

D'var Torah on Korach – June, 2020 – Ellis Werbow

As the first half of 2020 draws to a close, there are many among us who would like to have a do over for these 6 months. This time has been filled with a pandemic, quarantine, massive unemployment and in-home schooling for those who never thought they would be home schoolers on both the student and teacher sides. There were cancellations aplenty - from graduations and proms, to annual summer activities like the Erie County Fair and summer concerts - that many of us look forward to each year. We have had to get used to being in public while wearing masks and had to figure how to greet people without a handshake, a hug or a kiss. That doesn't even note all of the changes to our lives as a result of the Coronavirus or the changes that are still to come as we continue to figure out our new normal. What will schooling will look like in the fall? When, if ever, will professional sports be played for us to watch let alone actually attend? How do we hold a National Election?

On top of all that we have had the numerous natural disasters that just added insult to injury, like the power outages resulting from snow storms or the earthquakes in California. That doesn't include the one felt here in Western New York, which rarely ever happens, but happening during this year just adds one more thing to the list of what else can happen this year.

This all gets followed by swarms of locusts in Kenya and other parts of East Africa. Sahara dust scheduled to hit the East Coast next week. These also are keeping people on edge as they prepare for a second or third wave of locusts in the next month or two.

But wait, there's more!

We have seen a wave of protests, marches, and unfortunately riots all across the country. In the past these events were focused in other parts of the country, like Baltimore in 2016 after the death of Freddie Gray, or Los Angeles, 1991, for the Rodney King beating. Those cities expressed their outrage while the rest of the country sat and watched. This time was different though; this time it came to our front door, to our city, and city after city after city. This time the conversation is different; this time it isn't just how do things change in the affected city but how do we change things on a national, cultural, global, and humanitarian scale to make for lasting change. One thing that has come out of all this is that for many of us who think we have come far in this country over the years, we now can see we really haven't come that far and as a society now may actually be ready to start making that change.

Phew - that is a lot for 6 months, or more realistically the last 4 months. Even with all that I've noted, it still is just the broad strokes. It doesn't cover the nuances of all these matters. It doesn't cover all the ways that each individual and family has been affected or the experiences they have had. It doesn't cover all the conversations within the homes that may never have taken place before. It doesn't cover the unknowns that the future holds for us as we move towards a new normal.

Believe it or not there is still one type of major event that was experienced in this week's parsha, that at least that I am aware of, has not happened in this year and might I say thank goodness. We haven't had a mutiny or at least an attempted mutiny.

As part of this week's reading Korach and his followers confront Moses and Aaron and in short question the legitimacy of their leadership.

Korach wanted the role of High Priest to be filled by more than just Aaron. He wanted to fill that role and be bestowed with the honors and responsibilities that accompanied it. Initially Korach had 250 followers and within one night there were thousands who stood with him.

Moses and Aaron then presented several methods for Korach and his followers to be shown that they – Moses and Aaron - were the rightful leaders.

As with all mutinies, an authority in power, in this case, God, will take steps to quell the revolt. During the parsha this was done in two steps. During the first, God caused the earth to open and swallow up Korach and the 250 that stood initially with him. For the thousands of others, a plague was sent by God to deal with them.

Before things could escalate further, as will happen during a power struggle, and before all of the Israelites following Korach could be wiped out, some would say the voice of reason interceded. In this case it was Aaron rushing out amongst the masses and atoning for them, leading to God stopping the plague that was passing through the people. What steps Aaron exactly took other than standing up for the people are not clear, yet it was enough to make a difference to God.

Moses had also made a plea on behalf of his people for God to be restrained in His deeds. However it was Aaron's actions, the actions of one that seemed to have had a bigger effect and result.

At different times, we all ask, "What can I do, I'm only one person?". Whether it may be in terms of voting in an election, where we say there is no need for me to vote - it won't count and make a difference - or maybe in terms of participating in a protest. However, from Aaron's steps, we can all see that the behaviors of one can make a difference.

Now let's bring this idea of one person can make a difference to today's reality and on-goings.

Think of the family member, neighbor, or friend that called or texted you to ask what you needed or wanted from the store so that you didn't have to go out. They then came by, left a package on your front step, rang your bell, and walked away with no words exchanged. How much did you appreciate that little gesture as you and your family were all holed up inside?

Think of that phone call you received by someone who just wanted to call to say hi. How much did you appreciate that 2-minute call? How much did you appreciate that hour call?

Think of that child drawing chalk art on the sidewalk, who was there to break their own routine or in some cases may have been sent outside by the home-school teacher who needed a break, and as you walked down the street you saw their handiwork and it brought a smile and some joy to you.

These were just the actions of one person.

Think of that person who came up with the idea to place lawn signs for all the high school graduates in your district. When we first got the email saying that this was going to take place, our first reaction was it wasn't needed and was no big deal. However, when the day came for the signs to be distributed, we as a family sat outside to await the delivery. Then being able to visit and chat, while distanced of course, with members of the school. Spending those moments with others, catching up from where you left off when schools were abruptly shut down, talking about the future of a high school graduate. When all

was said and done, it was a little gesture that was the idea of one person (while it took many to put into action), and it did make a difference.

Think of that person who is a doctor, nurse, caregiver, or other health care worker. Think of the cashier at your local grocery. They are not your traditional first responders of fire, police, or paramedic. Yet in this new reality, we look at these roles very differently. These individuals were thrust into roles in a way they had never been before. They each had the option of not going to work, to put their health and family above those who needed them. While you may say that it is their job, they still had to take action and make a decision to make difference instead of turning away and letting someone else be responsible. Each as an individual made a difference and when you put them all together they truly helped get us to where we are today.

We could keep adding to this list endlessly to show that one person's actions do indeed make a difference.

One thing that they all have in common is to those on the receiving end, they are just ARK. As we learned from the movie Evan Almighty, ARK is an acronym of Acts of Random Kindness. In Judaism, these types of events are under the concept of Gemilut Chasadim or the giving of loving kindness.

This idea has been shown time and again throughout the Torah. From Abraham tending to the three visitors that came by his home, to Lot taking in the Angels sent to Sodom and Gemorrah even though it may have meant him and his family harm, from Rebecca drawing water for Eliezer's camels while he was on a search for a wife for Isaac, to Aaron running into the community to atone for the uprising.

Since the dawn of time people have engaged in random acts of kindness, without fanfare and without notice. Those little ripple effects have changed the landscape of our world. Today these instances of Gemilut Chasadim are a much more prevalent part of our mindset. If one thing does come out of the first half of 2020 for all its challenges, I hope it is the knowledge that one person can make a difference and that it is something that remains a part of our new normal. Be the change you wish to see in the world, even if you think it won't matter. I promise, it will make a difference to someone. Shabbat Shalom.