

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Korach

Before we discuss this week's parsha, let's return for a moment to last week's. In parshat Sh'lach we had the episode of the spies. Twelve Jewish leaders went undercover to spy on the fortifications and armies of the land of Israel. The scouts returned with tales of mighty giants and convinced the Jews that Israel was impenetrable. This amounted to blasphemy, for G-d Himself had promised Israel to the Jews. But the people believed the spies and even considered returning to Egypt. Apparently, the Jews had more faith in their leaders than they had in G-d. For this sin, G-d condemned the people to a life of aimless desert wandering, and only after that entire generation died out would their children enter the Holy Land.

This story carries a powerful and relevant message: We are not to follow anybody like blind sheep, no matter how charismatic they may be. We are held accountable for whom we choose to follow, and our behavior cannot be justified with the excuse that our leaders have led us astray. When a leader lacks faith, it's time for impeachment. We must hold our leaders to the highest standards. No leader is above our scrutiny.

If last week's parsha encourages us to continuously evaluate the powers that be, this week's parsha draws the line between constructive criticism and subversive opposition. This week we have the tragedy of Moshe's own cousin Korach, a widely respected sage who fearlessly challenges the authority of the establishment. Korach accused Moshe and Aaron of abusing the privileges of power, but his accusations were not intellectually honest. He wasn't really interested in improving government or society; he just desired the mantle of leadership for himself.

Korach and his followers confronted Moshe and Aaron and declared, "[You have taken] too much for yourself! All the people in the community are holy, and G-d is with them. Why are you setting yourselves above G-d's congregation?" (Bamidbar 16:3). Korach was claiming that the people were so holy and perfect, there was no need for government at all. On the surface, his questioning sounds innocent enough, but it was not answers that he was after. His only intent was to create social unrest and undermine the leadership of Moshe and Aaron. Moshe saw right through his political maneuvering and didn't even bother to respond. He just went straight to the point, "Please listen, you sons of Levi. Isn't it enough that the G-d of Israel has separated you from the community of Israel? He has brought you close to Him, allowing you to serve in G-d's Tabernacle and to minister as the community's leaders. Although He gave this privilege to you and all of your fellow Levites, you are now also demanding the priesthood!"



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

It is actually against G-d that you and your group are demonstrating!” (16:8-11).

The Midrash tells us that Korach’s discontent began when he was passed up for the position of paternal leader of the Kehothite family. Moshe gave this honor to a younger cousin named Eltzafan the son of Uzziel (3:30). Korach was so confident that he was the right man for the job, he just couldn’t accept that Moshe was following G-d’s directions when he appointed Eltzafan (Tanchuma 1). It was this lapse of faith that ultimately led to Korach’s downfall. Once he began to question Moshe’s authority to appoint leaders, it didn’t take long for him to doubt Moshe’s prophecy altogether. One thing led to the next, and eventually Korach was mocking certain mitzvot and denying their divine origin (Tanchuma Yashan 5). He claimed that Moshe invented them for his own purposes. Korach slid down the slippery slope of heresy, and it all began with a common character flaw, an ego problem. He had an obsessive need for a position of honor and a deep-seated belief that it was coming to him. It stands to reason that it was this very attitude that disqualified him from the position in the first place. As we know, the prototypical Jewish leader is Moshe, the most unassuming of all men (12:3).

G-d was not amused by the rebellion of Korach and his followers, for at its core their uprising had no real platform. Korach was driven by no agenda other than his own personal quest for power and fame. We are indeed obligated to hold our leaders to the highest standards, but at the same time we need to be honest with ourselves. What is the motivation behind our criticisms? Are we truly concerned for the welfare of the people, or do we criticize because we are jealous and bitter?

Whether or not Korach was even conscious of his own inner jealousies and ambitions is debatable, but from the start he was doomed to fail. Every reader of the parsha immediately recognizes Korach’s foolishness. You watch helplessly as Korach marches inexorably towards his tragic doom. It makes you want to scream out from across the millennia, ‘Don’t go there!’ But Korach keeps going. Everyone but Korach can see where he is headed. This is a classic example of the power of jealousy and honor to blind and misguide even the wisest of men. Unfortunately, we hardly need early examples. We have plenty of contemporary ones.

Shabbat Shalom!

