

Dear Chavraya,

Two phrases can easily enter a discussion of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*. Similar and different in the way and context in which they are often spoken, each one is easily misunderstood. Of greater import than often recognized, they both represent a vitalizing force in movements for democratic social change, even as they are essential for the preservation of democracy. Proclaimed from T-shirts and bumper stickers, one is "Question Authority." Coming out of Quaker tradition, the other is "Speak Truth to Power."

The impact of each phrase is in how we speak and how we question, and in the motives that underlie each. Questioning authority and speaking truth to power both require courage, whether in a child's questioning of a teacher, or of a dissident facing down tanks. Each one is meant to produce change, both in situation, and, ideally, in the person who wields authority and power. Though each can be important as an expression of witness, even when change is unlikely in the present moment, neither reflects an end in itself. In the classic tension between means and ends, questioning authority and speaking truth to power find ultimate effectiveness in the degree to which means and ends are joined in the manner of our striving toward a more just and humane reality.

In *Parashat Korach*, Korach stands up to Moses and Aaron. In his questioning of what certainly appears to be entrenched authority, we might feel sympathetic at first. The Korach "rebellion," as presented in the Torah portion that bears its leader's name, is an excellent source for the study of power and the questioning of power, of means and ends, and of the nature of motives in a social struggle. The first word in the portion is revealing, *vayikach/and he took*. It suggests a grabbing after power, of seeking for himself. So it comes to be that Korach and his followers seek for themselves both the political authority represented by Moses and the priestly authority represented by Aaron. The "Targum Unkelos," an Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah, begins with the words, *v'it'p'leg Korach/and Korach divided*. From that, Rashi says that Korach "separated from the rest of the community to foment conflict." Rather than striving to bring people together for a greater good, Korach seeks to divide for the sake of personal gain. Much that Korach says by way of critique makes sense, and would be worthy of response, an impetus for change, if asked with different motive. He tells Moses and Aaron that they take too much upon themselves, *rav lachem, for the entire community, they all are holy*. It is very similar to the advice that Yitro gives to Moses earlier, urging him to decentralize and share the burden of authority and leadership with others, so that neither he nor the people will wear away. Significant organizational change follows from this advice that is given out of concern for the wellbeing of both Moses and the people.

The way in which we question authority and speak truth to power also needs to be calibrated in relation to the nature of response from those in power. A leader of rare humility, Moses' first response to the challenge of Korach and his band is to fall on his face. Reaching out to Datan and Aviram, other leaders of the revolt, he seeks to engage with them. Rejecting Moses' offer, they twice say, *lo na'aleh/we will not come up*. The text notes poignantly that Moses is deeply hurt by their response. On Datan and Aviram's refusal to speak with Moses, Rashi cites a

timeless midrash that speaks to our own lives and conflicts, *from here we learn that we should not hold onto conflict/ayn machzikin b'machloket; for Moses was going around after them to bring reconciliation with them through words of peace/l'hashlimam b'divrei shalom.*

Ironically, we learn more about resolving conflict and questioning authority from the rare nature of Moses' expression of authority than from the ones who would challenge it. Reaching out across the divide, the leader has taught us how to speak from a place of deeper truth in seeking to resolve conflict, whichever side of the divide we happen to be on. Whatever the nature and context of authority, true leadership means to question our own authority and to be open to the truths bravely spoken by others. The way of Moses' leadership is for all who would lead others to higher moral ground and lasting change, pursuing our opponents for the sake of reconciliation, not for triumph or revenge. So may we help to bring a time when speaking truth to power shall no longer need to be in the face of tanks or tear gas and dogs, but as a welcome corrective, expressed and received as an argument that is "for the sake of Heaven."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor