

Davar Torah Korach – July 2, 2022

By Barry Bergman

Shabbat Shalom. My name is Barry Bergman

In this week's parsha the Israelites are tired of the hardship and despair from too much time spent wandering through the desert. There is a man who understands the concerns of the Israelites and gives voice to their needs. Along with his followers, Dathan and Aviram, he gives the Israelites hope that things can be better. This man is Korach.

Korach along with Dathan and Aviram pull together 250 prominent Israelites to take their message to Moses and Aaron saying "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above the Lord's congregation?"

Korach's message is clear. No one man is more holy than another. Certainly 250 prominent members of the community agree with him. In parsha T'Tzavveh God designates Aaron and his sons as priests but to Korach and his followers this designation is no longer relevant. The community has been through too much suffering and misery since leaving Egypt. Why should Moses and Aaron still be leading the Israelites? Why are the Israelites still trekking through the desert?

Dathan and Aviram say "Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would set yourself as a despot over us?"

Moses tries to take on this challenge. He arranges that Korach along with his 250 followers and Aaron bring fire pans and incense to the Tent of Meeting to determine who God believes should be their rightful leader. God appears and the earth swallows up Korach, Dathan and Aviram along with their families. Fire consumes the 250 followers of Korach. The next day the community rails "against Moses and Aaron saying 'You two have brought death upon the Lord's people'".

A cloud appears and a plague ensues killing 14,700 Israelites. This death and destruction ends any hope for change and puts an end to the principle that one man is no more holy than the next; the principle that all men are created equal.

You could say that Moses and Aaron are complicit in the murder of thousands of Israelites. You could argue that they have abused their power as leaders.

The rabbis don't see things this way. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that Moses tells Korach that he will wait until the next day to bring the test before God thereby giving Korach's followers a chance to back down. When God says that he will destroy Korach and his followers Moses and Aaron ask "When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?" Failing to convince God to spare Korach's followers Moses tells the community to stay away from the tents so they won't be hurt. Moses is trying to save lives. When the plague kills 14,700 Israelites Moses sends Aaron with a fire pan and incense into the crowd, which stops the plague. Despite their best efforts Moses and Aaron witness the deaths of thousands of Israelites. Were these deaths justified? Are Moses and Aaron still responsible?

What principles were Korach and his crowd really following?

The rabbis say Korach was actually a demagogue. The Etz Chaim chumash commentary says "Korach is the arch-demagogue, lusting for power to inflate his own prominence, not to serve the people." According to the Merriam Webster dictionary a demagogue is "a leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims and promises in order to gain power." Earlier we saw Korach ask "why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says "the form in which he posed the questions, as a spokesman for the interests of the community, was nothing but a sham and pretense." In the tradition of demagogues, Korach takes an issue and uses it only to benefit himself. At the Tent of Meeting Korach tries to gather the entire community to confront Moses. Rabbi Hirsch says "it must have been Korach's intention to impose his will by sheer force of numbers." Korach has a complaint that resonates with the Israelites but nothing else; no plans; no solutions. The only thing that is clear is that Korach wants power by removing Moses and Aaron from their leadership positions.

Demagogues are good at destroying institutions and the laws that provide for a cohesive society. In the case of the Israelites this cohesive society is needed to conquer the Promised Land. A stable society following the Ten Commandments is needed to prevent discord. God's mission was to deliver the Israelites to the

land he promised Abraham. Moses and Aaron carried out this mission. In this parsha God reaffirms his choice of Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelites.

Demagogues appeal directly to the emotions of the uninformed masses telling lies and exploiting crises. The same incitement that is used by demagogues to gain power today was used by Korach. He identifies Moses and Aaron as the scapegoats for the troubles of the Israelites yet provides no real solution for the difficulties they are facing. Instead, Korach provides an easy answer to the problems facing the Israelites; put himself in charge. Yet, in last week's parsha of Shelach Lecha, Caleb and Joshua put forward the real solution to these problems; which was to allow God to bring the Israelites into the Promised Land. Instead, the Israelites chose to listen to the other spies who pushed for no action; taking the easy way out.

By putting himself ahead of the community, Korach was about to destroy the fabric of society. Even after the demagogue is gone the followers remain carrying the misleading thoughts promoted by the demagogue. This was true for Korach's followers and explains the deaths of his 250 cohorts. But what about the other 14,700 Israelites killed by the plague? Sir Thomas More has said that silence is consent. The Israelites did not stand up to Korach. They did not question his plans for their future. They did not question his motives. By not questioning Korach they couldn't see the danger he posed by his attacks on Moses and Aaron. They couldn't see that Korach was leading this uprising for his own benefit or if they did see it, they kept silent. This is how demagogues have destroyed societies and brought misery to millions throughout history. These Israelites stood by and went with the flow, taking the easy way out. Even if they disagreed with Korach, they felt it wasn't worth the effort to challenge him. By not standing up to Korach they aided and abetted his attempted coup against Moses and Aaron.

Moses and Aaron were clearly selected by God to lead the Israelites. Yet, it took the deaths of thousands and the miracle of blossoms blooming from the staff of Aaron to prevent their overthrow. The lesson from Korach is that all of us need to be vigilant against the rise of demagogues. They can destroy a nation's institutions and its society. It is easy to find scapegoats for the problems in the world, but by us not standing up to demagogues we condemn our society to destruction.