

Korah 5773: Speak Up

Rabbi Michael Safra

Shabbat shalom. I want to deliver the sermon this morning about the importance of speaking up, about having difficult conversations even if our instincts tell us that certain matters don't need to be discussed in public.

I have to admit that I thought twice or maybe three times about delivering this message, particularly at a bat mitzvah, in front of Hayley's friends and guests. There are some conversations that make us uncomfortable – and I certainly don't want to detract from the joys and celebrations of this Shabbat. But then I realized that that is precisely the point. There are some topics that we have to speak about more, not less. There are instances when being silent causes more harm than good.

It's a little ironic to offer this message on Shabbat Korah because it appears that Korah's problem was that he talked too much. But I turn to a midrashic account of Korah's interaction with Moses.

It seems that Korah tried to get under Moses's skin and make him look bad by contesting the commandments. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg imagines Korah questioning Moses about a verse in Proverbs: "אל תגזל דל כי דל הוא", You shall not steal from the poor because he is poor." "Who would ever think of stealing from the poor?" he asked. "They don't have anything!" In response, Moses answered that one can steal not only by *taking* something away; one can steal also by *failing to give*. When one fails to give *tzedakkah*, when one takes from the corners of the field that were supposed to be set aside, then one is *stealing* from the poor.

Sometimes we steal by failing to give. And I want to extend the concept to the ethics of speech. Sometimes it is not just what we say that can cause harm. Sometimes we do harm with what we fail to say. The fact that certain subjects or conversations might be difficult does not lessen the need to have them.

The obvious example might be non-Jews who lived in Germany and Poland during the time of the Holocaust, some of whom lived in close proximity to the camps. History has not been kind to the argument that they are innocent because it was the Nazis and not they who perpetrated evil against the Jews. We know that they should have spoken out. To paraphrase the Rabbis, silence too easily becomes complicity.

A more banal example, but one that in some ways hits closer to home. In a few weeks, we are going to be sending our daughter away to summer camp for the first time. She is nine years old but you never know what might happen, so my wife suggested that it is time for us to have The Talk. Okay, I can clarify, it is time for my wife to have The Talk about her body. My first reaction was, "Oh no. Maybe this

can be put off.” There are certain subjects that people just don’t want to talk about. Maybe there is an alternative.

But of course I realized that it is an important discussion. We might feel squeamish, but that is, in a lot of ways, our problem. These are things our kids eventually need to learn. And they need to know that if they have questions or if they’re embarrassed about something, they can come to us and we will be available and honest and loving in those situations as we are with everything else.

Over the years, some of the most popular workshops I have offered to parents have been on answering difficult questions our kids ask – particularly about death or God. The sessions are easily summarized:

- First of all, don’t sugarcoat anything. Young children don’t understand euphemisms, as I learned the time the batteries in our flashlight “passed away”. My daughter opined, “The batteries are dead. Does that mean they’re with Aunt Rhoda?”
- And second, it is important that you come to grips with what you believe about these subjects. The reason it is hard to talk to children is not because these subjects are inherently complicated. It’s because we don’t know what we believe, and so we don’t know what to say. But we have to say something.

Perhaps the most difficult example is dealing with mental illness. I learned a horrifying statistic this week, that more people in this country die of suicide than in car accidents.

And yet we don’t want to talk about it. We don’t want to stigmatize. We don’t want to give people ideas. We don’t want to talk about mental illness in general. But these are serious matters. But it’s time that we did.

I had lunch with some B’nai Israel students at Churchill High School this week as they were getting ready for exams. I listened more than I talked, but I offered two messages, which I hope you will offer to your children as well (and I can say to the children who are here and about to finish their school year):

- The first is that stress is a real thing; anxiety or depression is a real thing; mental illness is not just having a bad day; it’s an illness.
- And second, if you feel that something is not right, if your friend tells you that something is not right, it is okay ... no, it is obligatory to speak up. If you can’t talk to a teacher, then speak to a guidance counselor. If not to the counselor then to your rabbi. Or to a parent. And if you can’t approach one of these people you need to find another adult because being silent, keeping such a secret is not helping anyone. As Moses taught Korah, failure to act is a kind of action. Silence can lead to complicity.

I serve on the board of the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, an organization that exists to help the community talk about a difficult issue. We wish abuse didn't happen in our community, but we know that is not true.

We know how important advance directives are, thinking about how we want to be treated in the unfortunate event that should never happen that we cannot speak for ourselves, and to make our wishes known.

Or in a different vein, how many people do we know who go to work and come home and go back again and never say to the people closest to them, "I love you." That's stealing.

Yesterday the head of our Federation, Steve Rakitt, offered another take on Korah in his weekly email. The trouble was not just that Korah rebelled against Moses and Aaron's authority. Equally troubling was the reaction of the people. The Torah doesn't say that they supported Korah, but it doesn't say that they opposed him either. They didn't speak up as the rebellion continued to mount, and that is very troubling.

We often quote the famous teaching of Shamai, "Say little and do much." But today I want to suggest that he might have only been half right. It is important to do much. But in many situations, it is also important to speak. In the days and weeks ahead, I pray that we may gather the courage to talk, to sit with loved ones for some of those difficult conversations in order to promote safety, health, and blessing in our homes, in our communities, and in our world. Shabbat Shalom.