SHABBAT KORACH: LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC CANADA
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"You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Eternal is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Eternal's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3)

Thus says Korach – the instigator of a great rebellion against Moses in this morning's Torah portion. And so, begins one of the most problematic episodes in a Torah filled with problematic episodes.

Korach challenges Moses' authority. Moses demurs and says I am only doing what God asked me to do. If you want to be the leader then let's put it before God and see who God chooses.

The next day God makes God's choice and kills Korach and his followers with an earthquake and a plague.

Pretty much the fantasy of every extremist opposition party or movement on the planet. If only the [fill in the blank] would be wiped off the face of the earth, then we could have the country we want. Or as I explain to my wedding couples when doing pre-marital counselling, relationships would be so much easier if they didn't involve other people.

But of course, they do, and only in the Torah or in horribly totalitarian regimes do those who disagree with you get wiped off the face of the earth by divine fiat.

I would say, "Thank God" but that obscures who does the wiping in this instance.

And so, the question: What did Korach do that was so wrong that it deserved that he and all his followers be killed?

My short answer is they shouldn't have been killed for their rebellion; at least not by divine hand.

But let's go back to the question, what was so bad about what Korach did?

[On the eve of the revelation at Mount Sinai, God calls to Moses and tells him to inform the people of Israel:] "You shall be to **Me** a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:6)

Korah's tragic error, according to Martin Buber, was to misread the verse in Exodus 19. Korah reads the verse as descriptive: the people are already holy, each one, and the presence of God is within each one. They therefore have no need of instruction, authority, or further spiritual growth.

Martin Buber writes:

"Both Moses and Korah desired the people to be the people of YHVH, a holy people. But for Moses this was the goal. In order to reach it, generation after generation had to chose again and again . . . . For Korah the people, as being the people of YHVH, ***were already holy.*** *They had been chosen by God and [God] dwelled in their midst, so why should there be further need of ways and choice? The people was holy just as it was, and all those within it were holy just as they were" (Martin Buber, Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant [New York: Harper & Row, 1958], p. 189).*

What Korach is advocating is rights and privileges based on privilege. The privilege of being born to a certain people. Call it Holy Privilege.

Because of what his ancestors did in their time, because of how they acted with God through covenantal relationship Korach argues that the holiness is passed down *L'dor v'Dor* – from generation to generation without having to do what those before them had done to earn such privilege.

There are obvious correlations for us today, indeed I cannot read Torah this morning and ignore the lessons of Korach:

- One with regard to White Privilege and how it contributes to systemic racism.
- Another concerning American Exceptionalism – which posits that America is great or will be great again through divine right not the hard-incremental work of continually renewing democracy and the social contract.
    - This is most frustratingly self-evident in the contrast between how Canada and the United States have approached the containment of the Corona Virus and public health in general. But there re many examples

What is lacking in Korach and in the United States today is humility. A self-awareness that you don't have all the answers; that we always have something to learn and to quote the passage from Mishnah that is on the *attarah* (the collar) of my synagogue tallit, *az hu chacham, halomed me kola dam*, who is wise the one (or the nation) that learns from all people.

Moses had humility – for him being the leader of the people was not a privilege, it was a sacred responsibility to God and to the people he led to get it right. It was not about him it was about us. Moses responds to Korach. 'Maybe you're right and you should be the leader, I am just doing what God told me to do, let's ask God and see who God wants?'

It is there that God should have made God's choice known and let the people work out the details.

But God responds with rage and anger. Very human emotions, dangerous in the hands of an omnipotent deity. The line from Spiderman would have been helpful here, "With great power comes great responsibility."

But I think God misreads the moment and what is required.

The conflict between Moses and Korach was not one of personality or the centralization of spiritual authority: rather, it was the inability of Korach to imagine that he (and the community) still needed to spiritually grow for, as Buber also taught "not being but becoming is [our] task . . . . " and although the "realization of the divine on earth. . . has its beginning in the life of [the] individual, it is consummated only in the life of true community" (The Way of Response, p. 162)

The story of Jewish peoplehood has always been complicated by two different stories, the Covenant of Being and the Covenant of Becoming. In the Covenant of Being which is Korach perspective, Jews are defined by who we are, and not by what we do. In this ethnic, familial identity, Jewishness is permanent and unconditional.

The second is the story of our Covenant of Becoming, which classifies Jewishness in opposite terms, as a people whose identity is expressed precisely in terms of what we do and what we believe, a people who aspire to live a life of meaning and greatness. This is Moses' approach – yes we are 'God's Chosen People" but that only gets you a ticket for entry, once inside the covenant you have to earn that designation through deeds; holy acts.

The question always comes up when reading this parasha, why did God choose to kill Korach and his followers rather than tolerate difference in the community?

And here I think is an example of where the Torah teaches us the danger of fanaticism, not on the side of Korach but as concerning the actions attributed to God.

Korach should not have died for his sin of hubris and egotism; rather the story would have been even more powerful if he and his decedents were still in the picture for the next 40 years of wandering in the desert.

Not only powerful but more realistic.

Because as we see today those that express indignance do not get swallowed up by the earth as happens in the biblical story. They stick around, their grievances when not addressed fester and grow and ultimately boil over. You can't push them out you have to deal with them and find a way to live together. Its true in Canada, its true between left and right, black and white, Red and Blue in the US and all over the world. Its true in Israel as the Netanyahu Government move closer toward annexation of the West Bank.

In Judaism the Covenant of Being which was Korach's position ultimately obligates tolerance and acceptance of others. In the Covenant of Being, regardless of who you are as a person, and what you do, your Jewishness is maintained. Jewishness is larger and broader than simply a system of faith, belief and actions. There are no good Jews or bad Jews.

Everyone is equal with a guaranteed place at the Jewish people's table. Jewish identity is permanent and unconditional and there is nothing any individual can do to alter one's membership status. This applies not only to those born into the family, but to converts as well. Once a Jew – even if only for a minute – always a Jew. The Talmud formulates this idea of Jewishness as "beingness" through the pronouncement: "Even though they have sinned, they are still Israel." (Sanhedrin 44a)

Since all Jews remain members in full standing regardless of what they do or believe, we are obligated to live with difference; to accommodate difference as an expression of our commitment to the Covenant.

Both God and Moses missed that. In many ways Korach even though his motivations were self-serving saw the challenge in a Judaism of Being. I'm here, I have my views and you have to deal with them, you cannot silence me and still be holy.

In the Covenant of Becoming, the position of Moses; Jews are defined by what they do. In this mission-based, aspirational Jewishness, identity is shaped around shared beliefs and practices.

It is in the response to this calling that Jewish identity is endowed with purpose and is transformed from an accident or privilege of birth into a choice and a mission to create a life of value and a just society.

You are not born great or privileged, you are born *k'dai*, you are born worthy, everyone is – BUT you have to earn holiness. The Covenant of Becoming expects of the Jewish people excellence, nothing short of the emulation of God. "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19)

The insight our Torah gives us this morning is not that those who espouse privilege and exceptionalism by right of birth should be cast out from the community, while people may be removed those ways of thinking will remain and the seeds planted will grow. Rather Korach and his followers needed to be heard, the community must address their perspective though dialogue, shared learning and compromise.

We work tirelessly to address these differences through peaceful means and shared values but sometimes there is protest, sometimes there's conflict and even violence as human beings try to resolve what we cannot agree on. But when the shouting and fighting is over, there must be reconciliation. We have to learn to live with difference it's an essential part of what it means to be holy.

We need both stories of the Jewish people Being and Becoming, we need Korach and Moses – and honestly God should stay out of it.