word for word, to Korach and his rebels -- controlled by clearly frustrated -- רַב-לְכֶם. This is too much that you have done,

you rebels. You, not I, have missed the point of leadership, of kedusha, of contentment. I have learned, and spread the wealth of leadership and the spirit. I am contented in my reduced role.

In our community, baruch hashem, we know these lessons. Spiritual, political and volunteer leadership is spread widely, and embraced by a significant percentage of our members. There is room for everyone to have a contented place -- in an atmosphere committed to observance yet not coercive of it. May we continue to apply the messages of Korach's rebellions, and the response of God and Moshe, well.