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Stay Away From the Tents of the Wicked

Today is the *yahrzeit* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. My grandmother was married to a veteran Lubavitcher Chassid who died before I ever got to know him, but I grew up knowing that my grandmother had an extensive extended Hassidic family and that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was a powerful inspiration to her. The first part of our daughter Sophie's Hebrew name "*Tzofit'ah*" is an allusion to the way that the Rebbe taught her to yearn for redemption - "*tzafita l'yeshua*" in the language of the Talmud - and that is something that stayed with her to her last days.

They say that the difference between a Hassidic rebbe and a Modern Orthodox rabbi is that a Hassidic rebbe can speak to a room with hundreds of people and each one there thinks the rebbe is speaking directly to him. Whereas a Modern Orthodox rabbi can address a large congregation and everyone thinks the rabbi is speaking to someone else. I've experienced this first-hand. I vividly recall the first time I attended a Friday night Hassidic *tisch*, late one night in Yerushalayim. Although there were hundreds of men gathered around the rebbe's table, standing on bleachers that were ten feet high, the rebbe went through the room and "shook hands" with each one of us. I could see a wave of men extending their hands with excitement and respect to receive the personal greeting from the rebbe.

It is indeed a special gift, a variety of charisma, that allows an individual to create a sense of unity among a large group of people, each with their own ideas and own agenda. That power can be used for good, as in the case of the rebbe, or it can be used for evil, as it was by Korach.

Korach's rebellion was a remarkable feat of politics. He assembled a diverse coalition, secured his own place at the head of that coalition, and then convinced hundreds of others to follow him in revolt against Moshe. Let's pay attention to how Korach assembles his coalition:

Korach understand what every demagogue knows: a clear slogan that can fit on a bumper-sticker or t-shirt is an effective way to spread a simple message that people can understand right away: כָּל־הָעֵדָה בְּלִם קְדוּשִׁים.

The entire congregation is holy. This is a simple idea. This is an idea that has is instantly appealing to the masses. Everyone likes to be pandered to. Everyone likes to be told that they are holy. In contrast, Moshe demands discipline and study and a lifetime of dedication towards Torah and Mitzvot in pursuit of holiness. In contrast to a four word message that can fit on a bumper sticker, printed on a baseball hat, or shared on Twitter, Moshe comes with a challenging and weighty agenda of Torah and Mitzvot.

Korach's analysis and prescription follows from his central organizing insight with brutal clarity:

רַב־לְכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלִם קְדוּשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם ה' וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קֹהֵל ה':

"You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the LORD is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the LORD's congregation?"

This isn't only a simple message and a compelling and attractive message. It is also a message that expresses an idea with a kernel of truth. My teacher Rabbi Brovender once asked sarcastically, "Why does Korach get his own parsha named after him? I don't have a parsha named after me! None of us have our own parashah. (Unless your name is Noach). Why did he deserve his own parashah?" Rabbi Brovender answered that Korach framed his rebellion as being rooted in an enduring idea with a facet of truth and its own internal legitimacy. If equal sanctity inheres in each individual, how can Moshe raise himself above the Lord's congregation?

However, according to the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (5:17), for all of its grandiosity and idealistic slogan, Korach was a quintessential example of someone who caused conflict for ulterior and insincere motives:

כָּל מַחֲלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אִין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִין הִיא מַחֲלֶקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלֶקֶת הַלֵּל וְשִׁמְאִי. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלֶקֶת קֶרַח וְכָל עֲדוֹתָיו:

“Any argument not for the sake of heaven will not endure...what is an argument not for the sake of heaven, the arguments brought by Korach and his congregation.”

Why does the mishnah assume that Korach and his congregation were not arguing with Moshe for the sake of heaven? Isn't Korach's claim כָּל־הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קֹדְשִׁים, a religious claim of the sort that should be considered “for the sake of heaven.”

It becomes clear from Moshe's response to the different members of the coalition that Korach assembled. Moshe first turns to Korach and says:

שְׁמַעוּ־נָא בְּנֵי לֵוִי

Please listen, sons of Levi. Moshe addresses his Levite cousin and hones in on the fact that Korach's rebellion was not motivated by high-sounding idealism but by a fairly crude desire for power. Moshe continues:

הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לְעַבֹּד אֶת־עַבְדֹת מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשָׁרְתָם:
וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲחֵיךָ בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אֶתְךָ וּבִקְשָׁתֶם גַּם־כֹּהֲנָה:

“Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, to perform the duties of the LORD's Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that He has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?”

Korach, along with the other Levites already had a special status and place of privilege. Although he claimed to represent a populist and egalitarian call that each member of the community is already holy, Korach was actually upset that he himself was “only” a levite and not a kohen.

Moshe then requests to meet with Datan and Aviram, Korach's co-conspirators. They refuse to meet with Moshe!

הַמַּעֲט כִּי הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ לְהַמִּיתָנוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר כִּי־תִשְׁתַּרְר עָלֵינוּ גַם־הַשְּׁתַּרְר:
אִךָ לֹא אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ הִבִּיאָתָנוּ וְתִתְּרָלָנוּ נַחֲלֹת שָׂדֵה וְכָרֶם הַעֵינֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם תִּנְקַר לָנוּ נַעֲלָה:

Moses sent for Dathan and Aviram, sons of Eliab; but they said, “We will not come!

Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?”

What was that about? Datan and Aviram blame Moshe for the outcome of the sin of the spies?! They blame Moshe that the Jewish people has been condemned to wander in the desert for forty years? How is that fair? How is that even logical?

Datan and Aviram care about Datan and Aviram. Their identification with the Jewish people is entirely instrumental; they are loyal to the Jewish people's mission and its cause only so long as that coincides with their own self-interest. If Moshe won't bring them into Eretz Yisrael then he is a failed leader and if he is a

failed leader he deserves no respect and if he nonetheless acts as though he expects others to respect him then Moshe is a cheat and a fraud.

Datan and Aviram are willing to make up allegations about Moshe acting in a corrupt way rather than concede that Moshe deserves respect.

And then there were the 250 men. What did they want? We don't really know what they wanted but we do know that they gathered with Korach and took fire-pans with them and placed fire in those fire-pans, and they were consumed by fire. God gives instructions that the fire-pans be collected in the same manner as the fire-pans that had belonged to Nadav and Avihu when they were consumed by fire for bringing an un-commanded fire.

And then something interesting happened.

After the ground opens and swallows Korach and the fire descends and consumes the 250 men, another rebellion breaks out.

וַיִּלְנוּ כָּל־עַדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמֶּחֱזֶת עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר אַתֶּם הַמִּתְמָם אֶת־עַם ה':

Next day the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You two have brought death upon the LORD's people

Wow! After the greatest vindication possible, there is a separate rebellion that breaks out in sympathy with the rebellion that had just ended. How is that possible? What were they thinking? This second rebellion ends up being more deadly than the first and thousands die before it is quelled.

What was the motivation of these rebels that lead them to align themselves with a cause that had already failed?

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno, a sixteenth century Italian rabbi offers a brilliant interpretation.

אתם המתם שאמרתם להם שינסו בקטרת שאין ראוי שיקטירנה אלא המקריב עולת התמיד והיה לכם לנסות בזבחים הראוים לכהנים רבים יחד:

This second, echo, rebellion is undertaken in sympathy with the two hundred fifty men. Moshe knew they would die when he told them to bring their fire-pans for a test. It was a setup that Moshe knew they would fail. The second rebellion blames Moshe for pushing these 250 men who may have been sincere in their desire to serve as kohanim, to a deadly test.

Why was their punishment so severe? Because sincere intentions and positive motivation don't matter if one is complicit in something evil. What do you call someone who supports evil with an innocent motivation? This is an old historical question? What do you call those Southern Americans who didn't particularly like slavery but supported the confederacy because of loyalty to their state and neighbors? We call those people traitors. What do we call people who supported the Bolsheviks, not out of a hatred for the bourgeois classes, but out of a sincere hope for a more equal and peaceful future? We call those people Communists and many of them have blood on their hands. If someone donates money to a terror organization because they operate a soup kitchen we call that "material support for terrorism."

Korach was a true evil genius. He coopted the religious desires of two hundred fifty men into supporting his own self-interested rebellion. Those were good people, and Korach lead them to their deaths.