

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Korakh

What do we do with dissidents? I remember reading Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" for the first time in high school. Even though I was too young to really "get it," I understood the message of its title. Later, I began to understand more as I read the teachings of the Reverend Dr. Martin King, Rosa Parks, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Ghandi, Susan B. Anthony, and even Karl Marx. I had the opportunity to utilize these teachings when the Keywanette Club at my high school wanted to disband. Separate but equal was not equal, and the members of the girl's club wanted to be members of Key Club. I was Lt. Governor over all of the Southern Nevada Key Clubs, and joined with many others across the country facing the same circumstances, and threatened to fold every charter in the division if Key Club and Kiwanis International did not allow females to be members. We won. This movement sparked a movement that eventually led to the U.S. Supreme Court decision that admitted women into Rotary Clubs and, by extension, all traditionally male service organizations. What do we do with dissidents? Sometimes we learn from them and, the world changes.

These "radical" messages of justice stayed with me as I began to practice law as the only white lawyer in an all "otherwise minority" law firm in Little Rock, Arkansas. I will never forget my first trial outside of Little Rock. I was defending an African American woman over a traffic stop in Southern Arkansas. At trial, her story and the State Trooper's were as different as night and day. In fact, he said it was a rainy night. She said it was a clear day, which, according to the almanac, it was. The judge reluctantly dismissed the charges, after I raised the matter of racial profiling in our defense. After rendering his verdict, he called me to the bench. "Mr. Kline, you have won your case. I am providing you with an escort out of town to make sure you get there safely." What do we dissidents do? Sometimes we make no difference at all, except to put ourselves and our cause at risk or worse.

Torah's ultimate depiction of dissidence appears in this week's portion. The rebellion of Korakh spreads out over one hundred verses and is the single longest story in the Torah. Korakh is a Levite. He takes exception to the role of Moses and Aaron, who exalted themselves over the rest of the congregation. In fact, Korakh is a Kohathite, the same tribal branch of Levi from which Moses and Aaron descend. He therefore has as much right to serve the people as they. Many will argue that his rebellion was merely ego based. Certainly the text could be interpreted in that way, but the text does not say that. Korakh's complaint is simply that Moses and Aaron have taken too much power upon themselves. Paradoxically, this is the same challenge Moses posed to Pharaoh. Moses challenged Pharaoh's authority. He said to Pharaoh, "You have taken too much upon yourself and claimed too much power." God responds to Korakh's challenge by opening up the Earth, allowing it to swallow his family and followers. Pharaoh's initial response to Moses was disdain but eventually he relented and granted Israel's freedom.

We glorify Moses, while we vilify Korakh. Personally, even though the Bible gives the victory to Moses, I am not sure that Korakh was not justified in his protest. In his farewell address (Deuteronomy), Moses blames the Israelites for all of his woes. He accuses Israel's lack of discipline as being the reason for God's refusal to allow him to enter the "Promised Land." He reminds them of the spies and how upon their return they scared the people with their stories of the land and persuaded them into disobeying God. Moses also blames the people for making him strike the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded (this action caused God to ban Moses from crossing the Jordan River). At some point, Moses has to take ownership for his own

blasphemous actions. Clearly, we understand this truth as it applies to a Pharaoh who ruled exclusively and then blamed everyone else for his traumas and failures.

All that being said, perhaps even if Korakh is right, the difference between the two acts of defiance can be found in the reasons for them. Moses came to free a people from servitude and oppression. Korakh rebelled in order to share power. He may have truly been entitled to some, but the difference between these two rebellions, even given the difficulties of the personalities involved, gives us some real help in looking at the world of civil disobedience and open protest. It also helps give us some perspective as to how we view the players. To Egypt, Moses was a traitor (no differently, by the way, than George Washington was to the British). Perhaps to those who would be religious literalists, Korakh is a hero for standing up for his rights as God "ordained" for the Kohathite clan of the Levite tribe. History has taught us that those causes that represent "the one" are doomed to failure, while those that are fought on behalf of justice for society have the best likelihood for success. Often times, those who fight these causes suffer great personal losses - and sometimes the one good fight may be their most redeeming moment in life.

What we know is that the world never changes when we persist at doing the same things as we have always done. We also recognize that not every change that the world has known has been for the betterment of humanity. We should be passionate for our causes and stand up for what we believe, and when this passion leads us to act with intention and integrity, occasionally the response will be immediate, and often it will come only over time - and with great angst along the way. When our intentions are for each other's blessing, we can all win. Shabbat Shalom.