

Sermon for Parshat Korach
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Everybody likes an underdog. Except fans of the New York Y*nkees, but you look like enlightened people so I think we're safe. Everybody likes an underdog. Everybody liked the 2010 World Series Champion San Francisco Giants. Everybody likes the imminent 2011 World Series Champion New York Mets. (Hey, this is my sermon.)

Why all the baseball? Baseball's the most Jewish sport, after all. Just look at the first verse of the Torah. (Say in Hebrew.) "In the big inning, G created the heavens and the earth." Even at Oakland A's Jewish Heritage Night earlier this month, when the A's won 14-0, they didn't have an inning nearly that big. And, by the way, Jewish reliever Craig Breslow pitched a scoreless 8th inning.

So, put it all together. Everybody likes an underdog. Baseball has underdogs. Baseball is Jewish. Jews are perennial underdogs. And now the legitimate part of the sermon begins. Ish.

Jews have been underdogs throughout history. So shouldn't everybody like the Jews? Well, we only have fifteen minutes so let's make it simpler. Jews have been underdogs throughout history. So shouldn't all Jews like the Jews?

Okay, let's try this one. Most Jews tend to like underdogs, and tend to like each other, outside of synagogue board meetings. And Jewish communities as a whole jump to the aid of other underdogs worldwide, from Darfur to Darmascus. It's in our DNA to like underdogs because we know what it's like to be them.

So why don't we like Korach? Is it because we don't know Korach? Is it because the first time some of you realized Korach was a person was about six words ago? Okay, as we all just heard in Hebrew, Korach a descendent of Levi, joined up with two Reubenites, Datan and Aviram, and rose up with 250 men against Moses. According to the second verse of the parshah, these were significant men, "anshei shem."

Korach told Moses and Aaron, "you take too much on you. All the people are holy, every one of them, and the Big G is among them. Why then do you raise yourselves above the people?" Korach has had it with the Big Kehunah. No, really, that's what it says in Hebrew, kehunah is the priesthood, basically.

What's Moses' answer? He falls on his face. So much for being *above* the people. Then he tells Korach that tomorrow the Big G will show who are his people, who is holy, and who's got some 'splaining to do.

He also tells Korach and his people to specially burn incense, which they do without realizing that this might make them easy targets. And Datan and Aviram refused to talk to

Moses, but still got in a jab about how he still hadn't gotten everyone to the Promised Land yet.

Moses then tells the Big G to not respect their offering, saying "I have not taken one ass from them" even though it's something they don't seem to lack. The Big G tells Moses, "I've got this one. Get away from this congregation that I may consume them as in a moment." And so on the next day the Big G tells Moses to separate the people from Korach's people. Moses tells the Israelites "if these men die the common death of all men, the Big G didn't send me. But if something else happens to them, will you finally take the hint?" Lo and behold, once the people separate, the ground opens up and swallows all 250 people of Korach. Whether you believe that the Big G really did this, or think it a well-timed desert-borne earthquake, or even that Moses cleverly asked Korach to make camp over some quicksand, you have to admit this sounds pretty convincing.

But was it convincing enough? Did the Jews sing campfire songs for the rest of the forty years til their condos were ready? Please. If they did, there's no way the Bible would have become the best-selling book of all time. By the middle of the third aliyah today, a bunch more of the Israelites complained to Moses and Aaron that they killed some of the Big G's people. (Didn't the Big G do it? Maybe the other Israelites saw the quicksand and knew it was Moses's idea. But then aren't they themselves culpable for not warning Korach about the quicksand? Too many questions and not enough coffee yet?)

After this latest round of complaining, the Big G apparently still had a belly for bellyachers, telling Moses once again, "Get away from this congregation that I may consume them as in a moment." This time the sand wasn't going to be quick enough, so instead they were stricken with a plague as bad as the Y*nkees sweeping a doubleheader. The plague killed 14,700; add Korach's people and that's almost 15,000 Israelites dead in just two chapters.

A few weeks ago, the book of Numbers began with a census, where they counted 603,550 adult men. How did they manage such a big census, when the U.S. government can't even get one right? You remember, it was the first mention of a major Silicon Valley company in the Torah. "b'mispar shemot l'gulglotam." "To Google them."

So after this exciting episode they're down in the 580s already, a sizable percentage wiped out. Everybody likes an underdog, but in this instance the underdog was wiped out like your gas money last winter. Aren't we supposed to be mad about this?

Well, after just 250 men were wiped out, the 14,700 men who were mad about it were also wiped out, maybe we took the hint? Maybe there was a greater good to keep society in check. Maybe this is a big ethical debate in the making. *Maybe this is a Palestinian debate in the making.* Maybe we're starting to wonder if we've backed the wrong horse with this whole Torah thing, and we better pack up Israel and move to Uganda. But before it gets as serious as all that, we need to think of it metaphorically in terms of a major Hollywood epic.

By backing the Big G, Moses, and Aaron in their wiping out of Korach, aren't we rooting for the Galactic Empire, when we're supposed to be all about the Rebel Alliance, and not just because Carrie Fisher and Natalie Portman are Jewish? Aren't we giving people in The Middle East some great fodder to use against us?

Let's think about it for a minute. Korach and his little group were the underdogs. The tiny band of uprisers railing against the establishment. But were they the really the Rebel Alliance, fighting against the Empire? No. The Rebel Alliance were the underdogs fighting against the Empire. Korach's people were on the cutting room floor, the small group of Rebel Alliance members who didn't like that Princess Leia didn't wear the bikini for them and who were jealous that Han Solo got to do that archaeology film.

These are the guys who would tell Luke Skywalker, okay so you destroyed the Death Star, but look at this icy wilderness we're stuck in now. They were undermining the underdogs by going against the underdogs. And all that would do is work contrary to their cause, ripping apart the Alliance from within so the Empire wouldn't even have a battle to fight.

But how do you explain this to people who haven't seen Star Wars?

Is the enemy of my enemy my friend? Maybe. But in this instance, is the enemy within my friends, my enemy? Is the enemy from within a greater enemy than the enemy from without? Is that what the parshah shows us?

Of course, people who really know Star Wars will say that the prequel trilogy is a more direct metaphor, but most rabbinic scholars agree that the prequel trilogy sucks. And if that many rabbis agree about something, you better believe it.

By the way, why all the Star Wars? This parshah includes one of the first mentions of the Jedi, giving us some clue as to exactly when a long, long time ago really was. About six verses in, it says "v'Yoda hashem et kol asher lo."

Okay, so the story of Korach, both the rebellion and wiping out thereof, plus the ensuing wiping out of the complainers about the initial wiping out, all add up to a lesson about not undermining the greater good, and the greater cause, by mutinying against the leaders. There are better approaches to take to effect change. But if you try, make sure you're not standing in quicksand. Or rebelling against someone who actually talks to the Big G.

But is that it? Fall in line? Is that all we get for our nickel this Shabbat? No.

Consider this. Why do we get bigger TVs? High definition cameras, Blu-Ray players? Because the Torah keeps showing us that we need to look at the bigger picture. Korach is one example of how. Read to the conclusion. Korach's rebellion isn't an entire story by itself, no matter how King James divided the chapters. The 14,700 complainers added to Korach's rebellion aren't the entire story either. What happened next, during those last

couple of aliyahs today when you were spared from hearing my voice anymore until I started throwing baseball at you?

Let's do like the old man in Raiders of the Lost Ark, and flip the headpiece to the Staff of Rah so we can foil those Nazis and that Frenchman with the biblical name. Or, in English, let's look at the bigger picture, the last part of the parshah.

Do any Israelites complain about the wiping out of the complainers who complained about the wiping out of Korach's complainers? No. Why not? The sixth aliyah begins with the Big G telling Moses to set out Aaron's rod to be kept as a sign against "bnei Mary" which means rebels. This is odd, because we are never told who Mary is, or why her sons were so rebellious.

But anyway, the last two aliyahs have the Big G giving Aaron loads of instructions regarding him, his sons, and the Levites and how they will care for the altar and handle all the people's sacrifices, and so on, as if we didn't get enough of that in Leviticus. He tells for almost twenty verses of all the responsibilities that are theirs and all that they will receive as a result of it. However, then He tells Aaron that he'll get no inheritance in the land or have any portion among the rest of the Israelites. That the Big G is their portion and inheritance instead, and that they will receive the tithes that the Israelites will bring to the Big G. They have to offer up only a tenth of the tithe.

So what's that about? It seems like the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away all in just a few verses. And why now, right after the Korach rebellion?

Let's look back for a second. At the very beginning, the 250 Israelites who join Korach are referred to as "Anshei Shem" – "men of name" or "men of renown." With the other words in the verse, they seem to be important people, princes or leaders among the tribes of Israel.

In commenting on these two words, "Anshei Shem," the Italian Rabbi Moshe Chafetz in his 1710 Torah commentary Melechet Machashevet refers to these men as "bnei bliya'al", more than literally worthless, but sons of bliya'al a figure associated with satan. A crown prince of hell, if you will. Or even if you won't. R. Chafetz goes on to say that "they will strive to make for themselves a name like the great names in the Land (the promised land) and will then see their way to steal, plunder, murder, and adulter, and all the people will hear and will know." R. Chafetz is saying that these men are opportunists who aren't just acting out against Moses and Aaron's leadership for the sake of the Israelites, but for the sake of their own selfish advancement. They want to get to the Promised Land and make a name for themselves there for their own gain.

R. Chafetz is not alone in this belief. The long-lost, recently discovered Mishnah tractate Bava Gump – the one that among other things shows us how shrimp can be kosher – expresses a similar sentiment. For those of you unfamiliar with Bava Gump, it's a recently revealed fourth tractate in the Mishnah book of Damages that goes along with the better-known tractates Bava Metziah, Bava Batra, and Bava Kama. Those three

tractates represent the First Gate, the Middle Gate, and the Last Gate. Bava Gump, more of an everyman's tractate in perspective and origin, represents the Service Entrance. While we're familiar with Rabbi Tarfon, perhaps best known for his phrase in Pirkei Avot "It is not upon you to complete the task, but neither can you stray from working toward it," Bava Gump prominently features the wisdom of Rabbi Telfon, the Great Communicator, who said "It is not upon you to complete the task, but neither can you leave it unfinished."

Bava Gump, with its usual prescience, points out that "Anshei Shem" can literally mean "men of shame." This particularly odd phrasing, that helps support the establishment of these men as important, is actually a backhanded warning that they're no good, that they'll bring shame upon themselves and whoever comes near.

So we have these questionable men who rebel against Moses and Aaron's leadership, they get wiped out, the people who complain about them getting wiped out get wiped out. And then the Big G tells Aaron and his sons of all their special responsibility to the altar, to sacrifices on behalf of Israel, but also that they are the only ones who get no portion unlike all the other tribes. What's going on here? Aaron and the Levites are both gaining and losing here all at once, after Moses and Aaron were accused of putting themselves above the other Israelites of their own volition.

R. Chafetz adjusts the brightness and puts the parshah in 1080p. For the verse (18:20) that suddenly, after telling Aaron everything he and his sons get to do special for the altar and such, "And God said to Aaron 'In their land you have no inheritance and there will not be any portion, for I am your portion.'"... R. Chafetz says that the intent of this passage is that the priests will not be subservient to Israel just because of the sacrifices that they will offer up on behalf of the Israelites. They're not just the UPS guys. R. Chafetz is saying that by having less than the rest of the Israelites and by having to handle the sacrifices brought by the Israelites, the Israelites might see Aaron and his people as being lesser than the rest of them. This can prevent people from feeling, like Korach, that Aaron has elevated himself above the Israelites. But that the Big G is their portion is a reminder that while the priests aren't to flaunt a higher status in front of the Israelites, that they are special nonetheless.

By the way, if you want to hear more about R. Chafetz and his Torah commentary, which I've been gradually translating for years, I'll be giving a sermon about it on Shabbat Yom Turkey, which is his 300th yahrtzeit. For more of the wisdom of Bava Gump, read my monthly column online.

So, was the whole saga of Korach, in the bigger picture, about a rebellion gone awry and showing that the Big G is boss and Moses and Aaron are His conciglieres? Is that the lesson? Or is the broader lesson here the consequence (rebellion) of the people in charge appearing, intentionally or not, too self-important or too much like they're superior, and that even our leaders should strive to appear like (and frankly to remember that) they're basically just part of the people like everyone else, just with special tasks to do?

Is it telling us that we can't tell who the underdogs are anymore? In a world where it's hard to know who the enemy is anymore, or where the enemy is, is it just as hard to tell who the real underdog is anymore? Are the Palestinians really an underdog, or just portraying themselves as the underdog to the perennial underdogs, the Jews? Does the story of Korach show us that people who try to be the underdog to the real underdog are actually wrong, but can get away with it in the eyes of many?

Is Korach really about backing the underdog, or just about backing the wrong horse?

Only one thing is certain. If Korach were around today, I bet he'd be a Y*nkees fan. Shabbat Shalom.

(Italics were ad-libs during the sermon. Underlines were in the sermon but left out on the spot.)

*(If you liked this, you'll probably like my monthly Jewish humor column, *The Beholder's Eye*, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/the.beholders.ey>. If you didn't like this, tell people you hate about the column, because they'll probably like it. Oh, and you shouldn't hate them so much. Save it for the Y*nkees.)*