

***Vayakhel: “And he assembled.”***  
**For Constructive or Destructive Ends?**  
**Parashat Vayakhel**  
**March 5, 2016**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

The other night, after a day spent running around attending to this matter and that, I finally got home sometime after 9 o'clock to grab a little dinner. I turned on my computer, and was about to get to my emails when, somewhere on my screen, there was a reminder that yet another presidential debate was going on. And so I clicked on the link, and before you knew it there I was, watching an unbelievable exchange.

Now, I have watched presidential debates for many, many years. I actually have a visual memory of seeing my father watching the Kennedy-Nixon debates on television in 1960. (Whether that memory is accurate or not is really impossible to determine, since I've certainly seen footage of those debates so many times since then. Social scientists will tell you that when you've seen something enough times on television, you really don't know whether you ever actually once saw it in real time.) I have watched presidential debates over the years: with Humphrey and Nixon in 1968, with Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in 1984, with George W. Bush and Bill Clinton in 1992; and so on and so forth.

But I don't think I'd ever seen anything like what I saw that night. Now, to be fair, most of the debates I've seen – probably most of the debates that most of us have seen – were debates between two people of different parties, each trying to persuade the undecided, the uncommitted, the independent electorate that didn't necessarily identify with either of their parties or persuasions that they had the best vision for the country. Primary debates are different. I get that. Everyone on stage is fighting over not those on the margins but those in the base. I get that. But never before had I encountered what I saw the other night.

I watched two and sometimes three men—they *happened* to be men, ... or maybe their gender had something to do with the give and take between them—I watched these men making fun of one another.



Is that what our political process, what this endless campaign has boiled down to: the kind of name calling that we associate with 3<sup>rd</sup> graders? Looking around the room at the seventh graders here, I think it's fair to say—and I'm not just saying this, I actually believe it—that they seem more mature, more composed, more capable of self-restraint than some of the folks on the stage the other night.

What are we to make of this? What's happening?

Well, let's take a look at this week's *parashah*. Perhaps there is a clue there for us.

The name of this week's *parashah* is, "*Vayakhel*." The word means, "And he convoked," or "And he assembled." The "he" is Moses, and the word "convoked" or "assembled" means that he gathered the people together.

It's an unusual word. We're used to seeing, "*Vay'daber Moshe*" -- "And Moses spoke," or "*Vayomer Moshe*" -- "And Moses said;" not, "*Vayakhel*" -- "And Moses convoked."

We don't generally translate the word "*vayakhel*" as "gathered," because, as the great medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, explains in his commentary, the word doesn't refer to the *physical* act of gathering people together. When the Torah uses the word, "*vayakhel*," it's not talking about Moses going around and grabbing people and pulling them into a circle. Rather, the term **refers to the use of speech to assemble them.**

ויקהל משה AND MOSES ASSEMBLED [ALL THE CONGREGATION OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL] — ...**The word ויקהל [Rashi writes] is used in [what we would today call the hif'il conjugation, i.e.,] the verbal form that expresses the idea of *causing* a thing to be done, because one does not actually assemble people [Rashi writes] with one's hands, rather, they are assembled by his word.**

In other words, when the text says, "*vayakhel*," it means that Moses spoke, and as a result of his speech, the people gathered around to listen. **The word *vayakhel* is related to the word *kehillah*, meaning a community or a congregation.** *Vayakhel Mosheh* means that Moses, through his speech, **turned his listeners into a community.**

The word *vayakhel* occurs only twice in the entire Torah. Sure enough, at the other place where it occurs, Rashi makes the same point. He emphasizes that the word means to cause people to assemble through speech.

There, it isn't Moses who is doing the convening or the assembling; it is Korach.

Now, who is Korach? Korach is a leader, a priest, who sets himself up in opposition to Moses. He is Korach the rebel, Korach the leader of the rebellion against Moses. The text uses the same language, "*vayakhel aleihem Korach*" -- "And Korach convened or assembled the entire congregation against them," that is, against Moses and Aaron.

**In that place, Rashi emphasizes that the language that Korach used to convene or to assemble the people was different from the language that Moses used here.**

AND KORAH CONVENEED [ALL THE CONGREGATION] AGAINST THEM, by means [Rashi writes] of **scoffing** language [*"b'divrei leitzanut"*]: that whole night he went round to all the tribes and tried to win them over: "*s'vurin atem she'alay lvadi ani makpid*" -- "Do you really think that I care for myself alone? *Eini makpid elah beshvil kulchem*, It is only for all of **you** that I have a care!" [And he continued to mock Moses and Aaron] ... until, in the end, all of them [i.e., the people] *nitp'tu* -- submitted to his persuasion – literally, "were seduced by him."

**We are in the midst of a year in which we are being bombarded with speech.** And not just ordinary speech. Speech designed to influence us, to persuade us to support one person or another; one position or another; one party or another. Speech designed to "assemble" us, designed to turn us into a *kehillah*, a community of one kind or another.

Not all of this speech is the same. Not all of it is principled; not all of it appeals to our powers of reason; **not all of it is benign.**

*Some* of it consists of rational argument, *some* of it consists of speech appealing to our higher natures, designed to inspire us. *Some* of it is like the speech of Moses in this week's parashah.

But not all of it. Some of the speech to which we have been exposed consists of scoffing language, *divrei leitzanut*, in Rashi's words, and some consists of

**demagogic speech** preying on our resentments and disappointments, speech designed to prey on our prejudices, to lead us astray, to seduce us.

Now, on the one hand, this is entertaining. That's for sure. That debate the other night was a reality show, and reality shows are entertaining. When you watch one of these free-wheeling debates, you are expecting, maybe even hoping, for some stumble, some blunder, that will shift the dynamic of the race.

The more outrageous, the better.

But is that healthy for us? Is it healthy for our democracy? I don't think so.

It worries me. It worries me because it's too easy to be distracted by this kind of speech and to forget that there are serious issues that are facing our nation, and that those issues need to be confronted in a serious, informed manner, not with schoolyard taunts, and certainly not with malicious, xenophobic bigotry designed to appeal to the reptilian part of our brains.

Leaving aside the embarrassment that the language of our debates has sunk so low that it's getting harder and harder to recommend it to kids—(Do we really want them to learn to behave this way?)—more serious is the question **whether this is the kind of leadership we're going to get in the White House?** And if that question concerns us, then there's something we must do.

There is only one way to change this dangerous dynamic and that is to protest it. To protest the demeaning of one's opponents, the mocking and the disrespect, the lies and innuendos, the bigotry and the misogyny and the racism and the anti-Semitism.

Unless we put a stop to this, it will only continue, and if it continues, we are all at grave risk. Nothing less than our unity as a nation and our safety and influence in the world is at stake.

We need to make a choice. It's up to us. Remember Rashi's commentary, on both this week's parashah and the parashah in which Korach's rebellion is described. The text doesn't say that Moses gathered the people, just as it doesn't say that Korach gathered the people to rebel. Instead, it says that Moses spoke, causing the people to gather; or Korach spoke, causing the people to gather.

That difference is crucial.

We must never allow ourselves to think that we lack agency.

**We are responsible for our actions.** No politician can do anything on his or her own. All politicians rely on the willing ascent of the people—an insight recognized by our Torah thousands of years ago. We have to be skeptical judges of the character and the talents of those who would lead us.

Mockery—the demeaning of those with whom we disagree; and demagoguery, the manipulative, deceitful use of language to persuade people to follow you—these should have no place among those who would lead our country.

**Let’s remember the two “*vayakhel*”’s in the Torah, and the crucial difference between them.**

In Numbers, it was a demagogue, a blowhard, a man engaged in deceitful and mocking speech. That kind of convocation is condemned by our tradition. A controversy grounded in that kind of rhetoric, that kind of thinking, that kind of politics is destined to disappear. And indeed, the people who follow Korach: they themselves are ultimately swallowed up by the earth.

On the other hand, in today’s *parashah*, it is Moses, the most modest man on earth, who convenes the people. And to what end, for what purpose? To collect contributions and build a portable shrine. A place within which to worship God. A place within which—and I think that this is relevant and crucial—he, Moses, will have no more rights and privileges than any other non-priestly Israelite. Once that Tabernacle is dedicated, Moses will not be able to enter the most sacred realm because he isn’t a priest. This is a modest and selfless convocation. Let’s use that standard to judge the character of those who would lead us: let modesty and not bravado be our measure.

What kind of a community do we want to be? With what kind of a community do we want to convene? Let’s strive to be convened, to be convoked, to be assembled into a *kehillah*, a community devoted to principled disputes between and among people who have respect for one another and who show respect for one another. Or, as our tradition puts it: *makhlokot l’shem shamayim*, disputes for the sake of heaven.

Not a **uniform** community but a **united** community: united in our commitment to work together, humble in our conviction that compromise will be necessary to do

that, doing our best to live up to our beliefs and values, and committed to building up and not tearing down.

Only in this way will we deserve to get the leadership we need to move us forward into the wilderness.

Shabbat shalom.

(Translation of Rashi's commentary based on *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary* by M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, as digitized by Sefaria.org.)