

Korach Dvar Torah, 6/15/13

Parsha describes a rebellion, mainly involving the tribe of Reuben, but central figure is a Levite and the first cousin of Moshe and Aharon. Korach is able to summon the support of some 250 leaders of the community and his movement also generates popular support of a large group of rabble rousers and discontents including Dathan and Aviram who we have heard about before but won't hear about from this point forward.

As a quick summary, there is a challenge to Aharon's elite designation as leader of the priesthood. There is an anti-nepotism, "fighting the man" tone to the rebellion. But certainly, Hashem does not consider this challenge in a favorable light. It is not a well intentioned movement in his eyes, except perhaps for one small element we will get to. But the community leaders are vanquished in a heavenly fire and the masses involved with the revolt are swallowed up by the earth. But, in typical fashion, Bnai Yisrael does not stop there with a challenge to Moshe and Aharon. Moshe is blamed for these deaths and a subsequent plague is sent through the community to put an end to this episode of rebellion. Finally the rod test is used to affirm that Aharon and the tribe of Levi have the authority from on high to minister in the proximity of Hashem, whether in the Mishkan or Beit Hamikdash once it is built. And there is an enumeration of gifts, tithes that will be apportioned to the tribe of Levi, partially in light of the fact they will be given no land upon settling in Eretz Yisrael on which to generate food, income, etc.

A closer look for lessons to be learned:

Korach: a jealous cousin. A trigger is likely that Moshe designated another younger cousin, Elitzafan, to head the family. And his wife also appears to have egged him on. From Talmud Sanhedrin the phrase "A foolish woman destroys her house with her hands" is in reference to Korach's wife. But his coveting of Aharon's position could, with a mental/philosophical stretch, be considered to have some element of merit. He wanted to be closer to G-d, as did the 250 community leaders. Why should there be this hierarchy when it comes to serving Hashem. It brings to mind Martin Luther and the Protestant movement that confronted the Catholic Church.

Dathan and Aviram: We have seen them in action before. They are chronic malcontents and trouble makers. Reported Moshe to the authorities over the killing of the Egyptian, forcing Moshe to have to flee. They also would leave the double portion of Manna over in defiance of Moshe's instructions. There was nothing redeeming in their scheming, as opposed to the community leadership. They were just joining to cause trouble.

The different ends for these two groups is instructive. Why not just have all of them swallowed up by the earth in one fell swoop? Instead a heavenly fire was used to consume the 250 who aspired to be close to Hashem. The commentaries describe this group as the "soul of the mutiny" or what we could also call its conscience. That there may have been something redeeming in their actions is also expressed by Hashem's insistence that the plates they used to bring the ketoret (the incense) be fashioned into a covering for the altar. They were made holy by an attempt to honor Hashem, although in a misguided fashion.

Dathan and Aviram and the rabble rousers, instead, represent the physical body of the mutiny. They were consumed by the hole in the earth. Their motivation was not tempered by an aspiration to be closer to Hashem but was only driven by jealousy and an opposition to the burdens placed on them by rituals that were communicated largely through Moshe. For instance, the proper way to gather the Manna. Nothing redeeming here.

The very fact that the Parsha is named for Korach, also hints at this small redemptive quality. Typically Parshas do not carry the name of negative forces.

So how to come to grips with this challenge to authority, some of which was driven by an attempt to even the playing field when it comes to serving Hashem. How to reconcile this with the Judaism of more modern times that we not practice by proxy, that we do not delegate others to pray for us, that we do not depend on others to follow rituals (keep kosher, go to shul, give tzedaka, etc.) for us. We should be active participants, action should be valued over mere words. We should participate.....

Some answers:

1. The rabbis note that Korach's motivation to lead the priesthood was driven by visions of glory mainly and not the service elements of the position. He was power-hungry and blinded by the restrictions placed on the priesthood.
2. Distinctions in society are necessary/required for a healthy, functioning community. Different talents confer different professions, for instance. We are meant to serve humanity according to our individual skills, interests, etc.
3. So a key lesson of this parsha is that it is the responsibility of those in authority, such as Moshe and Aharon, to not allow such distinctions to become divisive. There is a need to recognize and reward individuality and to do it in such a way that it fosters diversity of thought and adds value to the community. But it also has to be reined in (laws, customs, collective responsibility) to quell a move to rebellion and chaos.

Good Shabbas.