

Parashat Korach 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

There are times when an argued position makes complete sense, except it doesn't. Taken out of context, unaccompanied by the tone of voice or facial expression of the speaker, the essence of an argument may seem quite reasonable, even if at root it is not. The arguments of Korach and his company in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*, express important truths, but are flawed through dishonest intent. Challenging Moses and Aaron, Korach says, *You take too much upon yourselves/rav lachem, for the entire community, they are all holy/kulam k'doshim and God is in their midst. And why do you lift yourselves up above the community of God?* Earlier, Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, had used similar words to express concern for his son-in-law, *for this thing is too difficult for you/ki chaved mimcha ha'davar. You cannot carry it out all alone....* We are also told many times that the entire people is holy, at least to the degree that we strive to be, and so we are challenged, *k'doshim ti'h'yu/you shall be holy, as I, God, your God, am holy.* And God is certainly in our midst, if we create a fitting sanctuary among us and within us. Telling us to build a sanctuary, God says, *v'shochanti b'tocham/and I will dwell among you.* It is an operative mitzvah still today, calling each of us to build a sanctuary within our hearts.

It is all about sincerity and purity of purpose, and that is what Korach was lacking. The very first words of the *parsha* are *vayikach Korach/and Korach took.* Strikingly, there is no direct object to Korach's taking. All that Korach says is understood as directed toward taking, taking power from Moses. Challenging power is in itself deeply important, vital if we would keep power from becoming abusive. Korach's concern is not in protecting others from an abuse of power on the part of Moses and Aaron, but in taking power for himself. Beyond the person of Korach, the portion that bears his name offers a lens through which to examine our own deeds and desires, a reminder to seek harmony between heart and hand, between deepest inner awareness and outer expression.

I was guided to see these teachings in our own tradition more clearly through engaging in study of such matters with Muslim friends and colleagues this week, and through many months of preparation for this gathering. It was a program of "Building Bridges through Learning," an effort that I co-founded a number of years ago to bring together imams and rabbis to learn from and with each other. The name and theme for this week's program expresses a challenge, "Purification of the Heart - Shaping Upright Character and Deeds." Finding new insight into one's own tradition is one of the gifts to be found when sitting down at the study table with those of other traditions.

Muslims put great emphasis on daily prayer and practice toward “purification of the heart.” The purpose is to strive regularly to return to one’s best self, to be in a place of harmony between inner and outer expression. Because Jewish tradition doesn’t emphasize “purification of the heart” as a specific commandment, a daily mitzvah, we tend not to realize its importance within our own tradition and within our own lives. Such return to be who we are meant to be is the challenge of *t’shuva/repentant turning*. In Arabic it is *tawba/repentance*, from the verb “to turn,” the root of *t’shuva*. The goal for a Muslim is to return to *fitr*, the inherent nature of the human being, the natural inclination of the self toward the Creator.

Every Shabbos, we offer a most simple prayer of four words, so simple that it is easily missed, *v’taher libenu l’ao’d’cha b’emet/purify our hearts to serve You in truth*. It is a prayer for wholeness, for cohesion between intent and deed. It is prayer to direct all of our deeds toward higher purpose. It is a prayer that Korach missed, and so a reminder for us to take it to heart. As a Shabbos meditation to help us receive the gift of such a simple prayer, I share with you below a beautiful teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, one of the texts shared this week among Jews and Muslims learning together.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, 18th century, Likutey Moharan 156  
"Create in me, God, a pure heart..." (Psalms 51:12).... All the words that the heart says are indeed words of the Holy Blessed One, and this reflects the presence of the Holy Spirit. One needs to renew continually, to seek renewals in every moment through supplications and words of conciliation. To attain to such merit, one needs purification of the heart. And purification of the heart is accomplished when one's heart is inflamed and burns with desire for the Holy Blessed One, and so the heart is purified.... Then shall one merit to speak in every moment with inspired speech, reflecting the presence of the Holy Spirit. And this is just what is meant [by the full verse, Psalm 51:12], "Create in me, God, a pure heart," which is followed immediately by the words, "and renew an upright spirit within me." Then shall one merit to renew inspired speech, which is the presence of the Holy Spirit.