

Korach 5785

Erev Shabbat June 27, 2025

Returning from Sabbatical

CBE Chapel

There is a town in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, called Ushuaia. Ushuaia is at the very southern tip of the continent. To give you a sense of how remote this place is, how far away it is from everything else, the distance from Ushuaia to Buenos Aires (both in Argentina) is two and a half times as far as the distance from Ushuaia to Antarctica. The nickname for this town is Fin del Mundo, or end of the world, and it knows how to play the part. The day I arrived, the sky was a dramatic stormy grey with low, misty clouds. The mountains visible on all sides were dark, sharply peaked, craggy, and ominous, with ice dotting their sides. The town seemed forlorn, forgotten. It really felt like I'd arrived at the end of the world.

But in the morning, when I set off on my first hike, the sun came out. The day was bright, and I found myself on a beautiful mountain trail alongside burbling streams crossed by wooden footbridges into green meadows. The mountains were still in view all around, but against the now blue sky I could see their green forests below those rocky peaks, which now looked inviting more than foreboding. There were travelers all around me (many of whom, incidentally, were speaking Hebrew), and eventually we all made our way up the beautiful valley to a turquoise glacial-fed lake where everyone sat to rest and picnic. An adorable Patagonian Sierra finch hopped up on the log where I was perched as I ate my sandwich. What had seemed like the end of the world turned out to be remarkably bucolic.

In our parasha this week, our ancestors feel like it's the end of the world. Korach the Levite confronts Moses and Aaron, challenging their authority with a populist claim to power. He rallies many leaders to his side, and eventually mobilizes the entire Israelite people against Moses and Aaron, creating a crisis of leadership. God intervenes, opening the earth like a gaping maw to swallow Korach and his two sidekicks Datan and Abiram and their families, burying them alive. The two hundred and fifty men of repute who followed them are then consumed by God's fire. Still, even then, the whole community of Israel continues to turn against

Moses and Aaron. The populist rebellion is not put down, even after the deaths of its leaders. Finally, a plague breaks out among the Israelite camp, killing fourteen thousand seven hundred people until Moses and Aaron are finally able to stop it.

Often this parasha raises questions for us like, What makes for good leaders? Why are ambitious populists so able to deceive people? When is rebellion justified? Some of these are the very questions that our bnei mitzvah will be asking tomorrow. But for me this year, Parashat Korach is bringing up a different question: what does it do to us when we feel like it's the end of the world?

There's some context you need in order to understand why I'm asking this question. In last week's parasha the Israelites are told that because they turned against God after hearing the fearful report of the spies, almost all of them are going to die in the wilderness. When they left Egypt, they thought they were going to the Promised Land. They thought they would make it there in their lifetimes. But now they learn that they will not. Instead, everyone over 20 years of age is going to die in the wilderness. They've proven that they don't have what it takes to enter the Promised Land so they're going to spend the remainder of their lives wandering in the wilderness, and then they're going to die. It feels to them like a death sentence. It feels to them like the end of the world.

Ramban says, "Now as long as Israel was in the wilderness [before this] no evil happening befell them, for even after the incident of the golden calf, which was a serious and well-known sin, those who died were few, the people were saved by Moses's prayer....thus they loved Moses as they loved themselves, and they obeyed him, so that had anybody rebelled against Moses at that time the people would have stoned him. But when ... after the sin of the spies ... the decree against them was thus not annulled, ... and it was decreed that the whole people would be consumed in the wilderness and there they shall die, the mood of the whole people became embittered... therefore Korach found it an opportune occasion to contest Moses' deeds, thinking that the people would readily listen to him."

Feeling that it is the end of the world, they are embittered, and not only that. They also are panicked. After the sin of the spies and before the rebellion of Korach, the people panic and get aggressive. They foolishly attack the Canaanites and Amorites despite the fact that Moses and God warn them that this is not the time

to fight, that they have no protection and will not win. They do not listen, hastily go into battle and are routed.

The very next thing that happens after their disastrous foray into combat is Korach's revolt. The people are in no position at this point to assess the situation rationally. They're in no position to make good choices. They are embittered, they are panicked, they are aggressive. They are not calm, cool, or collected. They are whipped up into a frenzy. They are out of their heads. They are desperate.

It feels to them like the end of the world.

You might remember that after Election Day last November, a lot of people felt like it was the end of the world. And feeling like it was the end of the world was kind of familiar because of October 7th and the war in Gaza, which has felt like the end of the world for a long time, and the ever increasing craziness on the left and the right in this country, antisemitic threats and violence from many directions, climate catastrophes, the danger of AI—the list of things that make us feel like it's the end of the world is long.

For the last six months, you've been going through what I imagine has been one of the most difficult times in your lives as citizens or residents of this country. You've experienced a barrage of lies, distortion, chaos, corruption, destruction and acts of cruelty. Add to that one of the most difficult times to be people who care deeply about Israel and Israelis, to be people who care deeply about Palestinians and Gaza. These aspects of being American Jews have been tied together, intertwined in what seems to me to be the most disturbing and confusing kind of way.

You might remember that I thought about canceling my sabbatical, because I didn't want to leave you during a time that promised to be so chaotic and brutal. But I knew you were in excellent hands, and it turns out you were. From all accounts, our clergy team, our leadership, and our staff rose to the moment brilliantly.

I thank God, I thank them and I thank you that I was gifted with the experience I had. I don't know that I've ever been so refreshed, so renewed, so resourced by

any six months of my life. I stand before you lighter, brighter, more joyful and more directed toward the Holy One of Blessing than I was before.

These six months gave me perspective. The first thing I realized was how much I had lost perspective. I had no idea how small my mental construct of the world had become. You don't know what you don't know. And when you get embattled, when you have to defend who you are all the time, you get tired. And then everything starts to feel like a struggle, and a closed in, limited, narrow view starts to seem like reality. And I think when one thing starts to seem like the end of the world, lots of things start to seem like the end of the world.

On sabbatical I saw so clearly that when we are embattled or embittered or panicked, when our nervous systems are disregulated for very good reasons—because how could they not be, when our world becomes narrow or constricted by a barrage of bad news, we have less to offer, we're less able to see possibility, to be creative, expansive, to make good decisions, to reach out, to trust, to believe, to try something new, to try something old, to remember and feel God's presence.

Only when I had distance, only when I had time, only when I was immersed in unfamiliar places, in wide open spaces, did my world open again, did I remember how small I am, how big it all is, how beautiful, how magnificent, how eternal.

While you were grappling with things here, I was far, far away, with no media and no social media, and though by now I have been fully briefed, I will never know what it was like to live here for these last six months. Did it sometimes feel like the end of the world? Does it now?

I want to listen to you. I want to understand what it did to your heart and your body and your mind, to your sense of hope and possibility, to your faith in humanity, to your feelings about being a Jew and being an American.

Even just since I've been back, the mayoral election in our city has seemed to some people like the end of the world.

I will have many opportunities to share more about my experience with you over the coming months and years. For tonight, I simply want to say that it is not the

end of the world, not the current presidency, not the mayoral election. Not even climate change. Not even close. The world goes on and on. The universe, the earth, life, even humanity, even the Jewish people will go on, long past our lives, long past our age, long past all of the crises with which we are concerned. The world is not ending. But we will die while we're still in the wilderness, confused and wandering. That is the human condition.

And the crises with which we are concerned — questions of who belongs, of different paths to safety for our people, of caring for the other and the stranger and the self, of how to live on this earth, of compassion versus cruelty, honesty versus mendacity, humility versus grandiosity, righteousness versus corruption — are just as pressing, just as urgent, just as important as we think they are.

It's just that they're taking place in this brief flash and blink of light. It's just that they're taking place on this blue-green marble that is full of lush glorious life. It's just that they're taking place in vast, expanding, glittering space. It's just that God is here, right here, in us, around us, beyond us, all the time. It's just that we get this one crazy experiment of being alive and trying to do it well. And even though we're so, so small, it's our entire purpose for our existence to give our whole selves to that effort. Our lives, our world, even our challenges look different with a little perspective.

The world is not ending. If it feels like that, it's time to take a break. It's time to get some distance. This life is a miracle. It's going to be short and it's happening now. We have work to do for six days out of every week that we're given to be alive. Our work is simple: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. That's it.

Shabbat Shalom.