

Shabbat Parashat Korach/Rosh Chodesh

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Last Sunday was the Israel Day Parade in NYC, the annual celebration of Israel that drew hundreds of thousands from the Tri-State area to cheer for Israel as this year 35,000 marchers, 17 bands and 30 floats made their way up 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

I had an unveiling to do way out on Long Island and wasn't sure if I'd make it back in time to get to the parade (which thankfully I did) so I was especially pleased that our family would be represented by my 17 year-old son Aaron who was marching with his friends from the Heschel School.

My son Isaac who's 15 had some other commitments so he didn't march with Heschel but he went to the parade afterwards to cheer with the spectators. It was about 2:15pm when he arrived at 59<sup>th</sup> street. Not having a kippa on him, he made sure to buy one from a vendor so he could be identified as a Jewish kid celebrating Israel. He found some friends in the crowds and they watched the passing parade together.

Standing near to Isaac was a Haredi man from the Neturei Karta sect ranting and raving and heckling the marchers and the spectators with his anti-Israel tirades. He set his sights on Isaac and his friends and began to verbally harass and threaten them. I won't repeat verbatim what he said because we're in shul, but his despicable diatribe went something like this: "You f-ing Jews, you filthy Jews, supporting Israel makes you no better than Nazis, you are a disgrace to Judaism and to humanity."

He then set his sights on a black Jewish man wearing a kippah and tzitzit cheering on the parade and unleashed a slew of racial slurs at this man that would make David Duke blush.

Isaac started to yell back at this crazy man, defending himself, his friends and the State of Israel until he realized that it would do no good and that the threats were turning physical. He went and found a police officer and reported what was going on. The officer went over and confronted the Haredi man and escorted him away from the parade.

Isaac called me immediately, shaken and deeply disturbed. Not a natural-born activist, he was now definitely charged up having learned how crucial it is to show up at these events and support Israel and modern Judaism, often in the face of the most unlikely of critics.

Not long after that one of my 80 year-old congregants who's also a dear friend drove with me into the city to catch the end of the parade. While coming down Park Avenue we saw a couple of vans with big marquis signs on the roof which read: "Any Zionist occupation of even one inch of the land of Israel is a crime." Disgusted, we both assumed that as we passed we'd find either a Palestinian extremist or a left-wing American protester at the wheel. Instead we found a group Haredi men inside and around the vans. Thelma rolled down her window as we drove by: "Shame on you", she yelled, "Shame on you". It didn't bother them, but she couldn't just watch in silence.

While we were cheering on the last of the marchers and floats at the end of the parade route at 74<sup>th</sup> street, my son Aaron called me to report on his experience marching with the Heschel school. He said it was great, but that the Haredi protesters were beyond obscene this year. As they marched they saw Haredim holding up huge signs which read: "Shame

on the yeshivas that force their children to march with homosexuals. That's why their children are getting molested."

Disgraceful behavior on the part of loud and verbally abusive Haredim, mostly but not only Neturei Karta, at the Israel Day Parade is, sadly, not new. But it never fails to enrage me. And to embarrass me; embarrass us, truthfully.

Like when you see members of that community appearing on talk shows in Tehran, sharing the airways with people calling for Israel's destruction, wearing lapel pins of the Israeli flag with a big red line through it.

Log onto the Neturei Karta website and you can navigate a whole site devoted to anti-Israel activism around the world.

It's nauseating. And terrifying.

No less so were the massive Haredi marches this past week in the Romema neighborhood of Jerusalem, where, by the way, the shul known as Beit Aharon stands, named after its founder and builder, my great-grandfather Aaron Drazin, z"l. Thirty thousand men gathered swearing they'll never enlist in the Israeli Army no matter what the government says and that they'll sooner sit in jail than share in the military defense of Israel—the country which provides them with the social and financial support to sit and study all day, learning no skills or knowledge to help them become productive members of society, while the rest of the citizens work hard to sustain the economy and send their kids off to war.

No less embarrassing are the scores of Haredi families in the NY area who marry in religious ceremonies but not civil ceremonies and then go on to produce huge families wherein the legally single mothers apply for and

receive welfare checks to feed and house their children – all at the American taxpayer's expense.

I could go on and list more exploitations of both Israeli and American society perpetrated by people who claim to represent the most pious strain of Jewish values and of Torah. I could mention the outsized political influence of Haredim that has enabled the imposition of fundamentalist values on gender-segregated buses and sidewalks in Israel, and the imbalanced granting of Pell grants in the U.S., educational grants meant for poor students but whose three largest recipients are ultra Orthodox yeshivot. 76% of the students at one of the most prominent yeshivas in the country, in Lakewood, NJ, receive Pell grants. Or this staggering statistic: last year's NY Jewish population survey determined that 49% of NY's Jewish children are Haredi (either Hasidic or "yeshivish"), so that as Jay Michaelson and others have predicted, within a generation, NY's Jews will be overwhelmingly "fundamentalist, poor, uneducated and reactionary."

But instead, allow me to state very clearly: There are many righteous and moral members of the Haredi community. Not all of them are guilty of abhorrent behavior. As Michaelson explains in a recent Forward editorial, it's not Haredi Judaism per se that's so troubling, it is the Haredi system which fosters these kinds of abuses that we can no longer afford to ignore.

I thought about this vile Haredi man and his behavior at the parade as I explored this week's parasha of Korach, the archetype of the rebellious, defiant Jew whose challenge to Moses and Aaron, and by extension to the whole nation, was met with clear disapproval by God as the earth opened up and swallowed him and his supporters.

Aside from the rudeness and aggression he displayed, Korach is cited by meforshim for having violated some of the basic rules of Jewish unity.

“Vayikach Korach ben Yitzhar, ben Kehat, ben Levi, v'Datan v'Aviram bnei Eliav v'On ben Pelet bnei Reuven/Now Korach son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi, with Datán and Aviram the sons of Eliav and On son of Pelet the sons of Reuven, took”, (presumably took men to revolt against Moses). These opening words of the parasha are noted by Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer for their unusual grammatical formulation. Given the many different people cited, the verb “Vayikach” which is in the singular, should really have been “Vayikchu”, the plural form for “and they took”.

Zvi Hirsch Kalischer explains that the reason it's written in the singular is because they each went to battle only for themselves. They weren't real leaders in the sense of trying to represent a people. They were challenging Moshe and Aaron to selfishly advance their own agendas.

It's not hard to see the same narcissism in the actions of the Haredim who behave the way this man at the parade behaved and in the other examples I cited. Their agenda is not to create a communal tent that is wide and accessible enough to welcome all who make their home within the Jewish people, but rather one that accommodates only their version of Jewish values and practices.

Ironically, Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Polish Orthodox rabbi, spent most of his life advocating the resettlement of the land of Israel. He never believed that God would suddenly appear or send the Mashiach to secure our future. Rather, courageously defying his colleagues, he believed that Jewish destiny would be determined by human action and initiative.

Those same opening words, “Vayikach Korach” are translated into Aramaic by Onkelos as “Vaitpaleeg Korach/Korach divided himself.” Usually understood to convey the fact that Korach separated himself from

the nation by rebelling against Moshe, the Gerer Rebbe notes that the phrase could mean that he divided himself from his heritage. Expanding on this, the Hasidic Reb Simcha Bunem explained that this means that the deeds of every Jew must bear some continuity, some cleaving and bonding to the deeds of one's parents in order to link the generations. "Vaitpaleeg Korach/Korach divided himself", suggests Korach severed his bond with his past, cut himself off from the ethical and spiritual roots of his parents and his ancestors.

Again, the parallel to what happened to my son last Sunday seems clear. Behavior by one Jew towards another such as what took place at the parade betrays a complete disconnect between that man and the Torah's many commandments to show one another, indeed all human beings, respect and even love.

One of the most difficult aspects of these realities within the Jewish world is our reluctance to accept **our** responsibility for enabling them to come about. We as a Jewish community have been passively complicit in allowing these behaviors to go unchecked.

In Israel we have tolerated for far too long a system of government that requires making concessions to groups who tear at the democratic fiber of Israeli society in order to form a working coalition in the Knesset. What integrity is there to an authority that exists at the expense of forcing women to ride at the back of a public bus? Or at the expense of state-sponsored rabbis calling on Israeli Jews not to rent homes to Arabs? Or at the expense of erasing the presence of women from all public advertisements in Jerusalem?

In the U.S. we have tolerated the moral bankruptcy of a segment of the Jewish community that exploits American taxpayers. As Michaelson

declared, we have to stop pretending to find common cause with such Jews and instead we must demand from our elected officials an end to the granting of government funds to corrupt groups simply because the grantees are a powerful voting bloc. We who believe in democracy, honesty, equality and freedom also have powerful voices. It's time to start raising them.

On a more provocative note, Michaelson challenges the philanthropic Jewish community to make more funds available to organizations that provide social, emotional and vocational support to individuals seeking to leave Haredi communities, but who fear doing so under threat of total excommunication or fear of complete dislocation, organizations like Footsteps. Not making it easier for those who wish to leave makes us part of the problem.

Michaelson's point is that we bear some guilt for perpetuating institutionalized ideologies that brazenly defy the principles of Ahavat Yisrael, love for the Jewish people, and Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of God's name through upright and righteous behavior by Jews within and beyond the boundaries of the Jewish world.

Things are changing in Israel now as more demands are placed on the Haredi community to collaborate with other elements of Israeli society. But as we can see, change will come with much pain and strife. Here in North America change is overdue as well. And the longer we wait to reclaim the Jewish values some have so brutally marred, the more blame we carry.

Today is Rosh Chodesh and in the special maftir we read, "This is the burnt-offering of the new month, throughout the months of the year. And one male goat for a sin-offering to God." (Num. 28: 14-15)

This is a very strange idea: what did God do that we need to atone for on God's behalf by making a sin-offering?

The Talmud in Massechet Chulin suggests it's to atone for God's making the moon smaller than the sun and thereby causing one of the great heavenly luminaries to suffer some shame.

Rav Kook offered a different, very compelling message about Rosh Chodesh. The reality of our world, a world of human freedom and of complex natural phenomena is such that there are times of destruction and suffering even as there are those of untold beauty and joy. The cycles of the moon are the celestial symbols of the ebb and flow of life, of the swings between fullness and emptiness with which we must constantly contend.

And even though we couldn't conceive of and don't desire a world that lacks freedom or that limits nature, given the agony we must endure from time to time, on Rosh Chodesh we hold God, Creator of our universe, responsible for our distress by making the sin offering symbolically on God's behalf. We fearlessly make God accountable for creation – for both its blight and its beauty.

Again, the lesson of this teaching resonates in light of our discussion. We who have labored tirelessly – in the private realms of our families and communities and in the larger public sphere – to grow and strengthen the Jewish people in the fullness of our diverse beliefs and practices, have sometimes turned a blind eye to those whose despicable actions threaten the integrity of our people as a whole. For the sake of the unity of our

people we sometimes sacrifice the very thing we attempt to protect. And for that we bear some guilt.

If you haven't yet watched Yair Lapid's speech two years ago to the Haredi students at Kiryat Ono College, You Tube it. In it he challenges the Haredim to pick up their share of the social, military and financial responsibilities of life in Israel not because we seek to punish them, but for the simple truth that they have proven themselves to be an indispensable part of the Jewish people. No one is going away -- not progressive Jews, not centrist Jews and not fundamentalist Jews. No one has lost the battle over who constitutes the Jewish people. As the Supreme Court in Jerusalem has recently made clear in its positions regarding Women of the Wall, we are all stakeholders in the Jewish people and we all have no choice but to make room for one another – as winners, not as losers. We no longer have to agitate as outsiders and defend to an extreme our right to exist. Instead we all have to assume the burden of making sure that no one is left out. How to accomplish all this is still an unresolved question, but that we **must** is a position that is being made more and more clear each day.

On this Shabbat wherein the Torah warns us of the dangers of separating ourselves from Am Yisrael, let us both admonish those who dare to demonize us, and resolve to solve our internal conflicts without ever denying the indivisible oneness of the Jewish people.

And on this day of Rosh Chodesh, of monthly renewal, let us acknowledge the blessings and the burdens we share with one another in sustaining the Jewish people, and grant others and ourselves another chance to do it right.