

In a country torn apart by political disagreements, when Americans are polarized and terrified due to their views on many really serious issues, it was refreshing and heartening to read Jean Becker's memoir titled *The Man I Knew*. This insider account, by President George H.W. Bush's post-White House Chief of Staff, tells the story- by turns poignant, tragic and hilarious- of President Bush's re-emergence on the world scene after his humiliating defeat by President Clinton. Traveling the world and lending his skills to thorny diplomatic situations, or fundraising for relief in war torn or disaster-affected regions, President Bush was beloved as an ex-President even by those who despised his Presidential leadership. He was able to succeed in this realm because he formed meaningful relationships even- and especially- with those with whom he differed politically. The best example of this is his deep and genuine friendship with the man who handed him his most embarrassing defeat- for whom he would come to serve as a father figure. The Bush children referred to President Clinton as their "sibling"! What was especially impressive to me was that President Bush was a family man, even while he was a member of a patrician political family, and later its patriarch. As a loving father and a caring relative, he was able to nurture the aspirations, especially in the political arena, of his family members in ways that did not appear to lead to family conflict.

*Lehavdil*, this does not seem to have happened in another family with many leaders, where the frustrated ambitions of one member nearly tore the Jewish people apart. This morning, we read about the Korach rebellion, in which a charismatic Levi named Korach gathers a group of 250 malcontents and attempts to foment an insurrection against Moshe. Korach, a rabble rouser taking on the establishment- that makes for compelling reading, and indeed, that is how the Torah describes the *what*- the arguments Korach makes against Moshe and Aharon: everyone in our community is holy, the notion of a spiritual hierarchy is wrong, and you, Moshe and Aharon, are on a power trip at the expense of the people you have delegated yourself to lead. What the Torah *doesn't* tell us is *why* Korach went down this path.

A Midrash is designed to seize upon allusions in the text, using what is left unsaid in the Torah and filling in the blanks. Based on a comment of the Midrash Tanchuma, Rashi asserts that Korach was motivated by family politics: Korach and Moshe were first cousins. By way of background, Kehat, the middle son of Levi, had four sons of his own: Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron and Uziel. Amram, as we know, was the father of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam. Yitzhar was the father of Korach. Chevron was childless, leaving Uziel, whose son Elizaphan was appointed by Moshe to be the *nasi*, the leader, of all the families of Kehat. Korach was livid. After all, the fair thing would have been for Amram's family to take one honor, the next one- Kehunah, for example- would go to Yitzhar's family and then, anything left over would go to

Uziel. Korach felt cheated out of his birthright, and felt his branch of the family had been unforgivably slighted- so he sought an outlet for his anger. When we read it this way, Korach's rebellion seems like any other succession battle, the kind that makes for amazing television shows, which can be found in family businesses and chassidic courts to this very day. So which is it? A popular uprising based on lofty ideals of egalitarianism, or an internal family fight? And if it is the latter, the Midrash still leaves us wondering why he went so far. Shouldn't he have dealt with it within the family? Why was it necessary to air dirty laundry like this, by taking his grievances public?

I think the answer can be found in the great discrepancy between the high-minded rhetoric in the Torah and the petty politics in the Midrash. Korach's fundamental problem was a lack of self awareness. Instead of acknowledging that he was motivated by the all-too-human emotion of jealousy, he convinced himself that he was acting out of honor and principle. It's not that Korach wanted honor for *himself*; No, it was his *family's* honor he was fighting for. It isn't even that Korach wanted Moshe's thankless job. Who would? But it was wrong for Moshe to take a leadership role for himself and circumvent proper family structure. In an interview with the podcaster Yaakov Langer, Rabbi Doniel Kalish, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mesivta of Waterbury, Connecticut, said he believed this was Korach's downfall. Rabbi Kalish described the indignation he sometimes feels when he receives an invitation or a

letter addressed to “Mr. Daniel Kalish.” He isn’t proud of it, but Hashem gave him a desire for honor, for respect, for a reason, and the best thing to do when we experience these emotions is to sit with them, and learn from them. Korach should have done the same- as Rabbi Kalish put it, he should have taken a walk with his emotions, should have let his emotions be his Rebbe so he could learn something about himself. But he couldn’t be honest with himself and admit that he was motivated by personal concerns, so he took it outward, clothing his own grievances in populist rhetoric- all to avoid introspection.

We all possess unattractive emotions and character traits; some of us crave *kavod*; others are deeply desirous of material possessions, physical pleasures or financial gain; others are jealous and still others have a tendency toward anger. We recognize that these traits are less than attractive, and that literature from thousands of years of our tradition speaks about the importance of ridding ourselves of them. So rather than admit that we possess them, we convince ourselves that we are different, that our desires are noble and our motivations are honorable. “It’s not about me; it’s the *principle*.” Whenever someone tells you it’s about the principle, it is *never* about the principle...

Korach challenges us to be relentlessly honest with ourselves about our emotions, actions, and motivations. If we are, every interaction we have- whether with our

cousins, our friends or ourselves- will be better, more meaningful and more authentic.