

LOOKING BEHIND THE POWER OF WORDS

A commentary on *Parashat Korach*

By Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild

Korach, the cousin of Moses and Aaron, famously rebelled against their leadership. Along with 250 men, he challenged Moses saying:

רַב־לַכֶּם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כְּלָם קֹדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהֵל יְהוָה:

“Rav Lachem – you have taken on too much for yourselves, because all the community, ALL of them, are holy, and G-d is amongst them. So why do you raise yourself above the community of G-d?”

He has a point. Moses and Aaron have indeed taken on a lot for themselves; between them they hold the political, legal, military and the religious leadership. So while the men who joined the complaint of Korach are described as “*princes of the community, the elect of the assembly, men of renown*”, it is clear that they do not have anything like the power that they would like.

Moses seems to understand that their complaint has legitimacy. He falls on his face – and while no conversation with G-d is explicitly recorded, given his response in the following verse it seems that he must have been asking G-d how he should answer.

The problem is real. For Korach has spoken the truth – the whole community are holy – everyone is of equal value, and each has an equal right. So why are Moses and Aaron, the unelected leadership, over them?

At first sight it is hard to disagree with Korach and his men. All the people are holy, everyone has equal rights, and yet the leadership and the power is concentrated within one small group. Something is clearly wrong. And yet G-d is not on the side of the rebels. Indeed, the rebels will ultimately be swallowed alive when the earth opens and closes over them. The punishment of this descent is in direct contrast to their aspiration to rise to the very top of the society. It alludes to the selfish motivation of the challengers – they are not asserting the equal rights of everyone in the community even if at first it appears that they are doing so, but they are using the language of equality to stage a coup only in order to achieve the leadership for themselves. The punishment will fit the crime – descent rather than

ascent, separation rather than community.

The clues are there if you look. The very first sentence begins with a verb that has no object – “*And Korach took.*”

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח

Korach is someone who takes for himself. He is not interested in the holiness nor the rights of the rest of the people except insofar as espousing them can help his own case. His is not a desire to do anything except achieve power. For Korach equal holiness does not lead to equality in the society, it is simply a pawn in an argument that will lead to him increasing his own power.

We can take a number of lessons from Korach. One is that speaking the language of equality is powerful, but the motivation behind the language matters. Sometimes the work we do for others is actually mainly helping ourselves, making ourselves feel useful or even superior because of the time and energy we put into this cause. Many an idea to improve the lot of others has become mired in the internal politics and jostling for place in the organisation.

Another is how we challenge established structures and speak truth to power. Words create and words destroy. We have to be continually mindful of just how we are challenging, and not to slide into a different place. How we challenge really matters.

And thirdly we must be aware of the privilege and entitlement with which we live. It is no accident that Korach and his men were leaders in the community,

'men of renown' – they were the privileged and entitled who wanted more, who did not even notice how much they already had.

Korach spoke the truth but he did not care about it. He defended the holiness/rights of the whole community but only in order to take power for himself. And while Moses understood the truth of his words, he also came to understand the danger of his motivation, and the travesty of using those words in order not to fulfil them for others but to take power for himself.

We are living in a world where the Korachs are in the

Sometimes the work we do for others is actually mainly helping ourselves, making ourselves feel useful or even superior because of the time and energy we put into this cause

ascendant. The political rhetoric is all about destroying the elites and fighting for the little people, the ordinary people who have been left behind while the gap between rich and poor has grown exponentially. And yet rhetoric is all it is, as we see a new leadership consolidate its power, mouthing about taking back control for the masses while doing exactly the opposite. The story of Korach reminds us to look behind the language, to ascertain the motivation, to check the privilege and to notice the reality. As ever with bible, human nature does not change and we can see ourselves in the stories of our forbears.



*Painting of Korach and his 250 rebels by Sandro Botticelli entitled The Punishment of Rebels