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Temple Sinai  
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Korah, Numbers 16:1-18:32

## Introduction

*In Parshat Korach there is a full-fledged rebellion against the authority and leadership of Moses. Korach and his band, Dathan, Aviram and On, confront Moses, claiming that all of Israel is holy and worthy of leadership, not just Moses as God's designee. The confrontation comes to a head when Moses tells the rebels that God will choose who is authorized and who is not. On the fateful day, Korach and his band, including 250 rebels, are swallowed up in an earthquake. Our people protest to Moses that the rebels did not deserve to die, but to no avail. God confirms Moses' authority as prophet and Aaron's as priest.*

Korah is such an interesting figure. Here is a man of such stature in the community that he was assigned to help carry the ark. He knew enough to understand that we are all holy. He argued that no one should be elevated, one above another. Concurrently, he was jealous of Moses and Aaron. He wanted to be raised to the priestly status.

For this insurrection, he and his clan were swallowed by the earth, and, according to the portion, all the memories and remnants of Korah were erased. Yet, the memory of Korah and his sons were somehow able to survive this calamity. Each year we read this portion, which carries his name. His sons live on. They were entrusted with arranging and singing eleven of our psalms. We remember the sons of Korah in Psalm 47 before we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

He stands for something important, and at the same time he misses the mark. He did not know what he did not know. He did not know the mystery of the on-going nature of the Creative. And he thought he knew everything. His capacity of knowing awe of God was limited. His arguments were concerned with the small world of himself. And what he did know is just as essential as that which he did not know.

Today I would like to explore the tension of these two positions represented by Korah. We, as Israel, are both individual and community. We are holy and we live within a context where each has his portion. Our portion is equally necessary in the life of the community, and each portion performs a different function. We live interdependently with one another. We are at once the same and not the same. The priestly function is different than the ark carrier. The priest mediates between heaven and earth. The ark carrier can walk with the words. The Levites have a very visible job, their voices are heard in the community, but they own no land and are dependent on those who bring their offerings. Every part is essential and every part is holy.

I would like to bring this exploration into our contemplation. From relative silence, we can let ideas resonate and move within us, stir us, create new ideas and understanding, or plant seeds for the future which will germinate in the right time. If the ideas find no home in you, they are not for you, and then they can simply evaporate. If you don't hear a word that is spoken, then it is not useful to you. If you try to apply logical analysis or try to hear everything that is said, you will be needlessly frustrated. This is Shabbat, simply a time of receptivity, breathing the in-breath, and the out-breath without effort, of listening openly without trying to possess or push away what you hear. Simply listening. Simply breathing. No work or effort. Being Sabbath.

This contemplation is in three parts.

## **Niggun**

### **Part I: The ordinary is holy**

The portion begins with Korah declaring to Moses and Aaron: "you have gone too far! For all [in] the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in the midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" [Numbers 16:3]

We have holiness of the ordinary life.

We are ordinary.

The entire assembly is holy.

What gets in our way of way of seeing the holiness of the ordinary?

In what way do I need to be special?

What makes my gifts more than ordinary?

What makes my faults more than ordinary?

What makes my suffering more than ordinary?

What makes me feel irredeemable?

What is my need to elevate myself, making myself the worst in the world, or the best in the world?

In what ways am I jealous, like Korah?

Jealous.

Who do I think I should be other than myself?

What shifts in me as I allow myself the simplicity of being ordinary?

What happens when I begin to understand the same-ness of our struggles and our pride?

Can I allow the awareness of holiness to enter here?

**Chant:** Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh (Holy, holy, holy)

**Silence**

## **Part II: Purification**

Korah did not know that each person's understanding of the will of God depends on how each person sees it, through the lens of her own comprehension. He did not know the personal aspects of his limited understanding and did not know the necessity of the purification of his limited, personal view.

He did not know that it was the desire to serve God is the essential element, and not simply the implicit capacity for knowing holiness and awe. (Izbitzer)

Korah thought he lived in holiness and awe all the time.

When we think we have arrived in knowing, then we fall prey to our own traps. Awe must be kept alive, always placed beyond our current understanding. Never being able to fully know awe *is* the awesome. No matter what you know, mystery is still larger, beyond the reach of comprehension.

The priest functions to keep this alive in us.

From the Sefat Emet:

"Whoever seeks [to study] Torah may do so, but when it comes to deeds one needs the help of heaven." This category of deeds is that of the priest who serves God; the whole world is renewed each day through his service in the holy Temple." (p. 245)

The priest has the capacity to draw down into this realm from the Creative Essence.

The priest has a capacity to draw down a thread of the essence of the unreachable and unknowable.

According to Midrash, Korah made a tallit of all blue thread and challenged Moses, asking if the tallit were all blue, did it still need tzitzit? He said that he knew his own holiness and awe of God all the time. He did not know that there was a rung higher than receiving Torah. Moses knew that Korah's understanding was on a simple level.

Moses knew that the blue thread is placed among the fringes because it is only possible to draw forth a bit of light.

Our Rabbis talk about the levels of soul, some, more or less within our capacity to know:

The first level of understanding is like water from Miriam's well, the Exodus. The first liberation from enslavement. We drink deeply. Nefesh. (The daughter.)

The second level of understanding is like the sky, like manna from heaven, like receiving Torah, like Moses. Ruach. Spirit. (The sister or bride.) This is what Korah knew.

The third level of understanding is like the Throne of Glory, the Clouds of Glory, like Aaron. Neshemah. The redemptive deed. (The mother.)

And why is Aaron higher than Moses in this? Because Aaron knows Teshuvah. He knows the communion, of being blessed by the return, of the process of purification. He knows his own, necessary redemptive act.

And there is a redemptive act specific for each of us. (Sefat Emet)

Purification:

There is the sacrifice, the incense—the fire of purification, the smoke becomes the link; burning off, transforming, rather than being destroyed in the process.

The priest, in the silent burning of the incense, initiates the link, and the union of the power above with the power below. (The Zohar)

With Korah's challenge, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces, at the point of risking their lives, in supplication to the place of the Tree of Death, the place where is the bundle of all souls, to which they ascend and from which the issue. (Izbitzer)

And after the earth swallowed Korah's people, and the fire consumed 250 others, the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron. Then the plague began. When Moses saw the wrath impending, he told Aaron, who was a friend of the Shekhina, to light the incense. The incense, which bridges heaven and earth, increases peace in the world, and binds the knot of faith. Moses and Aaron stood between the dead and the living, between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death...and the plague was stayed. (Zohar)

In Midrash, Korah's rebellion was also a process of purification:

"Korah's mutiny also had a soul and a body: the positive forces that agitated it and the negative form they assumed. At its climatic end came a separating these two elements: its "soul" ascended on high in holy conflagration, while its "body" fell away to be absorbed by the earthy abyss. Released from its jealous embodiment, the spirit of Korah could now be reclaimed for its pure and holy application." (Lubavitcher Rebbe)

We each have our own work of redemption, of purification, for the release of the wholesome from the unwholesome.

**Chant:** Hitkadashu ki machar ya'aseh Yah b'kirb'chem niflaot

Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow God will work wonders among you (Joshua 3:5)

**Silence**

### **Part III: How do we live?**

What are the lenses we hold up to limit our understanding of God's will?  
Where do we keep our desire to serve God?  
When do we rise to it, and when do we hide from it?

From the Ethics of the Ancestors--  
Are our arguments for the sake of God or for ourselves?  
Do we make Korah's mistake?

It is in the deed that we serve God. And all deeds require the help of heaven. (Sefat Emet)

There is an important fluidity of interdependence, which is a call for cooperation. We live and work and love in concert with our families, and friends, and all the Jewish people, and the entire world.

And peace comes from a fluidity of interdependence from above to below and below to above. (Lubavitcher Rebbe)

When we say love your neighbor as yourself, we can remember that loving your neighbor is the same as loving God. (Sefat Emet)

Each person has her own portion, which is equally essential. We each have our own redemptive act to perform. (Sefat Emet)

We all are Korah. We all are ordinary. We all are holy. Here, in silence, we do the work of purification. In Teshuvah, we return. In our deed we can bring forth the Creative Essence. We can light the bridging incense.

**Chant:** V'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho

אַהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ!

Love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

### **Silence**

Bell

I have drawn upon the work of the Sefat Emet (translated and edited by Arthur Green, The Language of Truth, pp 243-248) , the Izbitzer Rebbe (translated and edited by Betsalel Philip Edwards Living Waters, pp. 294-299) the Lubavitcher Rebbe from the Chabad website on the portion, and The Zohar, Soncino Edition, Vol. 5, pp. 239-242).