Korach Part 1 – When do you excise a cancer?
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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I have shared with you many times a point of view that some might not agree with – now you're all thinking of a different example of that. That's kinda funny just in the abstract; a whole room thinking about what they disagree with their rabbi about and you are all thinking of different things, such is the way of Jewish life.

But in this instance I am referring to my opinion, based on study and a healthy degree of scepticism that the Torah is not a history book, in such that we can be absolutely certain that the stories it contains happened just as they are written, every word and event happening in sequence, exactly as described.

In my view Torah is foundational stories, legend and folktale written by human beings who sourced their blessings and their curses to an all knowing, all powerful omnipotent God. This God who had wrought miracles of deliverance at times of great suffering was to be honoured and revered by living lives of appreciation for all that God created, by treating with kindness those who were kind, compassion for those that were suffering, and fiercely defending justice and righteousness against those what sought to trample upon in by their treatment of others or the natural world.

There is more too it of course as Hillel said to his student, all the rest if commentary, go and study it. But in a paragraph that's my view of the place Torah occupies in Jewish theology. Essential truths, written by human beings attempting as best they could to express our divine purpose as human beings created in the image of God.

So, we come to this week's Torah portion, Korach, perhaps one of the most relatable, relevant and challenging in the whole torah. I am aware I have said that too about many other stories in the torah as well. The torah never changes, the text is fixed but we change as sometimes a story speaks more profoundly to us as we are now, than we were then.

Tonight's sermon is in two parts, tomorrow we will wrestle with and even debate whether we think Korach was justified in his charge against Moses, and if so justified if the divine punishment, the death of Korach and his 250 followers fit the crime.

Tonight – I want to set the scene and unpack the story, again not as a student of history, but as a student of human character, leadership and group dynamics. It doesn't matter if this really happened then, the story is so on point that as we will soon realize, what our torah describes happens if not back then, then now, and it happens all the time. We hear echoes of it every day.

Borrowing from my colleague Rabbi Josh Weinberg for his summary is more succinct than mine, for which we should all thank him.

“In Parashat Korach, Moses’ leadership is challenged by Korach and his supporters Korach was no ordinary rabble-rouser. He was a leading member of Kehatites, the most prestigious of the Levite families. Joining him in his mutiny against Moses and Aaron were "two hundred and fifty men of Israel, leaders of the community, of those regularly called to assembly, men of renown." Korach's difference with Moses was an ideological one, driven by the way in which he understood Israel's relationship with G-d and by the manner in which he felt the nation ought to be structured and led. He directly challenged Moses’ leadership of the people and his ultimate authority.

We might all agree that challenging leadership is inherently a good thing – especially when the leader appears incompetent or unjust. At face value, Korach’s accusation against Moses and Aaron should be seen as a worthy תוכחה, a redeemable rebuke to their leadership, if we accept his reasons as legitimate for doing so.

Korach declares in the sight of Moses, Aaron and the whole assembly of Israelites “You have gone too far! For all the community is holy, all of them, and יהוה is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above יהוה’s congregation?” (Numbers 16:3).

In reaction, Moses, who, by his own admission, is not a willing nor probably a charismatic leader, “fell on his face,” most likely from shame, as the commentators teach us. Moses has a pattern of not defending himself in circumstances such as these. In Numbers 12:1, Moshe allows God to defend him when Aharon and Miriam complain about his Kushite wife, but he does not defend himself. Later when Moses is punished for hitting the rock and calling the Israelites rebels; Moses accepts the punishment, to be barred from entering the land of Israel without protest or complaint. For sure there are many times that Moses defends the Israelite people, most notably during the Golden Calf incident when God wants to destroy them and give Moses a different group to lead. Moses beseeches God not to do it, “think of what the other nations will say of you [God] that you led this people out of bondage only to destroy them when they got scared, don’t do it.” But he does not defend himself against accusation. Here Korach utters a challenge and Moshe "flung himself on his face."

The next day Moses tells the people that God will decide who the leaders will be. He assembles Korach’s followers and, as an ultimate Divine rebuke against them, the earth opens and swallows all 250 of them including all of their earthly belongings.

The Rabbis of the midrash wish to understand why the Korach rebellion happens now. It is especially odd given that the parsha preceding the Korach incident is the parsha which explains the mitzvah of tzitzit, or the ritual fringes one places on a four cornered garment.

The Torah explains at the end of the last parsha, that one of the strings has to be dyed with tchelet, an azure color which was essential to the mitzvah. According to the midrash Korach

used this mitzvah as a pretext for challenging Moshe, that's why this chapter immediately precedes the Korach rebellion.

The Midrash, as story about the larger story of the Korach rebellion, also for me and most Jewish scholars in the category of folklore and legend not fact asks:

What is written immediately before this incident? "Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to make tzitzit," Korach jumped up and said to Moshe. "You told us to put tchelet on the tzitzit, tell me if the garment is entirely made up of tchelet, would such a garment require tzitzit." Moses replied, "Yes it would require tzitzit." Korach answered, "You mean that four strings of tchelet can allow you to wear another garment, but a garment made of tchelet cannot be exempted from this restriction?"

Korach asked, "What about a house filled with Torahs does it require a mezuza or not?" Moses answered, "It requires a mezuza." Korach replied, "You mean four little portions of parchment allow someone to live in their house, but a house filled with books still requires these four pieces of parchment?" (Tanchuma Korach Chapter 2)

A later teaching informs how we should judge Korach's challenging questions of Moses' understanding of Torah.

"Any dispute where the disputants are arguing toward the name of heaven, these are the disputes that will endure. Any dispute where the disputants are not arguing toward the name of heaven, these disputes will not endure. What is an example of a dispute where the disputants argue toward the name of heaven? Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of disputes where the disputants do not argue toward the name of heaven? Korach and his minions."

In the Talmudic tradition an enduring position in an argument is one that continues to be studied and continues to have adherents. It is a position which remains part of the conversation. Rabbi Avi Weinstein, the Head of Jewish studies at the Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy in Kansas City, Kansas – yes there are Jews in Kansas Dorothy said to her dog Toto – Rabbi Weinstein writes that, "Korach is not interested in tzitzit or tchelet. He is only interested in using the Torah as a pretext for challenging Moshe's authority. His real point is four strings of tchelet are no better than a whole garment of tchelet. We are a holy people, each of us a holy string, each of us capable of hearing the word of God. The rabbis use the analogy of tzitzit and tchelet to show how Korach used the Torah as a means for rebellion, and indeed that is how Korach got two hundred and fifty chieftains to go along.

What characterizes a dispute toward the name of heaven is not good manners, but intention. It is Korach's ulterior motive behind the challenge that the Torah and the rabbis find so insidious. This ultimately is why God destroys him and his followers, for the hubris of such a line of questioning and for the danger the continued promulgation of such a way of using Torah will do to the people and their relationship with God. Korach and his followers we can decern are, in

the view of God, a dangerous cancer amongst the community and it must be excised before the infection spreads and the body as a whole is corrupted from within.

No matter your politics – we can see the relevance of this story and the moral dilemmas it exposes in our own society and around the world today.

Pick a headline from reproductive rights, mask mandates and lock downs, to insurrections, climate change, even the economics of the root causes and possible solutions to inflation and recession. When you deem something so dangerous, so insidious that like in Harry Potter, “we dare not speak its name” you exhort enormous power over the lives and opinions of others. If you’re right you are a hero that perhaps saves a nation, the planet from impending doom. But if you are wrong, in curtailing, not just curtailing but eradicating specific views, speech and opinions that you deem a threat to a free society, you may in fact be the very threat to the free society you righteously/self-righteously endeavor to protect and defend.

To quote many a Facebook status when describing one’s personal and romantic relationships, “its complicated”

Come back to tomorrow and we will discuss and then debate just how complicated it is and whether Moses, Korach, God did the right thing. Services start at 10am our discussion around 11am – I hope you’ll join us online or in person.