

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - Korakh

"You take too much upon yourselves!" This is the cry Korakh yelled at Moses and Aaron. The tribe of Levy, all of them, were to serve as priests, but without consulting the rest of the tribes, only a fraction of the entire Levite tribe took control. Moses and Aaron were of a subset of the Levites. Only their families were to be considered ... and actually, even while brothers, Aaron was elevated over even Moses as the head priest. We never think of Moses as a priest... only a prophet, but he is. This week, the Torah tells us the tale of how a hierarchy in the tribe of Levy manifests. It seems as though God declares that in every challenge of authority, Aaron and his offspring will fend off the competition. In the end of this story, God opens up the earth and simply swallows Korakh's followers.

Some believe that the purpose of this text is to justify the very real shift of power from all Levites (First Temple) to only the descendants of Aaron (Second Temple). Both Aaron and Korakh have an entitlement of birth. According to many places in Torah, as Kohathites, descendants of Levy, both are to be priests over Israel. Moreover, in Exodus (19:6), God says to all the people, you are all a kingdom of priests (*mamlekheth kohanim*). How could Moses and Aaron claim to be more holy when everyone stood at Sinai and heard God proclaim, "I am the Lord your God." That being said, the Aaronides win, and the Korakhite rebellion ends in disaster. Aaron is affirmed as High Priest.

A colleague reminded me of a story from the Talmud that also speaks of a power struggle. Rabban Gamliel was the leader of the community. He was wealthy and arrogant. Rabbi Yehoshua is a poor blacksmith, but certainly equal in knowledge to his more wealthy colleague. Gamliel made a ruling on a matter and Yehoshua took exception to it. Gamliel proceeded to publicly humiliate Yehoshua for having disagreed. Certainly this situation mirrors our Torah text. Unlike the Torah portion, though, the sages are so incensed that they defend Yehoshua's honor and depose Gamliel for his horrific behavior.

I look at the difference in the end results of these two stories, and I have to scratch my head. It is hard to believe that God would ignore the legitimate concerns that Korakh raises, and worse, punishes him for raising them. And, even while I am heartened by the outcome of the Talmud story, I am troubled by the theme that they hold in common. Regardless of the results both communities are ripped apart because of the pursuit of power. If you have been reading this for a while, you will note that where the Torah speaks of God making decisions, this Rabbi reads it as the side who won the dispute wrote the story and authenticated themselves by putting God on their side. There are no winners in either story; families and communities stay ripped apart, even after the dispute is over.

In our country, election season is more deadly to a soul than hunting season is to any animal. One needs a license to hunt, while one needs only money to demean and destroy someone else. So much damage is done that even after the election, we stay a divided country. We are not Americans. We are Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Tea Partiers, etc. We side with our party, condemn everyone and everything not our party, and then condemn everyone else for doing the same thing to us. There is no winner in a power dispute. Lord Acton was right, "Power corrupts."

Whether it is a political struggle for control in a community, or the war we wage to "speak" loudest on behalf of God, if we are in the fight more for our own elevation than for the good of the community, the

whole world is in trouble. If one looks at the great leaders in history, they stepped down when they felt that their service was no longer in the best interest of their constituency.

Moses and Aaron fought their cousin to the death. Gamliel perverted Torah to his own demise. We see this paradigm play out over and over again throughout history. One has to wonder what makes one power monger think that he or she knows more than any before? To quote from the great sage Pete Seeger, "Where have all the flowers gone?" If you know the song, you know the ultimate question. If not, do an internet search for the words, for they are most profoundly prophetic. I pray that we do learn and that we do pay attention. I pray that we find ways past our own egos to a place where we really can see the needs of the whole world around us. I pray that where we invoke God it is for help and support for all people, and that power is seen as a tool to be shared and no longer a hammer to be swung. Each year, as I read this Torah portion, I look immediately to the news around me. I pray that one day, we will be able to see Korakh and Yehoshua as partners in figuring out how to govern this world, rather than the next threat to our absolute rule in and over a community. On that day when we can see their challenges as questions to help us think and grow and not as a threat ... on that day, we will come to know peace. Shabbat Shalom.