

**Parashat Korach**  
**July 1, 2005**  
**Rabbi Lisa Edwards**

Rabbi Lisa Edwards BCC, LA Parashat Korach 5765 July 1, 2005 What was she thinking?

On July 4th weekend no less?

Sandra, Sandra, Sandra...

Anyone remember when Sandra Day O'Connor was nominated -- the trepidation (mixed with elation because the nominee was a woman)? Anything like the trepidation now?

Well, it's a good thing that next Shabbat we'll have no less than two newly elected, and very out, Superior Court Judges here to speak with us about the Supreme Court and other things - come hear the Honorables (we're going to make a sequel to the Incredibles called the Honorables) come hear the Honorable Donna Groman and the Honorable Zeke Zeidler next Friday night.

What a week of ups and downs

Spain votes to legalize same gender marriage!!!!

A Jerusalem Magistrate Court rules that Jerusalem's mayor had no right to try to shut down the Pride Parade, and the judge ordered the Mayor to pay court costs of about \$6500 out of his own pocket!!!

The City of Los Angeles on Tuesday of this week set a plaque in the sidewalk at Hollywood Blvd and McCadden Place where, 35 years ago that day - June 28, 1970 - LA's first pride parade stepped off the curb. The plaque honors the 3 founders of that parade. I had the honor of giving the invocation at that little ceremony Tuesday morning, during which I said:

Thirty-five years ago today, when the first Pride Parade stepped off this very curb and into this street, no one could have imagined what Rev. Troy Perry, Morris Kight, and Rev. Bob Humphries were creating: a simple act of celebration with the power to encourage hearts, open minds, and restore souls.

Anyone here come from small enough town in America to remember 4th of July parades?

I do. Granted it was a suburb of Chicago - but it was still small town. Boy, talk about your pride parades. Everyone in town went to it. And most of the town's children - either as Brownies or Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts or Boy Scouts were in the parade.

I never got past Brownies - well, I "flew up" to Girl Scouts, but then I quit. I just couldn't

bear to wear the little dress uniforms. But I did have the distinction, even before I was a Brownie, of being a Cub Scout. Not officially, mind you, but my brother was a Cub Scout of course and my mother, z'l, was a den mother, and she & my brother, indulgent ones that they were, let me come to all the meetings. I fulfilled the requirements for the badges, I read the scouting books, I learned the pledge: I, Larry Edwards, promise to do my duty to God and my country... [I know that's not quite right - can anyone help?]

Larry let me wear his Cub Scout cap once in a while, but otherwise I didn't really get to wear the uniforms, or send in my accomplishments to Scouting Headquarters and receive any actual badges, or march with the Cub Scouts at the annual 4th of July Parade.

I guess I must have been in my brownie uniform when I marched, but I don't really remember that....I remember the fire engines in the parade (and - worst-case-scenario-kid that I was - I remember wondering what would happen if there were a fire somewhere else in town DURING the parade...), AND I remember how proud I was the first time I got to be in the color guard, and actually carried the American flag. Had that little belt on with a cup on it so the end of the flag pole wouldn't lodge in your belly button. Had to put right hand over left in that extremely awkward grip. Had to keep switching grips because it was so heavy! Especially on windy days.

I was proud as could be - of America, to be an American, to carry that flag. And now? Whew, how times have changed. Do you suppose that's why Sandra Day O'Connor has retired from the Supreme Court?

I was proud, and yet....I was really wishing I was up there with the Cub Scouts. I was really wishing I could be somebody they wouldn't quite let me be (well, my mom would have, but you know, they wouldn't). It kind of reminds me of this week's Torah portion (how convenient is that?) when Korach - already an important person among the people Israel - already a Levite, already a person in a high position - gathers his two friends Dathan and Abiram, and 250 others - "chieftains of the congregation, prominent ones of the assembly, people of repute" to assemble against Aaron and Moses, saying to them: "You have much! Because all of the congregation, all of them, are holy, and God is among them, Why do you raise yourselves up over God's community?" [Numbers 16:2-3]. Whoa. I never said anything like that to my Cub Scout brother. And it's a good thing, because as simple and perhaps even correct as Korach and his rebels sound, God does not take their banter lightly. Within a day, in quite a dramatic performance by God, the ground suddenly cracks open under Korach, Dathan, Abiram swallowing them whole, they and their families, and then just as suddenly the ground closes up again. No sooner had everybody else fled from the spot, than fire went out from God and consumed the 250 rebels [Numbers 16: 31-35].

Pretty terrifying way to be kept in your place, isn't it?

As you might imagine, the midrash writers and Torah commentators make much of this character Korach and his friends. Often they come to the conclusion that Korach's sin was not in his words to Moses, so much, they're right that we are all holy according to God, but he was wrong in the motive behind the words. He - Korach - rebelled because he wanted more power; he wanted more honor; he was jealous of Moses and Aaron; he was a

malcontent and everybody, even God, dislikes a malcontent, right? A whiner, a complainer -- ick. Put them down quickly - whining is contagious. If you don't believe that read Exodus and Numbers and Deuteronomy.

And I kind of buy that. I kind of buy it that what was wrong with Korach was that he was an egoist, and a complainer. That he was interested in what he could get for himself, rather than in making change for the greater good. Very unJewish.

Pirke Avot, that precious portion of the mishnah that gives us so much food for thought, speaks of Korach when it says, "Any controversy that is for the sake of Heaven shall in the end be resolved. A controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven shall not be resolved. Which controversy was for the sake of Heaven? That between Hillel and Shammai (two well-respected sages who disagreed about just about everything). Which controversy was not for the sake of Heaven? Korach and his band." [Pirke Avot, 5:17]

It's interesting to read about a controversy that was not for the sake of heaven, here on the eve of the 4th of July (or better yet, on the eve of the 2nd of July which, according to the July 2, 1776 Pennsylvania Evening Post: was the "[This] day the Continental Congress declared the United Colonies Free and Independent States."

What I buy about the traditional interpretations of Korach is the idea that one shouldn't promote oneself by putting others down. What I buy is not promoting yourself just for the sake of promoting yourself, for ego. But also I buy the possibility that maybe Korach and his crowd were misunderstood. Or at least I buy that, if not Korach, then at least some complainers are doing it for the right reasons. And I also buy it that it's not always so clear in the moment.

Did the founders of our country, for example, perhaps just want lower or no taxes? Or did they perhaps just want to be in charge? Or did they in fact deliberately devise an amazing system of representative government.

Some of our teachers say the moral of the story of Korach is: You should be content with your lot in life. Don't try to be Moses, be the best Korach you can be. [see Rabbi Moshe D. Bryski's d'var Torah "The Greenest Grass" in Jewish Journal July 1, 2005, p. 26, for example] But is that really what Judaism or the history of the founding of America teaches us?

I think - Korach notwithstanding - that Judaism and this country's founding documents teach us that maybe we can change roles in our lives, maybe we can aspire to be something else if not someone else, maybe we can continue to strive and to thrive through change and growth and feeling our way toward what we want to be, toward who we really are.

Maybe we can each become something we're not yet, maybe we can make a difference, or keep making a difference.

Sandra Day O'Connor never expected to be a Supreme Court Justice, let alone one respected by people from all political sides.

The folks who took the marriage equality issue to the government of the mostly Catholic country of Spain made a difference - how unlikely was that?

The people in 1970 who stepped off the curb onto Hollywood Blvd. - every last frightened one of them - made a difference.

The handful of Jews that Rev. Troy Perry helped in 1972 to found BCC made a difference.

The proud little cub scouts and girl scouts who paraded through the streets of Glencoe, IL in the 1950s learning to be good Americans actually learned to be good Americans by standing up to power, just the way our ancestors in the Continental Congress did. We learned from our parade training how to walk in the streets and carry heavy poles with signs and flags attached - came in handy later on. Weren't our Scout leaders surprised?

I heard a peace worker one time say, "the people in power want peace; the people who are oppressed want justice."

My brother is in Jerusalem right now and he took a taxi to the Pride Parade last night. When Larry told the taxi driver where he wanted to go - down near the parade - the driver said, "you're not going to that thing are you?" Yes, said my brother and the friend he was with. "Why would you want to do that?" "Our friends are there," said my brother, trying to come up with enough Hebrew fast enough (It was his first day in Israel in several years).

"Ach," said the taxi driver, "the Muslim population in Israel is growing and they are going to take over, and this is why the Jewish population isn't growing."

I guess one can feel oppressed in many circumstances, even when one has a lot of privileges -- Korach had a lot of privileges, but not as many as Moses and Aaron. George Bush has a lot of privileges, yet he seems to feel oppressed quite often by the likes of us.

In our funny little corner of the world and of history, we are pretty "privileged" to have both views. We know something about what it means to be in power and to be oppressed. And so we understand what it means to want both peace and justice - and to work for both.

So sometimes we march and sometimes we parade; and sometimes, like in Jerusalem last night, and on Hollywood Blvd in 1970, a parade turns into a march. Peace and justice - hold them both in focus as we help our officials pick a new Supreme Court justice, Peace and justice -- hold them both in focus as we watch the government of Israel take a bold move this summer; Peace and justice -- hold them both in focus as we continue to learn to be who we are, intent - as our Jewish and our American ancestors taught us - intent on making a difference.

Shabbat Shalom