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What Did Korah Do Wrong?

Torah Reading: Numbers 16:1 - 18:32

Haftarah Reading: I Samuel 11:14 - 12:22

I have often felt that Korah was punished unfairly. In fact, the story of Korah reminds me of the cowboy stories I saw on television when I was growing up in the 1950s (you do not have to do the math: I am 76!). The good guys all had white hats, and the bad guys all had black hats. There were no grays: people were either good or bad, and you did not even have to guess who was which. That made for a very clear picture, along with the security of knowing who was right and who was wrong. Moreover, the good guys always won in the end, so justice always prevailed.

Should Korah be wearing a black hat? The Rabbis certainly thought so. Korah's challenge to Moses' authority is the paradigm example that the Rabbis give for a debate "not for the sake of Heaven" but rather solely for personal gain (M. Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:20). Moreover, according to a legend recorded in the Talmud (B. Sanhedrin 110a), while Rabbah Bar Hannah was traveling in the desert, an Arab showed him the place where Korah and his companions had been engulfed. There was a spot in the ground, and on putting his ear to the crack, he heard voices cry, "Moses and his Torah are true, and we are liars." So Korah and his band do indeed deserve black hats: they rebelled against proper authority due to their own quest for power, and they lied about the fact that God Himself had given Moses authority in order to overthrow him. So Korah's sins were lying and rebellion for purposes of personal gain.

A much more sanguine view of Korah is suggested by Albert George Butzer in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953, II:221-223). He suggests that Korah actually had proper and even good motives: he wanted to replace the dictatorial authority of Moses, albeit sanctioned by God, with a true democracy. After all, if "all of us are holy," as God Himself had asserted before announcing the Decalogue (Exodus 19:6), the proper mode of government is that everyone has a say in deciding who should lead the group and how. Korah's mistake, though, was that he did not know when and how to accomplish this noble end; he was a man ahead of his time:

From our present vantage point we cannot be too severely critical of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Today we glory in their two main contentions, viz. ecclesiastical and political democracy as over against autocracy in both of these realms. In what then did the crime of Korah and his associates consist? Was it not that they failed to see that their timing was wrong? Fine as their ideas were, they would not understand that the people of Israel were not ready for them....There is... destructive power in an idea whose time has not come.

In some ways this reminds me of how Maimonides understands the sacrifices mandated in the Torah. He maintains that God never needed nor wanted human beings to feed Him with animal flesh. God recognized, though, that in the ancient world that is how every other nation worshipped its god, and so the ancient Hebrews would not know how to worship God without sacrifices. So God permitted and even mandated the sacrifices for that time while announcing that it was only their "sweet scent" that pleased God, not their flesh. Then, when the Second Temple was destroyed, the Jews were ready to worship God as God really wanted, through good deeds and prayer (Guide for the Perplexed, Part III, Chapter 32). So on this reading, Korah had the right idea; he just was a poor leader and teacher, not realizing what could be taught to whom at what time in their development.

At a much later time, Martin Buber articulates a third view of Korah's crime. In his book, *Moses* (pp. 186-190), he compares Korah and his group to the Nazi brown shirts who are "leopards" and "werewolves" in that they prefer chaos to order. This comes not just from a desire for power, but from an assertion that we are already holy and therefore can totally abandon the law. That is, their anarchy is motivated by a conviction that the eschatological age of living by the spirit is already a reality and can be had without legal restraints. Korah's crime, then, is that he broke the bonds of law in the name of immediately achieving the ideal age rather than reinterpreting and rejuvenating the law with the divine spirit so that people would live with and through both.

All three of these, I think, are grave warnings that the story of Korah provides for us. We must fight hard against those who would assume and use power through ego, lies, and subterfuge, as the Rabbis Korah as doing. We need to introduce new ideas and policies in ways and at times that can be assimilated by society in a healthy way, as *The Interpreter's Bible* suggests. We need also, as Buber proclaims, to reinterpret civil and Jewish law in ways that guide us to be "the kingdom of priests and holy people" that God wants us to be, not through false assertions that we are already holy, but through patient and persistent steps to become holy in the ways that Jewish law teaches us to be.

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