

Pride Shabbat D'var Torah by Leiah Moser

Saturday, June 16, 2018

“Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, its fate is to endure, and any that is not for the sake of Heaven, its fate is not to endure.” (*Mishnah Avot 5:21*)

For our rabbis, the dispute recorded in parashat Korach is the very archetype of the dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven. But while the end of the dispute may be quite clear, its origins and significance are more difficult to understand. Who are the disputants, and what is the nature of their complaint?

The Torah identifies four principle members of the group – Korach, of the tribe of Levi, is the apparent leader, the one to whom most of Moses’ responses are directed and the one whose name is attached to the group as a whole – they are referred to in Num. 17:5 as Korach and “his band” (עדתו). Along with Korach appear Datan, Aviram and On, all of whom are Reubenites. The question which remains is how to identify the two hundred and fifty others who appear alongside them, and who are identified only as “Men of Israel” (אנשים מבני ישראל) without any tribal designation.

This question is more important than it may at first seem when it comes to unraveling the nature of the dispute, since the tribal makeup of the disputants will have a significant impact on how we understand their social standing within the community and the nature of their demands. The criticism they level against Moses and Aaron – “All the community are holy, all of them, and HaShem is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above HaShem’s congregation?” – seems to be that of a group made up of Reubenites, or perhaps a mixture of tribes, who are arguing against the attempt to endow a particular group of Israelites with a heightened level of sanctity. However, there are a number of points that make this egalitarian reading of the dispute somewhat doubtful. First, the unnamed “Israelites” are not from the ordinary rank and file – rather, they are identified in the text as “chieftains of the community” (נשיאי עדה). Second, their leader, Korach, is himself a Levite and therefore part of the system of social distinction the group is supposedly trying to protest. Finally, when Moses refers to them as a group, he addresses them not as “sons of Israel” but “sons of Levi,” suggesting that Korach’s band is comprised primarily of Levites like himself.

So, what is it that has motivated this group comprised mostly, but not entirely, of Levites to rise up and oppose Moses and Aaron’s leadership? As we have said, their ostensible argument – that “all the community are holy, all of them, and HaShem is in their midst” – seems to be surprisingly reasonable, couched as it is in language evocative of the same values Moses himself has been trying to teach, that Israel’s role is to be “a nation of priests” and that at all times Israel should strive to be holy as God is holy. But appearances can be deceiving, and just because an argument seems to evoke values that are near and dear to our hearts, that doesn’t necessarily mean that the argument is being used in a way that ultimately supports those values. On the contrary, just as the language of religious freedom can be twisted and misused in support of bigotry and discrimination, so too can language of holiness be employed in support of a cause which in reality is anything but holy.

We should take a moment to consider how Korach’s followers are described – as “chieftains of the community” who are “called to the assembly” (קראי מועד). The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra understands this last phrase to be related to the tent of assembly (אהל מועד), a central feature in the sanctuary precincts – a reference to the service the Levites were required to provide in attending to the sanctuary and supporting its regular functioning.

“Men of repute” (אנשי שם) Ibn Ezra understands to be a reference to the period before the exodus from Egypt, indicating that they enjoyed a great deal of prestige within the community of Israelite slaves. What emerges then is a picture of a group of men who before Moses came along were reckoned as important people and leaders of the community, now relegated to the apparently unglamorous role of shleppers, responsible for setting up, taking down and transporting the portable sanctuary – work which, from their perspective, is considerably beneath their dignity.

Never mind that to be a shlepper among free people must be considered to be far superior to being a prince among slaves. Never mind that the labor they have been given involves transporting the literal dwelling place of God from place to place, enabling the very indwelling of the divine presence that they so cavalierly use to justify their complaints. These Levite followers of Korach are deeply resentful of the loss of privilege and prestige they used to enjoy, and they are determined to reclaim their former place of glory by usurping the priesthood from Aaron and his offspring.

Concerning this attitude, the Zohar has this to say:

בל דרדף בתר דלאו דיליה, איהו עריק מקמיה. ולא עוד אלא מה דאית ביה אתאביד מניה. קרח רדיף בתר דלאו דיליה, דיליה אביד, ואחרא לא רווח.

“Anyone who chases after what is not his, it flees from him. And not only that – what he does have is lost. Korach chased after what wasn’t his, what he had was lost, and nothing else could give him comfort.”

But what is it, precisely, that Korach has lost? What precisely has he failed to understand? To explain this, the Zohar takes us back to the creation of the world, to the very moment when Creation first looked upon the beautiful, terrifying face of the first human being and saw in his splendor the sign of its own completion. At that moment, when the human was complete and, by extension, so too was the world, the day itself desired to be sanctified, and so it was – Shabbat was born, and with it peace and rest came into the world.

But – and here is where the authors of the Zohar are so insightful – there cannot be rest if no work remains to rest from. In that moment when the world was declared complete and Shabbat rose to sanctity, there were as yet spirits waiting to be given physical form. Owing to the sanctification of the day, this never happens, and these spirits – the Zohar calls them demons – remain as they are, merely potential rather than actual, trapped in between being and nothingness by the imposition of a definition of completeness which does not include them. And because of this, the newly completed and perfected world... remains both incomplete and imperfect.

This incompleteness can only be repaired through the holy labor of the Levites, who have the capacity to fix the gap in the world left by these uncreated spirits by transporting the holy sanctuary from place to place. But this repair can only happen if the Levites themselves are willing to give up some of the power and prestige of their old lives as chieftains among the people and accept upon themselves the new role which God has ordained for them – outwardly humble, but so deeply important for the completion of the work of creation.

Preparing these words for Germantown Jewish Centre’s first Pride Shabbat, I couldn’t help but see parallels between the metaphysical struggle depicted in the Zohar and the social and political struggles that have been going on within our own communities in the present day. In our time, too, we hear the voices of the “uncreated”

calling out – those whose essential selves have gone for so long without recognition in a world whose understanding of completeness and perfection simply does not include them. For some, particularly those who have been placed in a position of privilege within the prevailing order, there may indeed seem to be something demonic about these voices. But just as in Korach's time, it is necessary to recognize the truth that honor and privilege are worthless so long as they are granted within the context of a system which ultimately enslaves us all. It is a far greater honor to accept upon oneself the labor which has been ordained for us – the labor of repairing and remaking our communities, our nation, our world, in the name of a broader and more complete definition of perfection.