

You *Shall Be Holy* – Parashat Korah

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*Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way.*

There is something unsettling about the exchange between Korah and Moses in today's Torah reading. The narrative is built on a polarity. Either Korah is right or Moses is right; either On and the Reubenites are right or Aaron and the Levites are right; and the one who is wrong has got to go. Of course, the Torah picks a side. I, too, choose Moses and Aaron. But is there any legitimacy in Korah's critique?

He expresses fealty to a value we hold sacred: "*ki khol ha-edah kulam k'doshm uv'tokham Adonai*, For all the community, all of them are holy, and Adonai is in their midst." That's democracy; we, too, are wary of leaders who take too much power for themselves.

And Moses and Aaron. They are the rightfully chosen leaders of the Israelite community; but we know they are imperfect. Moses gets frustrated and angry; he has a temper; at times he expresses doubt about God's ability to provide for such a large population; he questions his own fitness for leadership. And Aaron speaks behind Moses's back; he directs the people to construct the golden calf. It feels like the Torah spends more time pointing out Moses's and Aaron's faults and mistakes than it does praising them. But here, God chooses Moses; God chooses Aaron; and with no reservations. The rebels are swallowed by the earth or burned by fire; Aaron's flowering staff is placed forever in the sanctuary as a warning against those who question his authority.

And the commentators are puzzled. Why is Korah rejected if his ideas make sense? Well, they say, it turns out that Korah made the same mistake of assuming a polarity between right and wrong, good and bad. *Etz Hayim* cites Yeshayahu Leibowitz that Korah's deception was in his claim that all the people *are* holy. The Torah commands, "*Kedoshim tih'yu, you shall be holy.*" Holiness is a matter of becoming; no person can claim to already be holy. Another rabbi, cited in my commentary book as "*Gadol Echad, Some Great Rabbi,*" says that Korah didn't distinguish between *kedushah b'emet*, true holiness, and *kedushah l'mar'it ayin*, the appearance of holiness. You see, a person who is truly holy knows he is imperfect; a people that is truly holy understands that some are not there yet. On Yom Kippur before Kol Nidre, we give ourselves permission "*l'hitpalel im ha-avaryanim, to pray amongst those who have transgressed.*" In this Great Rabbi's words, "Any communal fast that does not include Jewish sinners is not a fast."

Korah's sin was in forcing a choice – either me or them. In that polarized world, I know which side I would choose, but the question remains unanswered: must every choice necessarily be so

polarized and absolute? Or is there room to choose my side while still acknowledging and wrestling with the claims of the Other?

Last Shabbat I was jetlagged, having just returned from a whirlwind solidarity mission to Israel. 55 hours. We landed on Tuesday at 4:30 pm and departed at 11:30 pm on Thursday because that's how you get 8 rabbis (who work on Shabbat) to drop everything and go to Israel. We went because we needed to be there – the rockets, the war, the press, the antisemitic vitriol and violence. ... We needed to make a statement that we stand with Israel. There was a Covid element too; seemingly every guide, liaison, driver, hotel operator and restaurateur told us that we were their first group since last March.

We also needed to investigate. There have been multiple conflicts with Hamas since the disengagement from Gaza in 2005; we've seen the rockets and destruction before. But this conflict brought something different – unrest in Israel's mixed cities and towns, places where Jewish Israeli citizens live alongside Palestinian Israeli citizens. In some places there were riots; in Lod it bordered on civil war. Israel's Declaration of Independence ensures "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." We wanted to know what went wrong.

On Wednesday we visited Ashkelon. We toured the ruins Penina Makhlof's home, which was hit by a Hamas missile. Although to hear Penina talk, the headline wasn't that she lost everything, or that the elderly next-door neighbor had been hospitalized and her aide killed, or that she felt terrorized; the headline was that God had provided three separate miracles to keep her and three generations of her family safe. We visited the Gaza border. We got a sense of how the Palestinians and Hamas are at once engaged in perpetual war with Israel and interconnected through infrastructure, economics, and social supports. That narrative is complicated; pieces are vilely misrepresented in the media; it is tragic; but it is familiar. It's been going on for a long time.

But Thursday was different. We visited Lod, a city near the airport of 70% Jews and 30% Palestinians, where there is crime and poverty and social depravation that visitors from American cities might find familiar. There is a Jewish part of the city, an Arab part, and a mixed section where Jews and Arabs live together in the same apartment buildings ... and where all hell broke loose at the beginning of May. We saw a Jewish apartment that was ransacked and burned by Arab rioters; we witnessed the infrastructure disparities between Arab and Jewish neighborhoods; we heard grievances and tales of violence and intimidation from leaders of both communities. And the question is what to do about it. Remember that these are not the terrorists; these are citizens of the democratic State of Israel.

We visited the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and one of the rabbis put the question to Donniel Hartman: how do we tell our congregants all that we saw in a way that does not question our love of Israel? When asked to choose sides we know which one we are on; but how do we address the truths coming from the other side ... without giving comfort to the enemy or fueling the anti-Israel propaganda machine? Hartman offered a Talmudic-like insight.

You see, the Talmud does this all the time. You have a seemingly simple question: are you committed to Israel? Are you committed to the fundamental right of the Jewish people to live freely in our own land? Or are you uncommitted? I am committed. But there is another duality. When you read

the news, when you visit the mixed cities, when you hear certain stories, are you troubled or untroubled? These are legitimately competing polarities: committed/uncommitted; troubled/untroubled.

When the Talmud encounters competing dualities, it brings them together. Imagine not a single line with two sides, but a quadrant with four boxes: Troubled/committed; troubled/uncommitted; untroubled/committed; untroubled/uncommitted.

“There are two groups I worry about,” Hartman suggests. The untroubled/uncommitted – that’s the supporters of terrorism. Rockets don’t bother them but Israeli power does. They aren’t committed to the just-ness of a Jewish state, which means they deny a basic tenet of Jewish identity. And that denial borders on antisemitism.

The untroubled/committed are also a problem. This is the group that is so committed to Zionism, so committed to Jewish rights as to be untroubled by violence, untroubled by injustice, untroubled by the national claims of the Palestinian people. Being untroubled borders on denial of the basic Jewish belief that all people are created in the image of God, *b’tzelem Elohim*. Human rights are universal values; and they are Jewish values.

I align with the committed/troubled quadrant, as I think many of us do. Israel is integral to my Jewish and religious identity. I have personal connections. I am committed to the cause. *And* I also dream of something more. I am troubled by the lack of religious pluralism, troubled by functional inequities between Jewish and non-Jewish citizens; troubled by certain decisions of the government. I know on which side I stand; *and* I know that the hope, the dream, is yet incomplete. Committed and troubled.

Which leaves the fourth category: Troubled and uncommitted. These are the ones we worry about. These are the folks of the demographic studies, the ones whose connection to Israel is loosening. We see the commitment wavering and we think to address it by focusing on their troubles; but it doesn’t work. I’m troubled too. People aren’t troubled because they don’t know enough facts; they aren’t troubled because they are misinformed. They are troubled because they *do* know. But we know in this country, too, that we can be troubled and still committed to the justness, the rightness, the miracle of the national project.

The educational response to loosening connections to Israel must be to focus on the commitment. Why does Israel matter; why is Israel important; what was Jewish life like in America in 1933 or Germany in 1938 or Russia in 1881 or Spain in 1492? Why do we face east when we pray? Because Israel is the focus of our religious identity; and Israel is the key to Jewish security and success. Israel is still becoming and becoming can be troubling; and that is why we must continue to engage in the most important national project of Jewish history.

That’s what bothers me about the interplay between Moses and Korah. I’m committed to Moses. Never before and never since did there arise a prophet in Israel like Moses. And I am troubled by some of the very issues Korah introduces. Because that is how people are. Ecclesiastes reminds us “*ki ain adam tzaddik ba-aretz asher ya-aseh tov v’lo ye-heta*, that there is no human being who is wholly

righteous, who does good and never falters.” We know how to give ourselves grace; we know how to address our own faults without denying our claim to basic human goodness.

We have to offer others that same grace. We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to Israel – the only Jewish state, our only spiritual homeland, a sacred part of who we are – because Israel is us, always becoming, always on the way. “*Kedoshim tih’yu, You shall be holy.*” It would just be short-sighted and dishonest to proclaim, as Korah did, that we are already there. Shabbat shalom.