

Finding the insight and inspiration for composing a drash for this Torah portion, Korach, has been unexpectedly difficult. The story in today's Parsha describes G-d's divine wrath in the most miraculous and incredible way--the earth opens up and swallows Korach and his 250 followers after they challenge the position of Moshe, Aaron and the established priestly hierarchy. This dramatic event is followed by a spreading plague, inflicted by G-d on the rebels under the leadership of Datan and Aviram, a plague which is only arrested by Aaron when he physically makes expiation with a sacred firepan and incense thereby halting the leading edge of human devastation--but not before more than 14,000 souls are killed by G-d's wrath. Truthfully, for me, the whole thing is a little hard to swallow.

On a trip to Israel four years ago, I came to understand that a nation is defined its code of law and that the "nation of Israel" is such, even in a diaspora, in that Jews are define themselves by the conscious choice to abide by Torah law. The child rearing book, *The Blessing of the Skinned Knee* taught me a lot about the wisdom of Jewish Law. The author, Wendy Mogul, describes her recognition over her years as a child psychologist working with upscale families, that much family discontent is rooted in societal norms and behaviors. She initially studied Judaism, she admits, as a kind of anthropological foray into a foreign culture--but eventually and coincidentally related to the raising of her own child, she came to embrace Judaism--its laws and practices--as a way of life. And, she gave up her private practice and became a Jewish educator. Her book shed so much light for me on the practical and ethical wisdom in Torah law, so it became easier for me to embrace Judaism. For example, I came to understand that the Jewish practice of routine prayers of gratitude for just about everything-- for food, for water, for the fruit of the vine and on and on as well as the Judaic emphasis on the obligation to perform mitzvot--were not just ritual but really practical methods for combatting materialism, greed, apathy and narcissism. Habits of gratitude and mitzvot cultivate awareness and appreciation for what we have--and combat the dysphoria of desire for what we do not have. So far so good.... But G-d really had not been required up to that point. It had even occurred to me that man created God in the image of himself, of man in his most ideal state. Hence my great difficulty with Korach parsha which so evidently includes a miraculous, all powerful G-d.

Central to the parsha is Korach's challenge to Moses' position when he asks, Why are you the one to rule over us? We are all "kadosh" and have Adonai within us?. Many of the commentaries identify Korach's challenge simply as a self aggrandizing struggle for power in the guise of democratizing the community. Because of my difficulties embracing G-d, one particular commentary stunned me. Rabbi Wien writes, on Torah.org 5768, "The deeper issue here is that Korach wishes to convert Torah and Judaism to a man-made "democratic" faith, not its original and true source as a faith revealed to humans from on high, a faith and life system ordained in Heaven and revealed to humans. Therefore, it is not Moshe and his leadership that are the core issues in this dispute but the basic definition of Judaism – is it revealed and Godly or man-made and invented?...It is not Moshe's status that is at stake here. It is the understanding and true meaning of Judaism...Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch once characterized the difference between Judaism and other faiths. Judaism, he said, is a

religion given by God to define man, while the other faiths were created by man to define God.” This exactly addresses my core tension to date with Judaism.

As is becoming my practice--what with this third Torah portion, I scrutinized at the words in the text--with the help of Yehuda my sometimes cooperative Israeli husband and the Bantam Meggido Hebrew English dictionary (I really need Yehuda's help because I still don't know the order of letters in the Hebrew alphabet). Struggling to translate the words eventually I found that the vocabulary associated with Korach, Datan and Aviram's demands are all words implying power, elevated stature, being above, superiority while the vocabulary associated with Moses and Aaron have to do differential levels of "holiness" by virtue of greater or lesser closeness to the holiness of the temple. Korach's demands are for vertical aggrandizement in the human hierarchy. By contrast, Moshe, Aaron and the Levites have different levels of Kadosh--Kadosh is translated as holy or sacred but at its root it means separate, apart--and so by virtue of separation from the mundane, the ordinary, kadosh is holy. The levels of Kadosh permit different levels of nearness--karov-- to the center of the temple and to G-d. Moses's and the Levites' privilege is horizontal proximity to the mystery of Adonai. Thus it seems to me that Korach fundamentally misunderstands that Moses's holiness is not achievable by climbing the human hierarchy of power. Korach wants the power to be higher than Moses without understanding that holiness is not power but is proximity to G-d.

First, Korach and his followers "yakoomoo"--rise up. Then they demand of Moses, "madoua titnaseou al kahal adonai" Why are you elevated over Adonai's congregation?" Moses' answer is that "tomorrow you will know who is Kadosh (separate) and who will be "brought close to it. (yhikriv elav)" Further Moses asks, Is it not enough that you have been "Ihavdil" distinguished from the rest of the community? Datan and Aviram complain that it is bad enough that Moses has brought them away from Egypt--a land of plenty of milk and honey--to have them die in the desert--but their ultimate grievance against Moses is that he "histarer" rules or is sovereign over them.

Ultimately I wonder if Korach and his followers had lost faith. Since kadosh means separate, apart, and therefore holy then "koolam kedoshim" --that everyone in the community is Kadosh according to Korach--is a logical fallacy. How can everyone be "apart"--apart from what? If everyone is apart, who or what is not apart? If everyone is holy in general then no one is holy in particular. And if Moses was known for being humble. So, what could Korach conceivably have desired that Moses possessed that Korach did not have? FAITH. In the biblical stories, G-d speaks directly to Moses--who wouldn't have faith under those circumstances. For the rest of us, maybe like Korach, it is harder to have faith--and maybe power leads to a false sense of certainty in the absence of faith.

Those Levites who had the audacity to offer incense in the temple but who were not qualified to do so are killed in the plague. And later it is stated that anyone other than the direct descendants of Aaron who dares to offer incense in the temple shall similarly die. So proximity to this holy, mysterious center is somehow connected with death. This is puzzling. Is the converse true? Will death bring us to the answer to the mystery

of why, closer to holiness? My 93 year old mother is declining in health and has terrible trouble sleeping. I think she is pondering the question. I wish she could share in my joyful foray in Torah. I hope we can both find Faith. But one thing I know, we will only find faith if we keep searching for it.

Thank you for allowing me to share my delvings with you. Thank you to HT and Beth Am for mysteriously and invisibly doing all the work necessary to keep this wonderful congregation afloat thereby giving me this wonderful opportunity.

As always, I am speaking to my children, and to all the young adults here who are finishing school or graduating. Have faith in yourselves and stay steadfast in your dedication to goals worthwhile in themselves rather than just the vanity of superiority.

Shabbat Shalom.