

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

such a house be exempt from requiring a mezuzah?" [Moses] responded: "[Such a house] requires a mezuzah." [Korah] said to him, "Since the whole Torah has two hundred and seventy-five *parashiot* in it - and they do not exempt the house [from having the mezuzah] - [how] would the two *parashiot* which are in the mezuzah exempt the house!?" You, Moshe, have invented these laws. They are not God-given!" (adapted from Tanhuma Korah 2)

There is a certain logic to his thinking. Why should a totally blue garment need a single blue thread to render it kosher? And why should a house full of Torah scrolls require that two paragraphs from the Torah be affixed to the doorpost? If a little is good, then more is better! Why have only one "holy person" in charge when everyone is holy? Surely everyone should be in charge!

But while we may concede that Korah had a point - having a point is not enough, and it is disingenuous to pretend that it is. Our tradition requires one to carefully consider the merits of both sides of an argument, something Korah does not even attempt. It also requires us to treat an opposing argument, and the opposition itself, as being at least as sincere as our side. Leaders make mistakes and people go through hard times, and popular demagogues like Korah seize on peoples' natural frustration to take power. They want people to think that only they know all the answers; only they can be trusted. Everyone else is either evil or naive.

Based on this story, the idiom "*Talit she'kulo techelet* (a *talit* that is entirely blue) has come to represent, in an ironic sense, something or someone who purports to be absolutely true and pure. These days, when dangerous panaceas abound, this story offers us a warning about having too much, or too little, trust in our leadership. It calls upon us to evaluate with open minds opposing points of view that are rooted in competing, but often legitimate, core values. But it mostly calls upon us to steer clear of those, like Korah, who undermine deliberative processes and basic norms of respect, tolerance, and critical thought.

May our tradition help us recognize "*talit she'kulo techelet*" when we see it and give us the tools to live successfully in a complicated world where scrutiny and vigilance are as much religious values as faith.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Korah

July 6, 2019 | 3 Tammuz 5779

Annual (Numbers 16:1-18:32): Etz Hayim p. 860; Hertz p. 639
 Triennial (Numbers 17:25-18:32): Etz Hayim p. 869; Hertz p. 645
 Haftarah (1 Samuel 11:14-12:22): Etz Hayim p. 876; Hertz p. 649

D'var Torah: An Entirely Blue Talit

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Religion cannot escape the human condition. Its enterprise is not exclusively to be found in the Beit Kneset nor the Beit Midrash. It must be involved in the nitty-gritty of real life, sometimes even with things most of us would rather avoid. The episode of Korah and his challenge to Moshe's leadership is a case in point. Who would have thought that someone would come along to challenge the authority of Israel's preeminent prophet and leader? To challenge his character and sincerity of his motivations? And worst yet, to do so in the name of the people he had led out of slavery at great personal cost?

This episode as found in the Torah is sparsely related. Korah gives one short speech, saying: "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Bemidbar 16:3) This leaves the rabbinic sages a fantastic opportunity to expound upon the story and make it their own. In a famous midrash from the Tanhuma, the sages connect Korah's rebellion to the Torah verses that came before it - the command to put *tzitziyot* (special fringes with a blue thread in them) on one's four-cornered garments:

Korah said to Moses, "Does a *talit* which is entirely blue (*talit she'kulo techelet*) require *tzitziyot* (ritual fringes) or not?" Moses said to him, "[Such a talit] certainly requires *tzitziyot*." Korah replied: "Wouldn't such a talit which is all blue exempt itself when four [blue] threads exempt it?" He continued: "And what about a house filled with Torah scrolls, would not

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Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

D'var Haftarah: The Prophetic Role

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The prophet Shmuel comes off as ambivalent about establishing the monarchy. Anointing a king represented a clear shift in the way the nation was governed as well a change in the place of religion in the leadership of the nation. Prior to Shmuel's accession to power, the nation was led by Judges - charismatic leaders appointed by God in times of national trauma to excise the nation from the clutches of its enemies. The nation's troubles, as described by the book of Judges, were brought about by the sins of the nation and national redemption came when the people cried out and appealed to God.

This approach changed when the nation demanded a king. No longer would the nation be held accountable exclusively for the sins of the nation; now, the nation would also be responsible for the behavior of its leader. The implications of this religious and political innovation were made clear to the people by Shmuel: "If you fear the Lord and serve Him and heed His voice and rebel not against the Lord's words, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, He will rescue you; but if you do heed not the voice of the Lord and you rebel against the Lord's words, the hand of God will be against you and against your fathers ('against your king to destroy you' in Septuagint)" (12:14-15)

This transformation also changed Shmuel's role in the life of the nation. No longer would he be both the national and religious leader of the people. He now became the king's (and nation's) moral conscience, with the responsibility to "check and balance" the king's behavior. Even a cursory look at the prophetic writings, whether they be the historical books like Shmuel and Kings, or the literary prophets, will note that the prophets of Israel acted as moral and religious gadflies to the monarchs of the nation. Even the most renowned kings, whether they be Saul, David or Josiah, were open to very serious challenges at the hands of the prophets.

The very idea of challenging power and holding power accountable is a tremendous prophetic innovation and it is one which should not be disregarded. We live in times where, even in democratic countries, this idea is under attack, and where even built-in governmental checks and balances are expected by some to comply with the behavior of the leader.

The prophet Shmuel anticipated the potential for the deification of the monarch or leader and it worried him deeply, both politically and religiously. There are no prophets today to challenge leadership gone awry and to right things. This should worry us just as much as it did Shmuel in times gone by.

Parashat Korah Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe finds himself facing a rebellion which seems to also be perceived as an offense to God. By the end, the rebels are punished in a unique manner, proof is given to the people about God's chosen leader, and the position and compensation of the Kohanim and Leviim for their work in the *Mishkan*, Tabernacle, is detailed.

- 1) Korah and his followers "congregated **on** Moshe" (16:3). At other times, when Moshe gathers people, we are told that they 'congregated **to**' Moshe. What do you think is the difference in meaning between the two? What might be the state of mind of a person experiencing that people are 'gathering on' him?
- 2) Moshe does not deal with all the followers of Korah in an equal manner. He addresses Korah (who is a Levite) and the Levites that join him separately from the rest. Why might that be?
- 3) When the people see the fate of Korah's followers, they turn on Moshe and Aharon saying: 'you killed the LORD's people!' (17:6-9) What do you think the people meant by that? (The punishment was from God.)
- 4) Why do you think Aharon is the person chosen to stop the plague that broke out because of the people's complaints (17:6-15)? What role might his personality, as well as the content and spirit of the complaint, play in the decision?
- 5) Chapter 18 is full of regulations regarding the role of the Levites and the Kohanim, with stern warnings that 'the outsider that comes near shall be put to death' (18:7). Do you think that the people will be receptive or objecting to this idea following the story of Korah's cohort being consumed by fire when they brought the incense offering (16:35)?

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