

Korach June 24, 2017

רַב לָכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה בְּלִם קְדוֹשִׁים, וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה; וּמִדּוֹעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ, עַל-קֹהֵל יְהוָה.

Numbers 16:3 *You have gone too far, since all in the community are holy, every one of them, and Adonai is among them. So, why then do you elevate yourself above this assembly of Adonai?*



This week's torah portion brings Korach, son of Izhar, who joins with tribal leaders Dathan, Abiram, and On, along with 250 chieftains of the Israelite community as they revolt against Moses. Perhaps, not coincidentally, in the previous portion *tzit tzit* are mentioned as part of the priestly garb. The *tzit tzit* are fringes and the special blue thread that indicated then (and still does today) that in the eyes of G-d every person is equal. It would seem the that Korach and his followers were justified in claiming that all the people wishing to connect with G-d and have a voice in the evolution of the Israelite people are equal.

Based on this week's portion, one can assume that in the ancient world, protesters and community organizers who disagreed with established leaders might meet their untimely death. Yet, reading this Torah text in a wider context can shed light on the seemingly harsh punishment for civil disobedience. Moses and Aaron are attempting to form a cohesive people out of a huge population of former slaves. The group has complained endlessly. And, when this most recent complaint reaches Moses, he calls for the protesters to come meet with him. They refuse. So, in his utter frustration, Moses arranges a "test." Firepans, used at that time for sacrificial offerings, are to be brought so they could determine who would win Divine favor. Korach and his followers are proven to be out of line and thus are swallowed by the earth, consumed by fire. Those of Korach's followers that do survive are subsequently afflicted with a deadly plague. The protesters' refusal to "come to the table" for discussion results in their annihilation.

Israel has had at its helm many different leaders. And Israelis are not shy to complain. But when groups clash and one party refuses to "come to the table" to voice their complaints and discuss the issues at hand, the resulting standstill can have dire consequences.

In the early days of Ethiopian immigration to Israel, the chief rabbinate questioned the Jewishness of the newest arrivals to Israel. The rabbinate required that Ethiopian men undergo a ritual procedure to "ensure" that their circumcision at infancy was *halachic* – legal in the strictest Jewish groups. The first wave of immigrants complied. But as larger numbers of Ethiopians arrived in Israel – around 8000 at the end of 1984 and beginning of 1985 – the leadership among them were affronted by this demand. They asserted that the community, while in Africa, had indeed lived as Jews. The State convened a

blue ribbon committee to examine the issue and determined that, while the men would no longer require any procedure associated with their circumcision, they would need to undergo a ritual immersion to be considered Jewish. The Ethiopian community and their leaders vehemently protested, met with Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who in turn met with the rabbinate. The protesters stood up publicly and worked within governmental structures to voice their complaint.

A second example of public protest in modern Israel started on July 14, 2011, when Daphni Leef began a social movement to demonstrate against the exponentially increasing inflation. What began as a Facebook invitation resulted in nearly 10% of Israel's total population at some point camping out in affluent neighborhoods of Tel Aviv and other major cities. In a short time, a network of activists formed. They "showed up," literally, on the doorsteps of community leaders and the wealthy establishment. The highest levels of government had to take notice and indeed they did. Several approached Leef with a desire to bring her into their political camp, but Leef decided then and continues now to resist becoming aligned with any single party.

A current and ongoing example of those seeking the removal of inequalities among social groups and engagement in civil discourse to achieve laudable ends is found in the work of an Israeli NGO, [*Hiddush*](#), a non-partisan Israel-Diaspora partnership that unites people across the political and religious spectrum. *Hiddush* seeks to resolve inequities in the realm of religious and civil liberties. The group's strategy mobilizes grassroots support among Israelis and Liberal Jews around the world and brings their "complaint" to policy-makers and the media. They peacefully raise public awareness about the critical nature of Israel's shortcomings.

The biblical treatment of Korach and his followers seems, at first glance, to be unduly harsh. A careful reading helps shed light on an enduring message. When protesting the actions and stance of a leader or government, meeting face to face is more likely to yield a positive result.

Discussion Questions:

Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3 states: "Rabbi Eliezer says, just as the day grows dark and [then] grows light; so too, the Ten Tribes, for whom it grew dark, in the future it will thus grow light for them." Who, in contemporary Israel, have gone from darkness to light? What kind of diplomacy was used as they "stood up" for their own and others' rights?

Is violence in the pursuit of justice ever justified? What do you think the rabbinic sages thought?

Additional Resources:

[*Hiddush*](#)

Oudeh Basharat, [Christian school students demonstrate outside the Education Ministry](#)- Haaretz, June 1, 2015

Asher Schechter, [A short guide to Israel's social protest](#) in Ha'aretz, July 11, 2012

Teshome G . Wagaw, *For Our Soul: Ethiopian Jews in Israel*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1993

Nathan Jeffay, [Daphne Leef: How a Woman in a Tent Became a Israel's Top Story](#) in *The Jewish Chronicle OnLine*, August 4, 2011