

This week's parasha, Korach, is at its face, a story of a failed rebellion against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. It opens, at the beginning of Chapter 16 of Numbers, "Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben— (2) to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. (3) They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Hashem is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Hashem's congregation?"

An escalation of accusation ensues, and by the time dust settles, the ground has swallowed up Korach and his followers, a plague has killed almost 15,000 others, and the people are terrified.

Now, from a scholarly historical perspective, someone pointed out in Torah study yesterday, Torah was written by human beings with human agendas, and the humans who compiled this text might have been offering a cautionary fable intending to warn the masses away from challenging authority figures. There is certainly a strand in contemporary Torah study of lionizing the rebel Korach in his righteous indignation.

And I respect that. But it's not very interesting to me, because I prefer to look at Torah as a challenge of meaning making, like in improvisational theater exercises that demands that we say, "yes, and!" If we accept the premise that Torah, as written, is divinely inspired and there is something valuable to be learned even from this uncomfortable story, then where would that take us?

First of us, for me, I do *not* accept that this story is simply warning us away from challenging authority. Not only because I dislike that message, but more because it is incoherent with the teachings of Torah which in so many places valorize questioning of even the highest authority – God! Abraham challenges God in Parashat Vayera; and throughout Torah Moshe himself challenges God to be more compassionate, slower to anger, more lenient with the Jewish people.

So Korach's sin, such as it was, cannot be in the fact of his challenge, but in either substance or manner of it.

So let's dig, deeper. The first accusation Korach makes, as I said, is ""You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Hashem is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Hashem's congregation?"

Korach's complaint, according to many commentators, references the passage that immediately precedes the beginning of this Torah portion, the instructions about wearing *tzitzit*, which we read as the last paragraph of Shema, and were in fact on page 73 of this evening's liturgy. That instruction includes the verse, "so shall you be reminded to observe all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God." At face value, Korach is saying "We just got this mitzvah that tells us all to be holy; how dare you set yourselves up as holier than us?"

At this, it seems that Korach is advocating for a radical egalitarianism, a societal reorganization. But if we look closely at how he organizes, it is clear that he is not advocating for any kind of reform, but rather hoping to make a personal power grab. He organizes those who are already powerful - "two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute," to ally with him. Several commentators note that all of those who rebelled already had claims to leadership, as first-borns, and as members of the tribes of Levi, or of the tribe of Jacob's firstborn, Reuben.

There's a cute midrash that brings home this point. The first verse names On ben Peleth as one of the rebels, but in the subsequent verses, he is not named among those swallowed up by the earth. Bamidbar Rabbah 18:20 explains: Rav said, "On ben Peleth was saved by his wife; for she said to him, 'What has this dispute to do with you? If Aaron is the high priest, you are a disciple; if Korah is high priest, you are [still] a disciple.'" The midrash goes on to describe how she got him drunk and barricaded him in their home, so that when the other rebel leaders came to bring him to the showdown, he was unavailable.

On's unnamed wife recognizes that this rebellion is not about creating structural changes, but is rather about one person, hungry for power, capitalizing on discontent to replace those in power without offering an alternative vision for the community.

And perhaps Korach's cynical power grab is based on a misunderstanding of how community works. As Rabbi Shai Held teaches, quoting Rabbi Yeshayahu Leibowitz: "Korah fails to understand the difference between the indicative and the imperative, between a fact and an aspiration. . . . Note well: Israel is summoned to be holy, Leibowitz points out, not promised that it already is holy. Now recall Korah's words: "All the community are holy, all of them" (16:3). Leibowitz argues that the mitzvah of tzitzit, on the one hand, and the posture of Korah, on the other, represent two antithetical approaches to the holy, separated by a vast and unbridgeable chasm: Holiness as a challenge and a calling versus holiness as an established fact with attendant privileges.

Korach basically tells the community: "We are already holy, we're good, so our problems must be our leaders' fault. Make me leader and we won't have these problems." As seductive as this is, it removes agency and responsibility from the community to continue to strive for greater holiness. It implicitly communicates that we shouldn't expect ourselves or our collective to transform, that we should look only to our leaders to affect transformation on our behalf.

As we continue in this summer of struggle, the lesson I want to suggest that we take from Korach is to remember not to absolve ourselves through our leadership, or assume that we can solve systemic problems by replacing only the people at the top. As we react to the multitudes of wrongs and injustices that continue compound throughout these weeks and months, let's remember that we all have a role in the striving towards greater truth and holiness. We cannot expect systems to change by replacing people at the top.

We cannot, for that matter, understand change to be something that happens once, and then poof, we are good, we are holy. Just as holiness is an ongoing challenge and aspiration, so too must be the work of creating a just society. We must not be seduced by quick fixes that promise sudden transformation.

Korach's only vision of a better world is one that looks just like this, but with him in charge. Moshe, in the end of the parashah, finally quells the rebellions not with the might of an earthquake or a plague, but by showing that Aaron's staff sprouts leaves and blossoms, in contrast to those of the other tribal leaders. I love this image of the bare stick flowering, for it's the possibility of generativity, even in places where we might not first imagine hope, that must guide the transformation we seek.

That's why I ask every week – what is the world you envision?