

**The Korach in All of Us**  
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Wouldn't you know it. The odds were against us. Just when things are going badly, just when we Israelites are having some of our roughest days in the desert, just when things are on the brink of disaster -- what happens? Everything get worse.

At least that's what we hear in the Torah reading for this Shabbat. It's bad enough what happened *last* week. When the ten scouts gave Moses a vote of no-confidence where the Promised Land was concerned. It's bad enough that G-d was so frustrated with the whole lot of us that He said, "Look, you bunch of ingrates. You're so afraid of the Promised Land, so afraid of getting there and living there. Your faith is so thin that I guess I'll just leave the arrival to the next generation. And you guys, can wander in the desert for forty years." If that's not bad enough, now we're dealing with a terrible threat, particularly grave because it's not a threat from the outside, it's a threat from within.

Korach, a fellow relatively high-up in tribal politics (grandson of Levi, no less) -- Korach gathers a big group of our people together. Like some kind of politician on the stump, he grandstands about democracy and how all of them are just as competent to be leaders as are Aaron and Moses.

Imagine the scene. Korach's voice gets louder and louder. His words are more and more harsh and angry. He does his best to fire up this group of about 250 community leaders to overthrow Aaron and Moses. "We'll organize a rebellion," Korach shouts. "Let's kick the bums out."

And then can't you just imagine how Moses felt when he hears about what's happened. "Oy Vey is mir! For this I lead them out of Egypt? Forty years in the desert and this is the thanks I get. What am I chopped liver?" If Rodney Dangerfield were playing Moses he'd say, "No matter what I do, I get no respect."

The parasha tells us that G-d isn't pleased either. In fact He's so angry about what Korach has done that He demonstrates his displeasure in a way that won't be misunderstood. Could it be any more clear that when the earth

opens up and swallows Korach and all his followers, that G-d has taken this event seriously and He wants to make a point that no one will miss? Why such a terrible punishment? Isn't this earthquake with Korach and his band tumbling down into the fiery pit, just a little too dramatic and a bit overdone?

Not really. Not when we think about the lesson G-d is trying to teach us. Not when we understand that G-d wants us never to forget that something that seems so insignificant, something as trivial as quarrelling, is something that Jewish tradition teaches us is one of the gravest, most awful of all the sins we could possibly commit.

Did you ever pick a fight? Or how about this? Did you ever keep something going when you knew you should have apologized? When you knew that you should have made peace? But somehow you had to assert, one last time, "I have my rights?" Did you ever push it so that you had the last word? I know I've done it. Lots of us have, especially in our teens. The all time "Korach-period" in most everyone's life. Here's what happened.

I wanted to go out to the movies with my "friend." My father didn't want me to go. "You're too young to be in a car with a boy. Fifteen is too young. Come to me when you're sixteen, then we'll discuss it."

"But Daddy, they'll be other kids there, too. In fact, it's a double date. Two girls out with two boys."

"I already told you. Fifteen is too young. Even for a double date."  
(Remember, this was only 1962 -- the "real" sixties hadn't happened yet.)

I whined. "But Daddy, Pleeeeeeezzzzeee! Pleeeeeeezzze let me go. I already said I would go. You're making me look like a baby. Don't make me disappoint them. Pleeezzzzeee!!"

"I already told you. Come talk to me when you're sixteen. And that's final."

So far, so good. My Dad, like the Moses in the story, was the one in charge. I, like Korach, had made my request and pleaded my case. I didn't win and that should have ended it. But it didn't.

The next day the phone started to ring. First it was my best girlfriend, Edwina Jankowsky or Eddie, for short. She said, “Ah, Mr. Aiello, I just want to let you know that if you let “Barbie” come out with us, we’ll go straight to the movies and come right back home. We promise.”

And then Eddie’s boyfriend called, “Mr. Aiello, I want you to know that me and my friend are really responsible guys. We sure wish Barbie could go along. “

And finally, out came the big guns. The next call was from the boyfriend himself. “Mr. Aiello, this is David Ackerman ...” (today he’s the pharmacist...not the Philadelphia rabbi). “I’m the one who wants to take your daughter to the movies. I’m a very good driver and a very nice guy and I just want you to know.

CLICK. My father hung up on David in mid-sentence, and by now was fuming. No matter that he only spoke Italian and that he understood just a little English. Daddy got the message and by the time he got the third phone call, boy was he mad.

My Dad, the Moses of the house, called his little Korach into the living room and sat me down. He said, “Cara mia, (“my dear,” in Italian) No means no. I don’t care how many of your friends call me. I don’t care if the whole class calls me. You can’t go out in a car with a boy until you’re sixteen years old. Period.”

Now you’d think that would have ended it, but it didn’t. No, little Korach pulled the same trick that big Korach did. “Who do you think you are? Just because you’re my dad doesn’t mean you can run my life. We live in America now. This is a democracy. I have my rights!”

Dad was pensive for a moment. He said, “Oh yes, you do have your rights. I learned in Citizenship Class that in this great country of America you do have rights. But I made a mistake...”

( I smiled to myself. “Now I’m getting somewhere!” )

Daddy continued. “I was wrong. I forgot that you have rights when you’re *eighteen* and not *sixteen*. In America *Eighteen* is the age. Thanks for reminding me. **Eighteen** is when you can go out in a car with a boy.”

I gave my Dad the silent treatment for about three days, until the weekend of the “double date” was over. For three days I stomped around the house, slammed a few doors and muttered under my breath. The earth didn’t open up and swallow me, but I’m sure my Dad wished that it had. During the argument and the three days that followed, I had destroyed the peace and harmony that should have existed in our home.

And that’s the point of Korach’s rebellion. Not that Korach didn’t make some good points. He did. Not that my friends and I didn’t make some good points. We did, too. But the Torah’s account of Korach’s rebellion and the punishment that follows is to show us, in a way that we won’t soon forget, that starting an argument and keeping it going creates a divisiveness that contradicts the essential unity of G-d. The world that G-d created is a world of harmony. If we take a close look, we see that a flower has perfect form and symmetry. The colors of the sunset, even when each sunset is different from the last one, always blend beautifully. But quarrelling, with its tensions, allegations, nasty words, and long silences ultimately undermine the harmony of creation.

Each Friday night and each Saturday morning we greet each other. We say, “Shabbat Shalom.” The Hebrew the word for peace is “shalom” and it is derived from the root “shalem.” Shalem means “whole” or “complete.” So peace is not only the absence of war. It is so much more than that. Peace is a cooperative relationship, where both parties care for each other, respect each other, help each other and ultimately complete each other.

So what should we do so that we don’t turn into modern day “Korach’s”? The best way to immediately defuse any conflict is to refuse to participate. Rather than escalating the situation, calm it down. “I’m sorry things are getting so heated. Let’s just let it rest for a while.” It takes two to argue. If one won’t then the other can’t.

The Talmud describes Aaron as the master of persuing peace. So we can take a lesson from him. If Aaron saw two people arguing, he would tell each of them that the other one had admitted a mistake and wanted to make up. That way each party saves face and the dispute can end.

The story of Korach is our wake up call, put there to show us that if there is a central theme in our Jewish religion, it is the theme of peace.

We sing about it when we sing one of our most popular Hebrew songs, “Hi ne ma tov,” the words of King David from Psalm 133. “How good and pleasant it is when we come together in peace.”

Our most important prayer, the Amidah or the standing prayer and the prayer that can be said three times a day concludes with the word “Shalom.”

At every Jewish wedding we hear The Sheva Brachot, the seven wedding blessings are chanted with the bride circling the groom to demonstrate that of all the things that couples can do in a marriage, the most important is to create “Shalom Beit” peace in the home.

In fact the Talmud says that one of the names of G-d is Shalom. And to bring the point home, the very last word of the entire Talmud, the word our sages wanted us to remember above all else, the Talmud’s final word on everything is Shalom Peace.

Korach’s final word was different. He felt that fighting it out was the best way to handle a difference of opinion. G-d’s response shows us that fighting brings us nowhere but down. But people, who come in all shapes and sizes, have opinions that come in all shapes and sizes, as well. Conflict between people is normal but fighting it out is not.

So we ask you, G-d, to help us monitor our behavior. Help us be aware of those times when the Korach in us begins to surface. And then help us, G-d, to remember that in the face of difficulty to turn to you and to Torah. Where all its ways are pleasantness and all its paths are peace. AMEN