



## **D'var Torah - Korah- Pride Shabbat – June 24, 2023**

**By Pam Adelstein**

My name is Pam Adelstein.

Who here in this room was rebellious as a child or teen, chafing at any limits imposed by authority figures? Who among us followed all the rules, afraid to get into trouble or be thought ill of?

Today I'm going to talk about rebellion. I am going to urge you to rebel – to find your 'why', where you can make a difference, whether it be big or small.

Let's look back to last week's parsha, Shlach L'kcha, as well as at today's parsha, Korah. Let's imagine we were among the people of Israel, with Moshe and Aaron. We just witnessed the stoning of a man to death for breaking G-d's commandment to observe Shabbat. We've been collectively sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, unable to enter the Promised Land. AND our children were similarly punished.

Due to all the complaining and mitzvah breaking, G-d was angry and consequently threatened to disown the Jewish people. With each challenging episode, Moshe and Aaron remained in dialogue with the Jewish people, acting as G-d's mouthpieces. After all this drama, Caleb was the only one in the group who was singled out and rewarded by G-d for his loyalty. This plot sounds like something out of The Godfather.

If I were there, I can imagine thinking, just as Korah did, why do Moshe and Aaron get to speak for G-d? And why is everyone being punished for the actions of a few?

Let's talk about who was Korah. He was a descendant of the oldest of Jacob's sons- Reuven, who slept with his father's concubine Bilhah. By sleeping with

Bilhah, Reuven challenged his father's authority and tried to seize additional power. Resentment of leadership may have been in Korah's blood as a descendant of Reuven. I can imagine Korah's urge to speak out and gather the Israelites as he did, so he could remind Moshe and Aaron that the Jewish people is holy, and G-d is in everyone's midst.

Korah possessed wealth and wits, was a Levite from a prestigious family and a first cousin to Moshe and Aaron. This gave him the privilege, clout, and ability to rebel.

Korah was jealous that Aaron solely had been chosen as High Priest. Perhaps Korah was upset about the choice of Aaron because Aaron led the effort to build the golden calf, but while everyone else involved was punished with death, Aaron wasn't. Aaron was also guilty of the same 'crime' of speaking against Moses as Miriam but, unlike her, was not cursed with leprosy and was not banished to outside the camp. Perhaps a resentment of Aaron based on these events was part of Korah's 'why' in his rebellion.

Korah rallied 250 community leaders to his cause. These leaders confronted Moses and Aaron, claiming that Moshe had appointed Aaron as High Priest on his own accord, without being instructed to do so by G-d. They demanded that they all be allowed to serve as High Priests.

In response the Torah states that Moshe's "fell on his face" – reflecting Moshe's hope that G-d would provide him with a response – which G-d did. G-d created a challenge: the next day, everyone should offer G-d fire and incense in firepans. G-d would accept the sacrifice of the one who was chosen as holy.

After relaying this, the Torah says that Moshe "further said" – perhaps indicating that these were his own words rather than G-d's– isn't it good enough that Korah has the privilege of Levite responsibilities? Now he wants priestly duties as well?? Sounds like our Passover seder Dayenu.

At the presentation of the fire and incense, the punishment for rebelling was revealed. Rather than quashing the rebellion by having the people die of ordinary means, Moshe invoked G-d in, as the Torah says, "creating a new creation"- which really is a destruction. The mouth of the earth opened to swallow Korah and his supporters alive – then the earth closed. The rebellious ones vanished into Sheol; only some charred remains hinted that they had ever existed on earth.

Why do we tell the story of Korah? Why is a Torah portion named after him? He is held out as the epitome of all quarrelers: his name conjures up disharmony and conflict. The Talmud even proclaims: "Anyone who engages in divisiveness transgresses a divine prohibition, as it is written: 'And he shall not be as Korah and his company.'"

But I ask you - was Korah all bad? Was he trying to demonstrate that absolute power corrupts? That people should not follow leaders blindly? That we need periodic leadership change to avoid stagnation?

Let's look at Korah's motives to help us decide whether he deserves this Talmudic reproach. Could Korah have been a champion of equality, railing against a "class system" that categorized levels of holiness within the community? Korah also contended, paradoxically, that *he* was the more worthy candidate for the High Priesthood. If Korah asserted everyone was equally holy, but then jockeyed for the role of the high priest in a power grab, we can conclude that Korah's motives for rebellion were selfish rather than pure – traits of an unsavory man.

While there may be a question as to whether Korah's rebellion merited his punishment, there are rebellions that are for the sake of heaven. I want to discuss next a rebellion for human dignity, equal rights, and equal treatment – the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York City.

In the 1960s, the Genovese crime family purchased the Stonewall Inn, cheaply renovated it, and reopened it as a gay bar. The Stonewall Inn was registered as a "bottle bar," which did not require a liquor license because patrons were supposed to bring their own liquor. The Genovese family bribed the Police to ignore activities occurring within the club. Corrupt cops also tipped off Mafia-run bars before raids occurred, allowing owners to stash alcohol (sold without a liquor license) and hide other illegal activities in return for payment.

Just after midnight on Friday June 28, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn and began making arrests. Patrons started to resist and push back. The mob of protestors outside the inn grew large and unruly. Because of the mob threat, police retreated into the inn and barricaded themselves inside. The mob tried to set the building on fire. More police officers arrived and began loading Stonewall employees and patrons in drag inside a van. The crowd grew rowdier after police roughed up a person dressed in drag, who had complained that their handcuffs were too tight. People yelled "Pigs!" and "Copper!" and threw pennies and

bottles at the officers. Protests drew large crowds and continued for several more days.

The Stonewall Inn was a vital LGBT institution. Drag queens, runaways, homeless LGBT youths and others viewed it as a haven. The violent attack on the inn was a breaking point for those looking to advance LGBT political activism.

On the one-year anniversary of the riots, thousands of people marched from the Stonewall Inn to Central Park in what was called “Christopher Street Liberation Day,” America’s first gay pride parade. Soon activists proposed an annual march on the last Saturday in June.

Inspired by New York’s example, activists in other American cities organized gay pride celebrations. This inspired gay rights movements in many countries around the world. Fifty years after the riots, the NYPD made a formal apology, stating “The actions taken by the N.Y.P.D. were wrong — plain and simple.”

So far in this drash we have examined Korah’s rebellion – seemingly reasonable on the surface but born of selfish desire - and the Stonewall Rebellion – local actions that sparked a worldwide movement for gay rights and freedoms. Now let’s turn the discussion to us.

It is our turn to think about OUR rebellion this June Shabbat of Pride Month. Why should we rebel? Because In 2023, anti-trans bills continue to be introduced across the country. This legislation seeks to block trans people from receiving basic healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist. That is a lot of effort to REMOVE people’s human rights- effort that could be better put into SECURING human rights.

In 2023, 82 anti-trans bills have passed out of 558 proposed across the country, and 77 have been signed into law. This number tragically continues to grow and reminds us that there can be no health without respect for the dignity and basic rights of all people.

And so, I challenge each of us in this room – what is your personal rebellion? What is your ‘why’? How will you take action? The LGBTQ Jewish organization Keshet defines allyship in part as using one’s own power to work with people who

hold a marginalized identity to increase safety, dignity, and belonging for *them*. An ally's goal of using their power is to make things better for someone else.

One small yet rebellious act that Minyan Ma'or has undertaken is the recent change in language calling people up for aliyot. We now use gender inclusive, as opposed to gendered Hebrew. As a community we have decided that altering the tradition is more important than preserving the comfortable, usual version. It's not at the level of "burn it all down" but it is an action, and it may upset or confuse some people. But it's important. And it's more than merely saying, "All people here are loved and welcome." Our goals in rebellion - even quiet rebellion - should be actions rather than just being open in our hearts.

For me, my 'why' is – having many dear LGBTQIA+ people in my life, I cannot sit on the sidelines and wait for someone else to do the work. I bought pronoun and rainbow stickers to put on our permanent name tags at our minyan – small but important signs that we are a welcoming and affirming community. I now work at Fenway Health, a community health center that centers its mission around the LGBTQIA+ and BiPOC populations, so that I can work directly to help provide a safe affirming space for health care.

Shifting the trajectory of society and the world towards being a place where everyone is safe and has dignity is a daunting task. Yet we must try – because collectively our small individual actions become big. We ALL can make a difference. Together.

I'll conclude with an abbreviated version of a prayer for Pride month, written by Rabbi Lily Solocheck:

May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors,

God of Ruth and Naomi, God of David and Jonathan, God of Joseph,

God of all our queer ancestors whose names have been erased,

grant that this Pride month bring us joy and celebration, and bestow upon us a long life:

a life of safety, a life of healing... a life of love and support... a life of friendship, partnership, and love in the ways we wish to give and receive it, a life with dreams of the future.

May the One who delivered our ancestors from oppression to freedom, redeem us and all marginalized peoples.

May the Holy One instill in us the wisdom to know our liberations are entwined together.

May the One who creates liberation on high, bring liberation to us, to all oppressed communities, and to the entire world,

*V'nomar, and we say, Amein.*

Shabbat shalom.