

Parashat Korakh 5780

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat's *parasha* (Torah portion) is called "Korakh" named after the person who leads a rebellion against Moses while our ancestors are travelling through the wilderness (*midbar*) on their way to the land of Israel. In many ways it is a story about leadership which makes it very relevant throughout all times including today, of course.

Korakh himself is part of the elite. He is one of the prime descendants of the tribe of Levi – the tribe which served as the spiritual leaders of our ancestors. Korakh, Moses, and Aaron are first cousins – their fathers were brothers. Korakh gathers about 250 people to confront Moses and Aaron over the issue of leadership. Korakh says to Moses and Aaron that they have gone too far. He says that "all of the community is holy and the Eternal One is in their midst. Why do you (two) put yourselves above the community of the Eternal One (i.e. the rest of us). When Moses hears this he "falls on his face" – a posture he takes up now and then that connotes shock and/or humility. In this case probably both.

Let's step back and have a little *rokhmones/rakhmanut* (compassion) for Moshe. If you recall about two books back at the beginning of *Shemot* (the book of Exodus) Moshe's at the burning bush and he doesn't want the job of leading the Israelites. He keeps saying how unqualified he is for it. Eventually he capitulates. We can't help but notice from the time our ancestors left Egypt that they were honing their skills at kvetching, constantly complaining. But Moses defends them all the time, nevertheless. Two weeks ago, the Torah portion mentioned that Moses was the humblest person on earth. And now here Korakh is treating Moses like he's just trying to elevate himself. Korakh presents his case by arguing as though everyone is equally holy and therefore, we (Korakh and the others) should have no less a role and no less power than Moses and Aaron.

The confrontation ends with Korakh and his 250 comrades getting punished, but I'd rather focus right now on how *khazal* (our sages of blessed memory) responded to Korakh. *Khazal* sees Korakh as very flawed and the antithesis of a good leader for many reasons. They begin by finding hints of this from the first word of the Torah portion. The portion begins with "*Vayikakh Korakh ben Yitzhar....*" (and Korakh the son of Yitzhar "took" –*vayikakh*). They say Korakh was a "taker" not a "giver" – the antithesis of Moses who was a "giver," taking nothing for himself. Our sages pointed out that Korakh wanted to either replace Moses or Aaron because

he wanted the power. He thought he should be the person to lead the people. So he uses the people as a prop for himself saying that the entire community is holy. It sounds like a very pious statement valuing the community – but, in fact it’s very manipulative. After saying that the entire community is holy, he says the Eternal One is in their midst. This harkens back to a statement back in the book of Exodus in which G!d says to Moses: “they shall build me a sanctuary (*V’asu li mikdash*) and I will dwell in their midst (*v’shakhanti b’tokham*). In other words if they sanctify themselves and create a holy space, the Eternal One’s Presence will be felt among them. This verse is one of my favorites in the Torah – a prescription for a spiritual life. But Korakh twists it to make it sound like it’s a matter of fact and takes no effort on the part of the people to attain. In other words he’s saying that everything is holy already and requires no effort on our part to live in a particular way that sanctifies our lives.

As we all know, we are living in particularly challenging times right now, times that call out for great leadership – leadership in which people feel called upon to serve the community, leadership that demonstrates selflessness. But we have been so mired in division in our country and there is so much distrust of people’s motives that something that would seem as innocuous as the necessity of wearing a mask when in public spaces and maintaining social distancing – all in order to get control over the spread of the coronavirus – is being treated by some people as a political issue. How have we descended to this point? I don’t have a quick answer for this – but it has probably been evolving in this direction for quite a while.

People can legitimately disagree with each other. In Pirkei Avot 5:17 our sages speak of different types of disagreements (*makhlokot* – *makhloket* is the singular). They say there is a *makhloket l’shem shamayim* (a disagreement for the sake of Heaven – i.e. a disagreement about what’s right in which the intentions of those who disagree are pure and they only truly want to do what’s right). They ask what’s an example of a *makhloket l’shem shamayim*? They answer those are the differences of opinions between Hillel and Shammai. Then they ask: what’s an example of a *makhloket*, a disagreement, not for the sake of Heaven? The answer is Korakh’s disagreement with Moses and Aaron.

Even though they didn’t have a word for this, *khazal* treat Korakh like a demagogue, someone who manipulates others for his own desire for power. There are numerous Midrashim that try to illustrate how disingenuous Korakh was. In one Midrash he asks: does a room full of Torah scrolls still require a Mezuzah (which only contains a small number of verses of the

Torah). Or does a Tallit that is entirely blue still require the blue thread on the tzitzit? Over and over they present Korakh as saying things that camouflage his true purpose which is to challenge Moses and Aaron and to replace them himself and have power. Clearly our tradition was very concerned with what kind of leadership our people needed. Our sages valued learning to an enormous degree. They would never have said that someone was too knowledgeable or intelligent to be the leader. They valued ethics and honesty. A leader should be an exemplary person and should never be in it for the sake of attaining power.

The Haftarah for this Torah portion continues with this issue of leadership. It is from the first Book of Samuel and begins with Saul being anointed as the first king of Israel. The whole question of having a king was very controversial. There was a great fear that a king might have too much power and could be corrupt or corrupted by that power unless they were an extraordinary person. It would usually be the prophet's role to confront a king with his wrongdoings and bring him to account. It was ancient Israel's form of checks and balances.

I'd like to conclude with another quote from Pirkei Avot 4:1: *Ayzehu m'khubad* (who is the one who is honored?) *Ham'khabed et habriyot* (the one who honors others). Not only the select others who flatter you or go along with you, but all of G!d's creatures. That was the kind of person that *khazal* saw as fit to lead the people, someone who loved the people, all of the people, the way Moses did. Not someone who saw the people as a means to attaining their own ambitions. Shabbat Shalom.