

Korach

By Masorti Judaism

By Sara Levan

For years I have used Korach in my leadership training repertoire – using the story in this week’s sedra as a way in to talk about issues related to leadership, democracy, challenge and dissent. He’s a ‘winner’ – in the sense that I know there will always be a lively discussion around who is at fault, how conflicts bubble up and how they can be resolved. Korach helps us think about authority and feedback, how groups behave and about hidden and unconscious motivations. All of which I was happy to discuss here when I volunteered to write about Korach, until I went back to the text to start writing. The words of the Talmudic sage Ben Bag-Bag in Pirkei Avot could not have rung truer; *turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it. Don’t turn from it, for nothing is better than it.*

Looking again at the text in June 2020 I am struck by the bit of the story I don’t usually get to in my leadership sessions. After the ground swallows up Korach, Datan and Abiram and their households a fire consumes the 250 of their followers who had lit an incense offering. The rest of the Bnei Yisrael turn on Aaron and Moses and blame them for these shocking and violent deaths. They in turn are punished by God with a plague that sweeps through the congregation. Of course reading this in the current climate brings it to life. The fear, uncertainty, grief and sense of unjustness jump off the page at me. Suddenly I know first hand what it is to be caught up in a plague, to have everything I know be pulled out from under me at a moment’s notice. To have no real understanding of where this has come from or what will happen next. What a punishment. For those afflicted by the plague as well as those condemned to witness it. I wonder how many of them would have felt envious of Korach’s summary execution.

At this point, Moses sends Aaron in to the camp to make amends with God on the people’s behalf with a new offering. And I come across a verse that makes me stop in my tracks.

וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין-הַמֵּתִים יִם וּבֵין הַחַיִּים וַתֵּעָצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה:

...he stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked. (Bemidbar 17:13)

Rashi gives us a vivid image of Aaron literally seizing the Angel of Death and stopping him in his tracks, but the Sforno suggests that he went into the camp to help cure those who had taken sick but had not yet died.

Here I see a completely different kind of leadership. I see the selfless, compassionate and brave compulsion to walk towards the suffering. It must take a complete suppression of all one's natural instincts to hold the hands of the dying, knowing that may well, at some point, compromise your own life. I can't imagine what it takes to separate yourself from your own family in order to protect them from what you expose yourself to every day, and to know that even if your physical health survives, the mental toll will never go away. *He stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked*, has gone from a barely noticed pasuk for me, to a statement of such profound compassionate leadership that I know I will never teach this story in the same way again. Aaron and Moses certainly have their flaws, but we also see here the kind of deep and true heroism which underpins what a truly holy society must hold dear and must follow after.

Dedicated to all of our doctors, nurses, careworkers and health support staff and their families.

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