

THE HOLE THAT ATE KORACH
a Torah teaching by the Rev. Paul Oakley
Erev Shabbat/ Friday Evening Service
Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness
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In Ellen Frankel's Torah commentary titled *The Five Books of Miriam* (1996), women's concerns are addressed by putting the discussion of each parsha, or Torah portion, in the mouths of women. Korach¹ is discussed and questioned by Our Daughters, Dinah the Wounded One, Sarah the Ancient One, and Lilith the Rebel, among others. Our Daughters ask, "But even if Korach and his followers do deserve what they get, why are innocent women and children swallowed up along with the guilty?" Dinah comments how innocent women and children have always been victims of war. Sarah says, "Sometimes there's just no telling what God is up to." And Lilith responds, "If women had been in charge, we certainly would have handled the situation differently." The perspective we bring to revered texts shapes what we can see there.

The story of Korach is a difficult one, one that seems to tell something very negative about God. Korach and his main men, Dathan and Abiram, lead a rebellion against the rule of Moses and Aaron, demanding that the priesthood and leadership be open to all people, not just the family of Moses. 250 rebels light incense to show their worthiness as priests, and God's fire consumes them. God punishes the rebels by causing the earth to open up and swallow them and their families alive. God then afflicts the people with a plague. Each tribe's chief places his staff, symbolizing his authority, inside the Tent of Meeting. Miraculously, Aaron's staff sprouts leaves and blossoms and bears almonds, proving beyond a doubt that God favored the leadership of the house of Moses. The remainder of the parsha is about the responsibilities and compensation for the Levites and Kohanim, the priests of this standing order under Moses and Aaron.

Now, I've always been *in awe* of Moshe Rabbeinu², Moses, who could go into God's radioactive presence and yet survive, glowing, but exuding authority. But I *like* Korach. Korach says everybody's holy now, right? We're a holy people, a holy nation of priests.³ And Korach stood up and said, our governance structure should match our theology. Then the earth opened up and swallowed the rebel leaders and their families. But the story was told by men, mostly, about men, mostly, and there was a vested interest in sussing out a positive interpretation. So the ancient rabbis figured out what Korach did wrong, what his sin was. And they had to figure it out, because they were already living in a vastly different culture than the one their ancestors were part of who first told the story.

¹ Numbers 16:1 - 18:32

² That is, "Moses our teacher."

³ Exodus 19:6

But we post moderns often prefer the message of Korach. We sometimes are able to counter-read Torah in dissent. Jane Litman tells of a conversation with her cousin Adam. “Pretty hard on Korach,” Adam said. “First the Torah has him swallowed up by the earth, and then the Rabbis diss his character... I think I’ll write my own midrash, in which Moses and Korach reunite in the World to Come, make peace and become friends.”⁴

But I would like to look for a moment at one place the story of Korach is referred to in the Mishna, in the tractate known as *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, chapter five. In an arcane discussion about how we know that the world was created with ten utterances, the rabbis referred to several lists of ten from the Torah: ten generations from Adam to Noach, ten more to Abraham. Ten plagues. Ten trials of Abraham. Ten miracles. And then this list of ten:

Ten things were created at twilight of Shabbat eve. These are: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korach]; the mouth of [Miriam's] well; the mouth of [Balaam's] donkey; the rainbow; the manna; [Moses'] staff; the shamir; the writing, the inscription and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments]. Some say also the burial place of Moses and the ram of our father Abraham. And some say also the spirits of destruction as well as the original tongs, for tongs are made with tongs.

The list of ten actually names 14 things that were or might have been created at twilight of the first Shabbat. God has just done the work of creation, is getting ready to take a rest but then suddenly thinks of ten (or 14) last minute things that creation somehow cannot do without for a single day more. eight of the 10 are part of the Torah story of Moshe. The mouth of the earth, a destructive force. The mouth of the well, a life-sustaining force, the mouth of the donkey, an instructive force... And so on.

Remember I started with Ellen Frankel’s women’s discussion of Korach, and Sarah said, “Sometimes there’s no telling what God is up to”? The rabbis of old were not people who casually dismissed the science of their day. Yet sometimes the holy writings suggested the impossible. One way of looking at it is that this list of things specially created on the eve of that first Sabbath were the things that were exceptions to the laws of nature or physics, the things that needed special creation to exist at all.⁵ Sometimes there’s no telling what God is up to!

Personally, I prefer a more metaphorical approach. The people of Israel had just escaped hundreds of years of oppression as slaves in Egypt. The experience of Sinai had not yet created a stable society. Moses and Aaron were larger than life boss men ruling over a people who had until recently been lorded over by taskmasters, owners, and Pharaohs. They were a people only beginning to be free, to have moral agency. And along comes Korach, a leader for another age, a leader who said all are equal, not just in theory but in actuality. It was a position the people were not ready for. And the earth opened. It was a force of nature, not a statement that Korach was wrong.

⁴ Jane Rachel Litman. “Torah and Its Discontents: Parashat Korach.” In *Torah Queeries*, p. 205.

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⁵ <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/6/19/1391652/-D-var-Torah-Torah-Science-and-Korach-s-Big-Hole>

In the recent election cycle, something similar happened. Political backlash where the people were not unified about the way forward ensured that the possibilities that some of us favored were, for the time, swallowed up by the earth. It was not a judgment on those goals, but a force of nature.

But that wonderful list of liminal metaphors only has this one destructive force. Along with it are manna and Miriam's well and the rainbow of promise and the surprise way out of ethical conundrums. Ten or fourteen things created in that liminal space as Shabbat began tell us to have hope, to hold on, to continue to work for freedom and equity for all even if the hole eats Korach. Shabbat still offers rest. And the work toward a better world continues tomorrow, well fed with manna, thirst quenched from Miriam's well.

As the earth swallows our vision for a just and equitable future, even so may Shabbat bring us rest and hope for the time when we can live as a truly free people.