

Parshat Korah 2018-5778

When teenagers in the 1980s or 90s were asked what they wanted to be "when they grew up", their answers were just updated versions of the professions that were exciting and sexy in my youth: astronauts and marine biologists were replaced with software developer, molecular neurobiologist, or day-trader. Starting in the early 2000s, a new phenomenon arose; when teenagers were asked the same question- what do you want to become, the answer was, "famous". The explosion of the internet, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook Live, YouTube, and Periscope, has spawned a new generation that seeks and attains fame based on the number of hits, viewers or "friends" they have. One need only to "trend" in order to receive attention , and from attention comes fame, and from fame comes offers from companies for product placement. I met one of my daughter's friend in Brooklyn who took pains to describe to me that she was a "positional brander", someone who passively advertised her clients products and services by having them benignly placed on the daily postings of those internet phenoms who somehow finagled an amazing number of daily hits to their site.

This week's parsha is that of Korach. Korach was the scion of a famous family- he was the great grandson of Levi, and thus, he was blessed to be amongst the Levites who were tasked with assembling and disassembling the mobile temple of the covenant. His job, as were those of the other Levites, was straightforward. Yet he rebelled, and in fact, egged on other Levites, Datan and Abiram, and their minions, to rebel against Moses' authority. Traditional Jewish texts are clear: Korach was a demagogue who professed to speak for the people but really was a self-promoter interested in amassing personal power and wealth.

Several simple words seem to imply this: the Torah states that after Korach takes himself, Datan and Amiram, and 250 well-renowned men, including those elected to office, that they "rose up in the face of Moses" לָפָנַי הִמָּוֶה, and that they "assembled themselves ON Moses and ON Aaron" וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן. In today's parlance, they got up in Moses' grill!

These men consisted of two groups: Korach and most of the 250 were Levites, vs. Data and Amiram, who were from the tribe of Reuven. Korach challenges Moses and Aaron: "*Why do you, Moses and Aaron, raise*

yourselves above us in keeping for yourself the priestly function? The entire congregation is holy and Adonai is in our midst." What was really being conveyed here is the jealousy that Korach, as a Levite, was *assisting* Aaron in his position as the *Cohane Gadol*, the High Priest. In this regard, Korach and his gang want *spiritual equality*.

The Reuvenites, who descend from Jacob's first born, believe that they, not the Levites, should hold political leadership. Yet we can remember that on his death bed, Jacob described Reuven as "unstable as water, lacking excellence" פָּחַז כַּמַּיִם אֶל-רֵתוֹתָ. This group wants *political leadership*.

Here, the Torah expounds on how Datan and Amiram were the political spin-doctors of the day: they twist Moses' promise to bring the congregation to the "land of milk and honey" as a ridiculousness, in that he really brought them out to die in the desert. These are akin to current day politicians who pass bills such as "The Clear Skies Act", which actually increases industrial pollution, or "The Safe Forest Act", which allows increased lumber cutting on public lands as a preventative against forest fires.

What happens to our two groups? Moses tells the Korach group to come to the Tabernacle with their fire pans and incense, and to light these, as would members of the *cohanim* would do. If their position is correct, then their incense offerings would work, but instead, as they lit their pans, the whole groups was consumed by the fire. The Reuvenites refuse to even come of their tents, and Moses, knowing what would become of them, goes to their tents to plead with them. When they refuse to come out, he warns all those in their tribe to flee for their lives from these tents, and most do. But in the next instant, Datan and Aviram and those who stayed are swallowed up as the "ground opened up". In the end, both groups get what could be called *serious biblical punishments!*

So...are we comfortable with this story? Is the conclusion for us that challenging authority is wrong, meriting capital punishment? What was the major sin committed by these two groups, and why do we have a whole parsha to teach us about it?

The answer may lie in the coda to this story: G-d tells Moses and Aaron to take the incense pans of the rebels who were consumed in the fire and to beat them into coverings for the alter in the Tabernacle,

כִּי-הִקְרִיבֶם לִפְנֵי-יְהוָה, וַיִּקְדָּשׁוּ; וַיְהִי לְאוֹת, לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

so that anyone coming close before G-d will become holy, and it will be as an "OT" before Israel.

The word "OT", which literally means "sign" is used very sparingly: Shabbat is an OT, *brit milah*, circumcision, is an OT, the rainbow in the story of Noah signifying the end of the floods was an OT. The commentary, *Etz Chayim*, translates this word here as a "warning". But a more beautiful interpretation was from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, who wrote of this OT: "*the holiness of the fire pans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy. Challenges to tradition are necessary because they stand as perpetual reminders that religion can sink into corruption and complacency. Plating the altar with the fire pans of the rebels is meant to remind us of the legitimacy, indeed the potential holiness of the impulse within each of us to rebel against religious stagnation and complacency that can infect religion.*"

As opposed to the Reuvenites, who were mere political rebels, perhaps the lesson about the Korach rebels is one that is, ironically, more positive. Perhaps, this is about how we, as common Jews are asked to give our all to our Jewish institutions, such as our shuls, our modern day temples. Perhaps, it seems just when we give of ourselves most intensely and spiritually, we ourselves are consumed. And yet, the lesson here is that fruits of these efforts will surely become the cornerstones of our buildings, the physical essence that will make these institutions holy. In this regard, we will have fulfilled G-d's promise that, *kidoshim tihyu*, you, the regular Jew, will become holy.