

In my Torah portion, Parashat Korach, Korach, Dathan, and Aviram lead a rebellion against Moses and Aharon. Moses, after trying to convince the rebels to take back their argument, because of the rebels' stubbornness, is eventually left with no better choice than to "test" the rebels (and I use the term lightly because it was more a proof than a test. Moses knew who would "win.") a "Test" to decide who is worthy of the kehuna (priesthood). The test Moses proposes involves all of the rebels and Aaron putting incense in their fire-pans and Adonai bringing those who are holy near to him. Korach agrees to this test, for he truly believes that he is just as worthy of the kehuna as Aharon, but Dathan and Aviram refuse, saying, "We will not come! Is it not enough that you have taken us out of a land flowing with milk and honey (in reference to Egypt) to kill us in the wilderness, but you make yourself a prince over us as well? We will not go!"

Adonai's first idea of response to this rebellion is to destroy all the congregation. However, Moses and Aaron plead with the Lord, saying, "When one man sins will you be wrathful with all the congregation?"

Adonai reconsiders, telling Moses and Aaron to instruct all of the congregation besides the rebels to move away from all of the rebels and their wives and children, so as to not be killed along with the rebels. The

congregation does so. Moses says, "If these men die in an ordinary manner, it is not the Lord who has sent me. But if the Lord brings about something unheard of so that the ground opens its mouth wide and swallows them up, then you will know that it is the Lord who these men have rejected." And so, Korach, Dathan, and Aviram, along with their wives, children, and all that belonged to them were, in fact, swallowed by the Earth. Then, all of their followers who had offered the incense were consumed by fire.

But then, there start to be murmurs in the congregation. "They've killed the people of Adonai." "Why have the innocent died?" And Adonai's rage becomes apparent again, as he tells Moses and Aaron to move away from the community so that they won't be affected by the plague which Adonai intends to kill all of the community with. So Moses and Aaron try to protect the community by offering incense to the Lord to atone for the community's sins. They only half succeed. Despite their efforts, thousands of people are killed with the plague.

Where to begin? I'm sure that most of you were a little weirded out by several things in just this brief summary. The deadly plague, the earth

swallowing the rebels, the innocent women and children dieing. But, I believe that I will begin with the thing that struck me the most when I sat down, almost a year ago, now, and read Parashat Korach for the first time. This is, in fact, the very argument which it seems Korach is presenting. Korach says, "You've gone too far, seeing as all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why, then do you elevate yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" This argument sounds, at first, very appealing to us citizens of a democratic nation that was born of a revolution challenging authority similarly. And were it really an argument for "democracy in holiness" it not only might be a very valid argument, it might have been considered by Adonai. However, it was not some fight for "power to the people." It was more an issue of "power to the Levites" or "power to the Korach," or at least, that's what our tradition teaches us. This goes along with a quote from our sages: "Any argument for the sake of heaven will end in an everlasting result, whereas any argument not for the sake of heaven will not." Korach's argument was for personal gain, or at least that is the popular belief. However, there is one Midrash portraying a more sympathetic Korach; a man truly wanting to be with God. This midrash shows Korach not as dieing due to some punishment, but due to his not being able to withstand being in the presence of God, the holy of holies. The

justification for this Midrash is that one is not supposed, by Jewish law, to name anyone or anything after a wicked man. Why, then, is this Parasha named after Korach, who, in popular tradition, is portrayed as somewhat of an ogre. Perhaps the ground swallowing Korach was not bringing him to Sheol, but rather bringing him to a world in which he could, in fact, be closer to God.

But, even if Korach's argument were a matter of a fight for democratic holiness, being stranded in the wilderness fighting for survival with no less than a man who speaks to god as your leader, is not exactly the best time to be fighting against this man. For Korach's rebellion would surely divide and shower the community with violence. In fact, Korach's very name is derived from a Hebrew root meaning division. It would be one thing to start a rebellion in a place and at a time with a terrible tyranny or aristocratic system in which people were suffering and the fact that a rebellion would cause division and violence amongst everyone were no excuse for ignoring terrible injustice. But Moshe and Aharon are most certainly not some terrible tyrants imposing vicious taxes and restraints on the people. Moses and Aharon have the two most direct relationships with God ever and, in addition to that, Moses is not a political tyrant, imprisoning those who do

not fear his magical staff with the power to part a thousand waters, but rather a spiritual leader. Thus, a rebellion against Moses and Aharon is, by no means, justified, especially since it would divide the community.

So, granted, Korach may have been wrong in his argument, but what with his punishment? Did he really deserve to die a slow painful death, along with all of his followers and his wife and children and all of his possessions? For what did he die this terrible death? He did not kill anyone (and many would say that even if he did, he wouldn't deserve death). Couldn't there have been a way of convincing Korach and his followers to take back their argument without just killing them?

Ok, so Korach and his followers were punished. They were directly leading a rebellion, and whether or not you agree with God's punishment of them, one can take some comfort in the fact that at least they knew what they were getting themselves into and made their own decisions about getting themselves into it. But what about those who didn't necessarily have a say in these decisions who were swallowed up along with Korach? What about those innocent members of the community who were killed in the plague? What with Korach's wife and children? They most certainly did not have

any say in whether or not Korach followed through with this argument. Did they deserve to die? Couldn't Adonai, the holiest of holies, find a way?

Well, that makes it... ::counting:: --8 questions I have asked thus far without resolving one of them! This is because I do not believe that I can answer these questions. The best I can say is that there may be something we can take out of this confusing, troubling, biblical story. But first, I think that I must say that, depressingly, while there are many good messages we could take from this story, there are just as many unethical ones that are out there for the taking, and, unfortunately, some would choose to take them over the more positive messages. For what is positive without negative, what is the glass half full without the glass half empty, how can good exist without bad? It can't. We can take the message that Korach's sin was in dividing the people of Israel in a time of struggle when division was the last thing anyone needed and causing many innocent people to be swallowed for sin's not theirs but his, including his own wife and children. But someone could just as easily take the message of ethnic cleansing: we must, when we punish one person punish all those who have come into contact with them, for surely they have been infected with the person's "disease." We could take the message that Korach's being swallowed up was a symbolic message saying,

“Don’t be like this here man!” But we could just as easily say that this was a message saying, “Should someone rise up and sin, you must punish them, along with all of their innocent, powerless family members harshly!” Or even worse, one could take this, or many, many other instances in the bible as a strong support of capital punishment under even slight circumstances.

But, to move away, as the end of this Drash draws near, from all of this philosophical, spiritual puzzle, and to end on a more positive note, let me say that the choice is yours; you can take the positive messages in any spiritual study as opposed to the negative ones, and I sincerely hope that all of you in this room would. And to show a wonderful, beautiful example of a positive message to be taken from this Parasha, to once again allude to our Sages, perhaps we should all strive to make our actions and fights more for the sake of heaven and spirituality, as opposed to power and self-aggrandizement or, if you don’t subscribe to any particular religion, strive to make our actions and fights for the sake of humanity. Only then can we expect to better ourselves as a species and create, for the future, more people who would choose to take the positive messages as opposed to the negative ones.