

Parashat Korach: The Songs That Can Save Your Life!
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Dear Friends,

This week we meet the roots of Jewish politics, and possibly even its remedy. Korach and his followers berate Moshe and Aharon, saying: who put you in charge? Why are you lording over us?

The story is well known: Korach and his 250 followers resist Moshe and Aharon's leadership:

"Now Korach, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men; and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them: 'You take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them; wherefore then lift yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?'" (Numbers 16:1-3)

The end of the story is both terrible and miraculous, and perhaps the most familiar part:

"And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korach, and all their goods. So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit; and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly." (Numbers 16: 30-33)

What a terrible fate! And note that together with Korach, all the men associated with him are also swallowed by the earth – the men, their families and all of their belongings, including their slaves.

And yet, miraculously, many years later, in the time of King David, we discover eleven Psalms that are attributed to the offspring of Korach! It seems that Korach's sons, who supposedly were swallowed by the earth, are among the poets of the great book of Psalms! We even know their names from an earlier passage, in Exodus 6:24, "And the sons of Korah: Assir, and Elkanah, and Abiasaph; these are the families [children of] of the Korahites."

Here are a few examples of the opening lines of these poems and their attribution:

"For the Leader; upon Shoshannim; [a Psalm] of the sons of Korah. Maschil. A Song of loves."

"For the Leader; [a Psalm] of the sons of Korah; upon Alamoth. A Song."

"For the Leader; a Psalm for the sons of Korah."

(Psalms 45-47)

There are two surprising discoveries here: The first is that the sons of Korach survived, and the second, that Korach's descendants are associated with King David, and they composed songs of praise to God which were worthy of being included in the immortal book of Psalms.

The first of these surprises is resolved in Parashat Pinchas, which we will read very soon, where it is clearly stated that the sons of Korach did not die, despite the earlier biblical description. We are left to wonder how and why did they survive, and how they came to be among the poets of the Psalms. Our Sages wondered the same thing, and many midrashim were written to try to provide answers to these apparent miracles.

Rashi tells us that initially the sons were supportive of their father's rebellion, but at a certain point they began to have doubts. Therefore, they were swallowed by the earth for their support, but remained relatively close to the opening of the pit because of the doubts they harbored regarding their father's actions.

One of the many midrashim explains that a ladder or crane was miraculously created, and it lifted the sons of Korach out of the pit and saved them. The ladder was actually created by the 11 Psalms which they sang.

In fact, they remedied their father's disastrous sin: Korach raises a lofty cause, and argues it beautifully. But his intention was neither lofty nor beautiful, thus turning it into a cheap manipulation. Korach was right in stating that "all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them;" But Korach was not stating this in the name of equality before God, but rather as part of a cynical manipulation whose goal was to take over the priesthood with all of its benefits.

This is a very familiar dynamic, both in politics and in our own lives: every maneuver, every manipulation, always contains a kernel of truth and loftiness, before it gets sullied.

We all experience sporadic, scarce moments of illumination which may contain flashes of great insight and understanding that can really uplift our lives. We hope they will help us enhance our happiness or peace of mind. But if and when we abuse those insights to accumulate power and wealth, as in the case of Korach, we turn a potential blessing into a terrible curse. Clearly we don't do this intentionally or even necessarily consciously. The difference between the two is so elusive, that more often than not we never really understand that we confused sublime truth with personal greed. It may involve great pain and confusion – until we understand that we have turned the sublime into a tool for our own use and narrow advancement. But divine and lofty values are not up for negotiation. They cannot be used to buy us power, wealth or control.

Some of the new age popular literature has fallen into this trap. It contains great truths, but has been used to achieve financial and personal gain. This is a typical process of spiritual descent.

This is initially what happens to Korach's sons. They heard a true statement and then they got carried away, together with the rest of their father's followers, even after it became evident that the goal was narrow and self-serving. But as opposed to the other followers, they began to have doubts; their conscience and their hearts were stirred. The earth had already opened up, but their descent was halted by that doubt. Indeed, this is precisely how it works: as soon as one begins to question, descent stops. We may remain at that point of reconsideration, neither descending nor returning. This is what happened to the sons of Korach at first, according to this midrash.

How familiar! Some of us have been stuck at that spot for years, the point at which we have not decided where we are headed, we have not committed ourselves one way or another. We are as if suspended between heaven and earth.

But Korach's sons were not idle. Like their dad, they were Levites, hence made from greatness. While their father's greatness lead him astray, dragging him down to Sheol, their greatness lifted them to the heavens. What did they do? They began to sing songs of ascent! They sang songs of praise, songs affirming life. Their singing was glorious, and with each song they ascended another rung of the ladder until they were back in the world.

Even then they didn't stop singing; they continued until they and their descendant – Shmuel the prophet, no less! - earned the honor of anointing King David. Indeed, it was their great great grandson, who anointed the Psalmer himself.

How wonderful it is that it is always possible to reconsider, and that the process can start with a simple thought.

How right it is that one's place on the slippery slope is a function of awakening from illusions of power.

How inspiring it is to know that it is always possible not only to climb back up, but even to rise to new heights.

How important it is to remember that songs of praise have the ability to raise us up – not for premeditated gain, but for sincere intent, for the sake of heaven.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha