

Parashat Korach
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This week in the Middle East more sad news: 10 apparently innocent Jews convicted in Iran of spying. And a hearing by the Israeli Supreme Court on the conversion issue may have been what sparked yet another attack on a liberal Jewish institution in Jerusalem (a Conservative synagogue was firebombed a few weeks ago).

This week someone(s) vandalized the school of the Reform movement: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. HUC in Jerusalem, where I spent the first year of my rabbinical studies, received minor but serious damage: the glass doors and windows that front the entrance to the campus were smashed, the word "Satan" was spray-painted on the floor near the entrance, and the street level sign for the school was defaced. It's believed that the perpetrators are ultra-Orthodox Jews.

If so, I wonder if they deliberately took such action during the week Jews are reading the story of Korach in the book of numbers. Korach is infamous in Jewish tradition for being the worst sort of bad-boy "rebel without a cause": Fairly high up in the leadership hierarchy already, Korach and his friends Datan and Abiram lead a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Gathering another "250 Israelites, chieftains of the community" onto their side, they rebel against Moses and Aaron, saying to them: "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?" [#s 16:3] God does not take kindly to their complaint (neither do Moses and Aaron), and acts swiftly to destroy these rebels. The earth literally opens up and swallows Dathan, Abiram and all their families. Then the rest of the 250 rebels are consumed in a fire that goes forth from God. Pretty clear evidence, one would think, that God has no patience for such dissent. But instead of humbling the rest of the Israelites, and putting an end to the unrest, God's response seems instead to infuriate the rest of the Israelite community, and so they pick up where the dead rebel leaders left off -- they too rail against Moses and Aaron: "You two have brought death upon God's people!" [17:6] This response infuriates God even more. And God brings a plague against the Israelites, willing, wanting, it would seem, to kill them all off.

Jewish tradition pretty much condemns Korach, even though his initial comment to Moses and Aaron seems kind of true: "For all the community are holy, all of them," say the rebels, "and God is in their midst." Isn't it fair then to ask, "Why then do you raise ourselves above God's congregation?" [#s 16:3] If those vandals who attacked HUC, and by extension, Reform Judaism, were thinking Korach, they might have been placing us liberal Jews right there in the category of rebel against God and Moses. In their eyes, we too deserve the fate of the Torah rebels - the earth should open and swallow us up. But once again we come face to face with that ongoing irony of Judaism. That Judaism not

only allows, but encourages different interpretations, varied understandings of our stories. For me, the vandals are more like Korach and the rebels, who had no respect for others, who tried to raise themselves up by undermining what had been built and by putting down the builders. In fact, I think the story told in Torah this week is largely a story about leadership, about building community, about what it takes both to envision and to create a holy community. Although violence occurs in this week's portion -- violence by the hand of God no less - violence is not condoned, and neither is the undermining of community, nor the sabotaging of people's hopes or dreams or efforts.

The official response from the heads of HUC about the vandalism included the important information that they have already received much support from "Fair-minded and tolerant Jews from across the religious spectrum." Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman and Rabbi Michael Marmor wrote that this support and solidarity "gives us strength and encouragement. They [those who support us] realize that in the struggle for the soul of Israel, indifference is impossible." It's good to think that indifference is impossible - I'm not so convinced myself. More to the heart of the matter, it seems to me though, is not whether indifference is impossible, but rather whether "difference is possible." For the issue, finally, is whether we can practice different ways of being Jews and still exist side-by-side. It's a good question to ask about the modern State of Israel and it's a good question to ask in narrower context, in our own BCC community. I think this portion, this story of rebellion and its aftermath, is a commentary not only on the arrogance of vandals, and those who think there is only one way to be Jewish, it is advice for us at BCC as we prepare to come together this Sunday (and beyond) for the first of a series of community meetings sponsored by the Strategic Planning & Oversight Committee.

This Sunday's meeting is called "The Gifts of Leadership," and there's a lot we could learn from this week's story of rebellions and unrest. In trying to figure out what Korach did wrong, some commentators look no farther than the first two words of the portion: va-yi-kakh Korach 'And Korach tookŠ" [#s 16:1] As a leader, Korach was "on the take." The fact that Korach "took" first, rather than "gave" made all the difference. It's not that one is not allowed to benefit personally, to receive rewards, to feel good, to grow from being a leader. In fact, those are all good things that should come to leaders. But the fact that personal gain was Korach's motive, that the first thing he did was "take" - that's a problem. Here's a second criticism of Korach: when the rebels say to Moses and Aaron, "why do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?" they miss something key about leadership. They miss the fact that though a leader necessarily sticks out (is more visible than others), that doesn't necessarily mean leaders think they are better than everyone else. Moses symbolically demonstrates this by his immediate response to Korah's question of "why do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?" - Moses va-yi-pol al panav "falls on his face" before speaking to Korach and the rebels [16:3-4]. In fact, in the Torah portion a couple of weeks ago we were told that "Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other person on earth." [#s 12:3] What the rebels miss is that Moses and Aaron don't raise themselves above God's congregation, but rather, they simply accept the roles and responsibilities God has assigned to them.

A third criticism often leveled at Korach and his crew: They began their insurrection by criticizing those who were already the leaders, trying to undermine what they had done and why. Now in their case it doesn't help that the current leaders either were God or were chosen by God, but think about it in any context. When you want to make a change in an institution, say BCC - to pick a random example - do you think you'd be more likely to make happy changes, to get your point across, by [A] condemning the current leadership or leadership structure, by publicly criticizing them; OR do you think you'd have more success by [B]: working with the current leadership to try to make change, to better the ways we operate here, to make sure our visions include the whole community? If you answered [A], please don't come to the meeting on Sunday, but if [B] sounds fun to you - we'll be so happy to see you at 4pm Sunday right here in this room. PLEASE COME! Whether you're a past leader, current leader, future leader, or just want to help make BCC an even more wonderful community, we want your input.

Earlier in my description of Korach's rebellion I said that God seemingly would have been willing to destroy everyone who rebelled. Why then, don't they all die? Another key element of the leadership of Moses and Aaron: twice in this portion, Moses and Aaron intercede on behalf of the rebellious Israelites. When God becomes incensed at the whole community, God says to Moses and Aaron:

"separate yourselves' from this community -- get out of the way -- and I will eat them up in an instant!" [16:21] But instead of moving away from the crowd as God commands, Moses and Aaron "fall on their faces" again. And this time they say to God, "When one sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?" [16:22] Immediately, God gives in a bit, arranging it so that only the leaders are destroyed -- at this point anyway. The second time Moses and Aaron intercede is after the leaders are killed, and the rest of the community rails against Moses and Aaron. Then God once again tells Aaron and Moses to get out of the way, so that "I can eat them up in an instant!" [17:10]. Once again Moses and Aaron respond by falling on their faces (yes, they do this a lot in this story). This time Moses instructs Aaron to take fire from the sacred altar, bring it out into the community and make expiation for them, for God has begun a plague against the rebellious people [17:11]. "And Aaron took [the fire] as Moses said and he RAN into the midst of the congregation, where the plague had begun among the people, and he made expiation for the people. Isn't this an incredible image? Aaron has just witnessed what God is willing to do to those who rebel or disobey: first, God opens the earth, allowing it to swallow men, women and children, and then in short order, God burns up 250 more people, followed immediately by the beginning of this devastating plague. And yet, having just witnessed God at God's most destructive, Aaron still opts to disobey -- God tells him to move out of the way and instead Aaron runs -- and that is literally what the Hebrew text says --vayaratz -- he doesn't just not move out of the way, he doesn't saunter casually, he RUNS toward instead of away from -- Aaron doesn't just disobey God, he RUNS to disobey God. He runs into the midst of the people where the plague has already begun, he makes expiation (atonement) for them, and then, says our text:

He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped.

Moses, and even more especially Aaron, serve as incredible role models here. For here is civil disobedience carried one step further -- here is divine disobedience -- and it works:

He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague stopped.

Presumably, had Aaron not run into the midst of the people, had he not stood between the dead and the living, and not prayed on their behalf, the plague would have continued. As it was, Aaron couldn't move fast enough to prevent major devastation: The number of people who died of the plague came to fourteen thousand and seven hundred, we are told [17:14]. But presumably he saved thousands, hundreds of thousands. And what happened to the disobedient Aaron? Did God banish him? punish him? Did he suffer the same fate as the rebellious Korach? Hardly. As soon as the plague stops, Aaron returns to the Tent of Meeting, the place "where God's presence appears." There, we're told, God sets forth proof once and for all that Aaron is "the man I choose," [17:20] and God bestows many honors and gifts upon him and upon "his descendants for all time." [17:15-18:20] At the end of the HUC letter describing the smashing of the glass entrance doors to Hebrew Union College, Rabbi Zimmerman and Rabbi Marmor wrote: "The future should be claimed by those who open doors, not by those who break them down."

When Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the disgruntled rebels, when they refused - even at God's request - to separate themselves from the community, when Aaron disobeyed God and risked his own life in order to run in and help those in need, they gave us many lessons, many "gifts of leadership." In these stories of rebellion and leadership, Moses and Aaron teach us something about "giving" rather than "taking," and about humility in place of arrogance. They teach us something about how to make changes without undermining the efforts of others, and about how to make difference possible - how to disagree, even with God, and still be a part of God's covenant and God's people. And in so doing, Moses and Aaron teach us something about how to lead, how to live, how to open doors for one another and for ourselves. Will you turn with me now to page 13 in our prayerbooks, and let's read together a prayer about opening doors, a prayer not only about Shabbat, but also about the vision of BCC:

May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who long for friendship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to young or straying feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness, and harshness.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter, the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.

Stay there on p. 12 as we sing "Ma tovu ohelecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael" Notice

the plurals - "how good they are: your tentS, O Jacob, your sanctuarieS, O Israel." There is more than one way to do good, to create beauty. There is more than one way to be a Jew. [Jeremy leads in singing "Mah tovu"]