

Korach 5784
July 5, 2024

Two hundred and forty eight years ago yesterday, our American forebears declared that they wanted new leadership. This week, our country has been in a painful conversation about what kind of leadership we need. It just so happens that *also* this week the Torah is asking that same question.

We find ourselves in parashat Korach, just about halfway into the Book of Numbers or Bemidbar, in the wilderness. The parasha is named for a man, Korach, who thought that he should be the leader of the Israelites, and it opens on a direct face-to-face confrontation between Korach and Moses.

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן־יִצְחָר בֶּן־קֹהַת בֶּן־לֵוִי וְאַבִּירָם בֶּן־אֵלִיָּאב וְאֹן בֶּן־פִּלֵּת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן:
Korach took – the son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi – with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben —
וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמֵשִׁים וּמֵאָתַיִם נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אַנְשֵׁי־שָׁם:
to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לַכֶּם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קְדוֹשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהַל יְהוָה:
They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and יהוה is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above יהוה’s congregation?”

“When Moses heard this,” the Torah tells us, “he fell on his face.” He literally fell face down onto the ground. Commenting, Abraham ibn Ezra compares him to a prophet when receiving a prophecy. Chizkuni suggests he was ashamed – Had he misused his authority? Was he in the wrong? – and went face first to the ground to offer a prayer.

The confrontation is confusing. Korach is using egalitarian language, declaring that there has been an injustice, an illegitimate usurpation of

authority: “All the community are holy” “Why do you raise yourself above Adonai’s congregation?” Has Moses done this? There’s not much evidence to support it. He didn’t want to lead. He recently, in Parashat Behaalotecha, begged to be released from his role and when G d gave him seventy two people to share his leadership with, his response was wishing that everyone else would share in it also. Has Aaron abused his power? There is no evidence that Aaron has done anything since the consecration of the Tabernacle other than his prescribed role commanded by G d.

So what is going on here? The Rabbis see this moment as a test of character, a contrast between two archetypes of leaders represented by Moses and Korach. Almost every commentator notes that the parasha opens with the word, *Vayikach*. He took. Korach took. The verb took, *vayikach*, has no object in the sentence. He took what? He just took. The verb has no object because it is not describing an action. It is describing his character. He is a person who takes, who thinks he deserves, who is in it for himself, for whom leadership is fundamentally about him. He cloaks that motivation with egalitarian language, but we can see through it. As Kedushat Levi says, “This is “Korah took.” He wanted that he take [the opportunity] and no one else.”

Moses, on the other hand, is more humble “than any other person on the face of the earth,” as the Torah just declared four chapters ago. When confronted with 250 men trying to seize his power, his response is to fall on his face. Aaron’s response is to remain utterly silent. These are exemplars of humility. For Moses, this is about service. It’s about giving, giving to something larger than himself. And even though, because he’s the one in power, it could look like he’s holding himself above the congregation, the truth of his character shines through.

I don’t claim to know what should happen next in the nomination process in the presidential election, and I’m not allowed to take a side anyway. But what our Rabbis say about this parashah is that we all have a bit of Moses and a bit of Korach in us. We all have some measure of humility and some measure of arrogance. We all have some part of us that is giving and some

part of us that is taking. But good leadership will always look more like giving than taking and more like humility than arrogance. Good leaders put the cause, the people, the nation, above ourselves. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't be the leader – at the end of this episode, Moses and Aaron remain in their places. It just means that the measure must be what's best for the people.

The qualities personified here by Moses and Korach are relevant not just between now and November 5th, because the phenomenon we are experiencing through the presidential election is only a manifestation of a dynamic at least 50 years in the making. People are seduced by authoritarianism when they are afraid, afraid of change and of losing what they've known. Economic globalization and dislocation, a technological revolution in the way we live – as in, life moving online and toward AI –, secularization, migration, white people becoming a minority in this country, new gender roles and family structures, climate change, it's a lot. No matter what happens in the next four months, this impulse toward authoritarianism will be here for the rest of our lives, because these changes will be here for the rest of our lives and will only accelerate.

So in addition to doing everything we can in the short term to support democracy, as citizens and residents of this country, we all could benefit from the qualities displayed here by Moses. By metaphorically falling on our faces. Not thinking we have all the answers. Humbling ourselves. Listening deeply. Looking for places of connection that bridge divides, even as we continue to stay clear in our principles and values of fundamental equality and universal human dignity. And all along the way, every one of us can ask ourselves, "Am I giving more than I am taking?" Because in a highly resource-imbalanced world, that might be the most important question of all.

Shabbat Shalom.