

## Korakh 5778

Over the last few years we've seen a widening divide among Americans. It is now standard for commentators to write about two Americas, one more conservative, in much of the middle of the country, and one more liberal, along the coasts. These two Americas often seem to hold diametrically opposed visions about the country, which leads each to talk past the other, not really responding to the very real concerns that each voices. We seem less able than ever to truly hear each other, less able to engage in self-criticism, less patient with views not our own. A culture steeped in anxiety, distrust and an unwillingness to think beyond the superficial, creates an environment conducive to demagoguery, to violence and even to rebellion against elected authority and the idea of authority itself.

These themes are particularly worrisome when we reflect on this week's parshah, centered on the figure of Korakh. In our reading of the Torah today we learn about the aftermath of Korakh's and his followers' rebellion, but we should remember also who Korakh was, the nature of his rebellion, as well as its costs. To begin with, Korakh was a member of the tribe of Levi, the same as Moses and Aaron. From his own words it is clear that he is not an outsider to the community, but near its very heart. He uses words that contain some truth, which he then exaggerates in order to achieve the personal goal of usurping leadership from his kinsmen. At the beginning of the parshah Korakh, backed by 250 clan leaders, says that Moses and Aaron '[have] gone too far. For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst.' It was true that God was said to dwell among the Israelites, but our sages point out that saying that they, and we, are a holy people, it is meant to be a spur to righteous living, not simply a boast about their current status. Further, by adding the words 'You have gone too far,' Korakh mocks not

only Moses and Aaron's leadership, but implicitly their being chosen as leaders, which is to say God's choice of them. Korakh is the definition of a demagogue, which is defined by the dictionary as 'a political leader who seeks support by appealing to popular desires and prejudices rather than by using rational argument.' Korakh's rebellion has long been seen by the rabbis as the definition of demagoguery, of using popular grievances against Moses and Aaron in order to take their place.

What accounted for Korakh's popularity? He seems to have paid close attention to common complaints against the leadership. Much of the book of Bemidbar/Numbers is an account of the Israelites' dissatisfaction with their living conditions, and the self-doubt that prevented them from conquering Canaan when they had the opportunity. They feel robbed of the future they had been promised, and they are terribly short sighted, seeing their current circumstances as worse than in the past – somehow forgetting that their past was 400 years of slavery in Egypt – and thus ripe for a demagogue like Korakh to cultivate. He plays on their fears and frustrations, emphasizes their sense of being disconnected from their leadership, and represents himself as the solution.

The Torah describes Korakh's undoing as divine punishment, as God reaffirming Moses and Aaron as leaders. Korakh and his followers are swallowed by the earth. God seems to want to go further and kill many more Israelites as punishment for the rebellion, and it is only through the efforts of Moses and Aaron that a contagion from God is checked and lives saved. It is testament to their character that, following the defeat of their enemies, Moses and Aaron race to save innocent lives, including the lives of those who may have supported the failed rebellion. In contrast to Korakh, their concern is always for the well-being of the community as a whole, even

those who had sinned against them and against God. The Torah, as well as the later rabbis, makes clear that the Jewish ideal of leadership is to accept it with humility rather than to chase it hungrily. Then again, these were divinely designated prophets, not elected officials.

Over the next several months Americans will continue to argue the virtues and flaws of political candidates for Congress and statehouses. The Torah has a limited ability to teach us about many of the specific issues that will animate those campaigns. But in the Torah reading this week and throughout rabbinic literature the warnings against a Korakh figure are clear and consistent: A leader who seeks power merely as an expression of their own hunger for attention, and who plays on people's real feelings of anxiety in order to achieve that power, is unworthy of divinely sanctioned leadership. Whether they deserve to be elected to office by a popular vote is obviously a different kind of question, but one that is certainly informed by our sacred texts. The lesson of Korakh is not only that we shouldn't be such a person; it is also to warn us against the temptation to be a support to them.

On a deeper level we need to be asking ourselves what really ails us, what do we fear, and why? Is our anxiety motivated by resistance to change, by a past that we fear losing, by racial, national or religious differences that we don't understand? It is only through talking – not shouting slogans or slurs at one another, but really engaging each other – that we can heal some of the rifts that our country has suffered. It is in our interest as Americans to have that kind of conversation, and it is as Jews that we have a special insight into what it is like to be accused of being 'the other' who is threatening the social order. Because of our history Jews have a special affinity with all minorities, all immigrants, all who are strangers in a strange land, and thus a

special responsibility to stand up for other minorities who are labelled as other, as threats, without cause.

Three weeks from now, in parshat Pinhas, a verse states that the descendants of Korakh did not die. That verse has been interpreted in two very different ways. One is that the 'descendants of Korakh' are those in every generation who seek to capitalize on unrest in the community for their own advantage; the verse serves as a warning to be constantly vigilant against the temptation to elevate demagogues to positions of leadership. A very different interpretation is that the continued survival of the 'sons of Korakh' shows that even those who had previously sinned are capable of repenting. Some of the psalms are attributed to the clan of Korakh, and have made their way into the liturgy. I think that both of these interpretations will have value after the November elections, as we all recover from what is sure to be a difficult period. We must continue to guard ourselves against becoming followers of Korakh, at the same time that we encourage Korakh's followers to turn back toward the good of the whole, the understanding of one another that will lead to healing and to a future informed by hope.

Shabbat shalom.