

(Something about taking the opportunity to say something that has been on my mind, and the strategic planning goal of a culture of appreciation.)

Our Parasha this week, Korach, is named after the antagonist of the Parashah. Korach is the head of a priestly clan of Levi'im, Levites, who instigates a rebellion against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. In Chapter 16, he confronts them, charging, "You have taken too much power for yourselves!"

Korach can be an attractive anti-authoritarian hero. And yet, his punishment - of being swallowed by the earth - is severe, particularly so for a tradition that often celebrates when people argue with each other or with God.

So I want to examine how the midrash understands his crime.

Korach instigates, or attempts to instigate a rebellion involving the entire community. Yalkut Shimoni, and early collection of midrash, explains how Korach attempted to win over the hearts of the people, with a sob story:

"What did Korach do? He gathered the entire congregation and began to tell stories: "There was once a widow in my neighborhood who had two little girls, orphans. She owned a modest field (from which they made their living.) She began to plough the field; Moses told her 'Do not plough with an ox and an ass together'(Deut. 22:10). She began to sow the field, He said 'Do not sow the field with mixtures of seeds (Lev. 19:19). She began to harvest the crop; he said, 'leave the gleanings, and the edge of your field for the poor'. She gathered the harvest; he said "Give the tithes to the Priest and the Levite'. She gave it all to him. And so on, until in Korach's account,

... she stood there crying with her two daughters. That is what they did to this desperate woman. This is what they do and they pin it all on the word of God."

By Korach's rendering, the laws of Torah, designed to create justice, distribute wealth and provide for the needy, wind up victimizing a poor widow. The law is merciless, refusing to make allowances for a most ideal victim to tug on the hearts-strings: a poor widow and her orphaned children. But by Korach's account, blame lies not with the unbending law, but with Moses and Aaron, whom he implies have set up these laws to wear the people down and to directly benefit from their misfortune.

The midrash doesn't say whether or not there was an actual poor widow, or whether Korach was just using her story as a rhetorical device.

But it doesn't matter. Because in every community or nation, some laws or policies are a hassle for some people. And I am not talking about unjust laws, though those certainly exist.

I am talking about the routine rules that make society function, like paying taxes, or obeying traffic rules, or respecting accessible parking spaces. In individual cases, these rules are sometime - maybe often - burdensome, but society is far healthier with them than it would be without them.

Now, when a particular policy causes disadvantage to someone, there are several potential ways to behave. One can look around and say, hey, this isn't working for a lot of us, so let's see what kind of a collaboration we can do to make some constructive change. Or one can say, you know, I really don't like this, but no community is perfect for each person all the time. Sometimes the policies serve me and sometimes they don't, and I guess I can deal with the fact that this isn't my moment.

And then, of course, there is the third option, which is the way Korach behaved: one can assume that people are being deliberately malicious, exploitative, (or name any other negative adjective), and then attack the leaders instead of speaking with them directly, deliberately spreading discord and making it harder for people to do their job.

And I expect this was Korach's real crime. Because Korach's punishment is severe - the ground opens and swallows him up. But the interesting thing is, we know that in the logic of Torah, questioning the word of God is not a crime punishable by death - Abraham argues with God and so does Moses. We know that criticizing Moses is not punishable by death. Miriam speaks slander about him back in parashat Beha'alotecha. She is punished, but not nearly so severely.

It is inconceivable that Torah is teaching that one cannot question or challenge authority. There are too many cases in which doing just that is completely praised in Torah. So Korach's unforgivable crime must be in how he went about it. He imputed the worst possible intentions to Moses and Aaron, and went about spreading his story of those intentions, without any depth of examination of those intentions. He attacked a person's character instead of their actions. He closed down the possibility of constructively addressing his concerns, saying in effect, "Don't bother trying to work with these leaders. These people are jerks. They don't care about you, and everything they do is to exploit you." He then attacked the effects of their policies, without offering any more constructive ideas about how the Israelite community should be run.

As this is the anniversary Shabbat of my time here at TBI, I'll share that that if I could name a single factor that I've observe leads to discord and hurt, it is this same practice of Korach - of equating what is preferable from my perspective with the absolute moral good, and what I find unfortunate or unpleasant with absolute moral wrong - and then assuming that other people, who are making the decisions that I don't like, are somehow being calculating for their own benefit.

In a large, diverse community, it is impossible that people will never offend each other, that policies won't be a hassle for some. So the challenge I want to put to all of us, it when something is happening that we don't like, are we going to work constructively to address it? Or perhaps could we check our perspective, say "hey, I don't like this, but maybe this is causing enough good that there isn't a moral problem here" . . .?

Or are we going to be like Korach, making character attacks that destroy the possibility of constructive conversation?

I know this may be an uncomfortable drasha to hear. If you think that my remarks are targeted to you personally, well, you are likely not alone. I am not referring to any single person or incident. Many have felt the temptation to accuse others of being corrupt.

But the truth is that our community is made up of very diverse, very well-meaning personalities, and we need each other.

Yesterday was Rosh Chodesh Tammuz. The beginning of the month of Tammuz, in which we descend into a period of mourning for the destroyed holy Temple. We are taught that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam* - baseless hatred - gossip and accusations between people. We need to stop destroying the Temple, perhaps by checking the urge to speak about each other, and instead, speaking *with* each other.