

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Korach 5774

Living the Dream; Ignoring Reality

Opportunism, demagoguery, manipulation, jealousy, conniving, self-destruction: These are just some of the words that come to mind when considering Korach and his rebellion.

Moshe's leadership was challenged many times, both before and after the Exodus from Egypt. Usually, these attacks arose in times of crisis; scarcity of resources has a way of bringing out the worst in people. Whether it was a shortage of straw for making bricks in Egypt, bread or water in the desert, or

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meat instead of manna, each time the people felt vulnerable they lashed out at God and Moshe for the "foolhardy" plan of taking a nation of "content" slaves into the treacherous, unforgiving desert.

The crisis that immediately preceded Korach's rebellion, the sin of the spies, differed in both texture and result. Convinced by the spies that conquest of the Land of Israel was beyond their capabilities, the people panicked. They were terrified that they would soon be utterly decimated on the battlefield, and vented their desperation by verbally attacking God, and physically threatening Moshe and Aharon. Their punishment was meted out swiftly: The leaders who had fomented the panic died immediately, and the followers – those who allowed themselves to disregard the miraculous nature of their sustenance and guidance in the desert, those who abandoned their faith in God and His most faithful servant - received a death sentence.

The punishment for the sin of the spies caused a tectonic shift: For the entire generation of adults who had marched out of Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai, The Promised Land would remain an unfulfilled promise. A new type of despair hovered over the camp, and, for a certain type of twisted mind, the time seemed ripe for challenging Moshe's leadership. Logically, the preceding chapters should have made it abundantly clear that Moshe was the leader: divinely appointed, and unparalleled in his relationship with God and the protection he enjoyed because of that relationship. Any rational person, no matter how jealous of Moshe's status, should have seen that attacking Moshe would be foolhardy and futile. And yet, people often behave illogically. Human beings have the capacity, even the tendency, to ignore what is best for themselves and their families, and instead opt to be captivated by fantasies. Pleasant daydreams are often more compelling than stark reality.

Korach suffered from delusions of grandeur. He saw himself, and not Moshe, as the one deserving the adulation of the crowds. Under the sway of his own visions of self-importance and over-estimation of his own capabilities, he interpreted the events recounted in the previous chapters as indications of Moshe's failure as a leader, and he seized the opportunity presented by the despair that had made inroads into the camp. Surely, Korach was talented. His oratorical skills are obvious, particularly his ability to rally the crowd behind a wonderful, compelling slogan: "All the people are holy." His following grew with each new

sound bite. He appealed to the disgruntled and disenfranchised, and created a confederacy of malcontents to launch a challenge against Moshe's leadership.

There was, however, a path not taken - a path that would have led to glory instead of infamy. No matter what problems, real or imagined, Korach perceived in the camp, rather than exploiting these problems to catapult himself to leadership, Korach could have taken the path chosen by Yitro. When Moshe's

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father-in-law Yitro arrived at the Israelites' encampment, he immediately identified what he saw as a very serious problem: Every question, every dispute, big or small, landed at the door of Moshe's tent. Yitro, who knew a thing or two about being a religious leader, advised Moshe to delegate authority in order to release the bottleneck that threatened to frustrate the people and exhaust Moshe's personal capabilities. Yitro did not attempt to exploit the situation for his own purposes, nor was his advice offered in order to feed his own ego. He offered constructive criticism and practical suggestions, and Moshe accepted Yitro's advice in the spirit in which it was offered, implementing Yitro's plan to lead the people more effectively and efficiently. Perhaps this is the reason that one of the most famous portions of the Torah is named for Yitro, and he is remembered until this day in a positive light.

Korach, on the other hand, used his considerable talents to attack and weaken Moshe. He, like Yitro, was related to Moshe; Korach was Moshe's cousin. But rather than offering a helping hand, he waged an attack. Instead of support, Korach offered slogans; instead of taking a hard look at reality, Korach embraced his own beautiful daydream of status, adulation, power – a pipe dream that ended in his own death and the deaths of those whom he manipulated and led astray.

Korach, like Yitro, is immortalized in a parasha that bears his name, but the story this parasha tells is a cautionary tale of an opportunistic demagogue who manipulates his unsuspecting followers with conniving and ultimately self-destructive words. We can only imagine what a positive impact he could have had on the Jewish People had he chosen the other path, using his strength to build and bolster Moshe's leadership and create a better reality for his people, rather than to chase his own destructive fantasies.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-korach.html>