



THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT

PARSHAT KORACH: REJECTING ISRAEL'S LEADERSHIP

SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE

- I. Over the past few parshas, we've seen Israel complain over and over, but never before have they tried to undermine and dispose of their leaders.
 - a. Korach and his followers boldly say: "Moses and Aaron, you've taken on too much! The whole nation is holy, and God is among them, so why do you raise yourself up over the rest of God's people?" (Numbers 16:3)
 - b. They attack the idea that Moses and Aaron - who have been there for them since Day 1 - should even be their leaders!
 - c. And not only is the content of the complaint audacious, so is the timing.
 - i. This complaint is the first story after the sin of the spies and its aftermath.
 - ii. After their sin, the people were handed a devastating punishment: The entire generation would wander in the desert until they die; they'd never see the land
 - iii. And the people got the message
 1. When they heard their fate, they mourned greatly.
 2. They declared that they sinned
 - iv. And yet, our parsha picks up as if none of that happened.
 1. As if they were never punished, and never learned their lesson from past complaints.
 2. Korach and 250 people do it again, this time, challenging leadership.
 - d. How could they so quickly have forgotten what had just happened to them?

- II. So how are we to understand Korach's complaints?
 - a. Often, we are tempted to study the Torah as if we can read one story by itself and understand its meaning, but one of the arguments we make here at the Parsha Experiment is that nothing in the Torah happens in isolation - we can only fully understand any one story by seeing it in its larger context.
 - i. And we think Parshat Korach is a perfect example of this.
 - ii. To understand Korach, we first need to understand the series of complaints that led up to his rebellion.
 - b. When you read the text carefully, you'll find that just as interesting as what the people are complaining about - food, water, terrifying enemies - is who they choose to complain to.
 - i. In one of their first complaints in the desert, when they're hungry, the people of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 17:6).

1. And, it wasn't just that they channeled their complaints against God through Moses and Aaron.
 2. They blamed them: "You, Moses and Aaron, brought us into this desert, to kill us all of hunger" (Exodus 16:3)
 3. And then, in the next chapter, when they're thirsty: "They complained against Moses, and they said: why did you, Moses, take us out of Egypt just to kill us of thirst?" (Exodus 17:3)
- ii. This all seems crazy.
1. It wasn't Moses and Aaron who took the nation out of Egypt; they were just messengers of God!
 2. And yet, in these first complaint stories, the people act as if it was all Moses and Aaron.
 - a. God is entirely out of the picture.
 - b. Over and over, Moses tried to tell them that they should be looking to God, not to him, when they're upset, but to no avail.
 - c. What's going on here? They've seen the miracles God has done for them! How could they act like Moses was the one behind it all?
- III. And it's even more glaring in the next sin, the Golden Calf.
- a. When the people thought that Moses was late in coming down from the mountain, they said to Aaron: "Get up and make us a god that will go before us, because this man, Moses, who took us out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him!" (Exodus 32:1)
 - i. Wait, so they're making a calf as a god-replacement.
 - ii. Why? Because they don't know where Moses is.
 - iii. So in their eyes, Moses seems to be a god.
 - iv. And yet, they also acknowledge that Moses is a man! How can they have it both ways?
 - b. And it continues in the book of Numbers. In Beha'alotecha, God sends a fire to quell the nation's murmuring, and in turn, the people yell at Moses! (Numbers 11:2)
 - c. And in Shelach, after the spies bring back their negative report about the land, the people complained against Moses and Aaron.
- IV. So, the people have been claiming that Moses and Aaron are in charge, not God.
- a. Why were they doing that, when any rational person knows that God is the power behind it all?
 - b. Well, the truth is, most people aren't always rational.
 - i. Especially when they have a good reason not to be.
 - ii. Take for example, the case of the 18 year old who celebrates her independence by moving out of her parents' home into a beautiful brand-new apartment.
 1. Looking around her home, she feels so adult!
 2. How does she finance her independence? With her parents' credit card.
 3. But her sense of freedom feels so good that she might not adequately thank her parents for this new arrangement; after all, that might threaten her newfound sense of adulthood.

- c. The people of Israel, since entering the desert, have wanted to feel independent, that they are in control of their own fates.
 - i. They want to be the ones to decide when they eat, how often they eat, and what they eat.
 - ii. They want to be sure that if they are going to conquer a new territory, they can do it on their own, without having to rely on anyone but themselves.
 - iii. Even if God is pledging His love to them, promising to give them food and water when they need it, and to give them the strength to prevail against even the most improbable foes, to Israel, that demands a level of vulnerability from them that is just plain scary.
 - iv. They're terrified to let go, and say, "regardless of what I do, it's all up to you, God."
 - d. And that fear makes sense; put yourselves in the nation's shoes.
 - i. Why would you want to attribute everything you've gone through to Moses and Aaron, and not rightfully to God?
 - ii. Well, if it's God behind it all, you're stuck.
 - 1. You can't try to control God.
 - 2. Because if you see things as a conflict between you and God, you might think that you have no choice but to accept His word, which means that you must accept that you have no control.
 - 3. And the hardest time to accept that we have no control is when we're most vulnerable. If I place a harness on you, I swear to you that the ropes are tight, and ask you to walk a tight-rope, 10 feet off the ground, that is a totally different story than if I ask you to do the same walk, blindfolded, suspended over the mouth of a volcano. Israel was at their most vulnerable in the desert.
 - 4. They have no water, and no food, and seemingly unbeatable foes in their future.
 - 5. Over and over, the lack of control over their own fate really scares them!
 - iii. And so, to preserve a sense of their own independence and control, the people choose not to fully acknowledge the reality that God is leading them.
 - 1. But, they couldn't just deny all the miracles that were done for them and pretend they didn't happen.
 - 2. So they figure out other ways to rationalize.
 - 3. They say - all the miracles that have been happening to us? They're from Moses and Aaron.
- V. And that makes it a whole different story.
- a. Because Moses and Aaron are people.
 - i. They're accessible, they're right there.
 - ii. You can contend with them.
 - iii. You can blame them when you're unhappy.
 - iv. You can complain, argue, and fight.
 - b. So, that's what the people do.

- i. They take God out of the picture and pretend that Moses and Aaron are the ones in charge.
 - ii. It's their way of trying to hold onto control
 - iii. It's the perfect "have your cake and eat it too" situation.
 - iv. By treating Moses like a demigod, an elohim, they acknowledge the miracles, but maintain their sense of control by being able to argue with him. After all, Moses is just a man.
 - c. The people manage to hold onto these lies throughout their experience in the desert until the sin of the spies.
 - i. God had been patient with Israel, proving His love to them through complaint after complaint, trying to get them to trust Him.
 - ii. God's grand gift of love, the entire purpose of this journey through the desert was a home: the land flowing with milk and honey.
 - iii. But Israel's fear of vulnerability won't let them accept God's loving gesture, and they turn away from Him.
 - iv. They won't go forward in the relationship, and they only pay lip-service to the idea of returning to Egypt, of going backward.
 - v. In the end, their punishment is merely a consequence of their lack of courage to take the next step in their relationship with God.
 - vi. They are doomed to wander in the desert until they die, perpetually never choosing to fully embrace their relationship with God, nor abandon Him.
 - d. Faced with their new death sentence, the people are at a dead-end.
 - i. They can't go back, and the only way forward is with the help of the divine.
 - ii. Moses and Aaron, their demi-gods, had just informed them that they are all destined to die.
 - iii. There is no way out, nothing they can do to change things.
 - 1. But the people still think, how can we control our situation?
 - 2. Is there any other option? What if Moses and Aaron don't really represent God?
 - 3. What if this supposed death sentence doesn't really come from Him?
- VI. And so Korach and his congregants take the opposite strategy that Israel has been taking up until now.
- a. Instead of hiding from God and treating Moses and Aaron as demi-gods, they cling to God, and deny the authority of Moses and Aaron.
 - b. Look closely at how Korach accuses Moses and Aaron.
 - i. Korach and his men say: "The whole nation is holy, God is in all of us, so why do you raise yourself up over the rest of God's people?" (Numbers 16:3)
 - ii. Look at all the religious terminology that Korach uses with Moses.
 - 1. He doesn't just say, "Hey, Moses, whoever appointed you leader?"
 - 2. He makes a religious argument. Moses, did you know that we are all holy? God dwells amongst all of us. You who raise yourself above us, you are raising yourself above God! Moses, do you think you are a God??
 - iii. It's almost funny; Korach and his followers now appear to be very pious - we've always wanted to be close to God, our leaders were the problem!

1. It's just a way to trying to maintain the illusion of control.
 2. Because if Moses and Aaron are the ones who claim that God assigned them their death sentence, but they aren't our true leaders, then maybe we aren't really doomed to die either.
- c. So it all wraps up nicely, right? Korach and his followers are killed at the hand of God, the people realize their mistake, they do full teshuvah and everyone lives happily ever after.
- i. Except, that's not what happens.
 - ii. Instead, immediately after Korach and his followers are swallowed up by the earth, the people turn on Moses and Aaron again! The people complain to Moses and Aaron, saying: "You killed the people" (Numbers 17:6)
 - iii. How could they complain against them when God had just affirmed their leadership?
- VII. But now we understand. Before the spies, the people hid from God, and chose to treat Moses and Aaron as demi-gods.
- a. Korach chose to cling to God, and to question the assumption that Moses and Aaron were demi-gods, or their leaders.
 - b. And instead of Israel realizing that God is God and Moses and Aaron are just His humble and faithful servants, they simply reverted to their old claim.
 - i. Oops! Turns out Moses and Aaron really are demi-gods.
 - ii. How dare they use their powers to kill Korach, who was such a wonderful and pious man! Israel would continue to tell themselves whatever story they needed to, because they were desperate to deny their fate and maintain control.
 - c. In the end, this story is hopelessly sad.
 - i. God threatens to wipe out the entire people, Moses and Aaron intercede on their behalf, and God sends a sign that He has chosen *them* to lead His people.
 - ii. When God is finally able to get through to the people that He is in charge, and that Moses and Aaron are His chosen ones, and not demi-gods, the people realize that they are in a nightmare of their own making.
 - iii. In failing to commit to God and go forward into the land, unable to go back to the land of Egypt, fated to wander, the last words of this generation are: "Behold, we perish, we are lost, we are all lost" (Numbers 17:27)
 - iv. And that's it. That's how the story ends.
 1. There is no redemption for Israel but to let go of control, and to acknowledge their fate.
 2. This generation dies out entirely - the next time we hear from Israel, just a few verses later, it will be an entirely new generation, in the 40th year.
- VIII. But there is a lot to learn from that first generation in the desert.
- a. They struggled with something that we, too, struggle with on a regular basis.
 - b. We say we trust God, but do we really believe it?
 - i. Can we really cede control and admit that it's all in His hands?
 - ii. It's not a question with an easy answer.
 - iii. It's something we struggle with and work on every single day.
 - iv. And as we do, perhaps we can look to these stories - of Israel's struggles with the very same thing - and redeem the mistakes of our ancestors.