Dissent Is Not a Dirty Word

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Sometimes leaders are wrong, and sometimes those who are meant to protect us actually hurt us. This basic fact is something we all know because we learned it in 1920s Germany with the rise of the Nazi party, in early 20th-century America with the implementation of the Jim Crow laws, and in Fidel Castro’s Cuba. For some reason, though, we have a difficult time acknowledging injustice and fighting against it, even when we see its effects. I think this is because we rely so heavily on our laws, our government, and on those who protect us that to admit they might be misguided or inflicting pain is to take some responsibility for reform.

To fight against these forces is also to accept a great amount of risk. Young grassroots organizers of the Arab Spring risked their lives to overthrow tyrannical governments. Those protesting police brutality in America organized the #blacklivesmatter Movement, sparking a national conversation about race and inequality, even, at times, risking their own safety. Korah, our paradigmatic rebel whose story we read in this week’s parashah, also accepted a great deal of risk when he gathered 250 Israelites and challenged Moses and Aaron, saying, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” (Num. 16:3).

The author of the text is not happy with Korah’s rebellion. It is clear that Korah and his co-dissenters have gone too far when God’s punishment is so swift, violent, and terrifying. “The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah’s people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation” (16:32–33). The punishment is terrifying not only for its imagery, but also for its permanence. Nothing remained of those who challenged Moses, Aaron, and God. Nothing remained of those who fought the status quo. The fact that they ever existed seems to be a threat to the system.
Most commentators are quick to point out that Korah’s rebellion comes immediately after the incident involving the spies in which the people of Israel are denied entry into the Promised Land and condemned to die in the wilderness. In light of this context, Korah is a disgruntled Israelite, hoping to overthrow the leaders for his own political gain. The Etz Hayim describes him as “the arch-demagogue” in Jewish lore (860). Many writers justify his punishment and object to any sort of dissent or rebellion.

Ibn Ezra takes a different view, however, by viewing the Korah texts as chronologically earlier than the spies incident. Indeed, Ibn Ezra argues, Korah’s rebellion comes much earlier, immediately following the episode in which the Levites replaced the first-born males in serving the Mishkan (Tabernacle) (Num. 3:5–13). Bible scholar Michael Hattin writes, “After all, the earlier arrangement ensured that many households in ancient Israel had direct involvement in the ongoing service. The election of the Levites effectively recast the service as less ‘democratic’, for now a particular group would have exclusive right to ministering in the Mishkan” (Passages: Text and Transformation in the Parasha, 274). Although Korah himself was a Levite, he was acting as a firstborn and on behalf of all the firstborn men (see Exod. 6:21).

In his book Dissent: The History of an American Idea, Ralph Young defines dissent as “speaking out and protesting against what is (whatever that is), most often by a minority group unhappy with majority opinion and rule.” Furthermore, “religious dissent is the insistence that everyone be allowed to worship according to the dictates of conscience and not according to the rules of an established religion” (23). Korah, then, is a religious dissenter, like Jews have been for much of our history.

In his essay “Dissent,” Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “Dissent is indigenous to Judaism.” Citing the prophets, disagreement in rabbinic texts, and Hassidism, Heschel demonstrates that Judaism is a religion of dissent. Zionism, I would add, is sometimes conceived as the rebellion against the diaspora and all that it entails: anti-Semitism, disenfranchisement, the weakening of Judaism as a religion, and the loss of Jewish identity.

Although dissenters are frequently attacked for being unpatriotic, Young argues, “protest is one of the consummate expressions of ‘Americanness’. It is patriotic in the deepest sense” (21–22). The same is true of Judaism. Heschel continues, “The greatness of the prophets was in their ability to voice dissent and disagreement not only with the beliefs of their pagan neighbors, but also with the cherished values and habits of their own people.” Rebellion is not something to be feared, and “dissent” is not a dirty word. Rebellion got us to where we are today. Dissent made us into a people with a 3,000-year-old religion and a homeland.

It is true that not all dissenters are created equal. Young writes, “There is a difference between dissenters whose goal is to create a more just society by expanding the rights of the disempowered and those who are self-aggrandizing troublemakers interested only in disrupting society or denying rights to others.” (29). For thousands of years we have read Korah as the latter, but isn’t ours a tradition that seeks to expand the rights of the disempowered? Haven’t we fought for equality for Jews, Blacks, and other marginalized groups? If we read according to Ibn Ezra, Korah is not a “self-aggrandizing troublemaker.” Young explains that many dissenters who were maligned and vilified early on come to be considered heroes only in hindsight. Maybe it’s time we see Korah as our hero and welcome the voice of dissent so ingrained in our tradition.

Most later commentators reject Ibn Ezra’s assertions, intent on painting Korah as the paradigmatic rebel whom we can unanimously reject. They justify punishing Korah, the other dissenters, and their entire families because they see this challenge to authority as deeply problematic. But maligning Korah because he fought against the status quo, because he sought to make the practice of Judaism more democratic, is also deeply problematic. Korah and his followers supported a system where each family had access to the Mishkan. They rose up against the leaders who had implemented a change that removed power from the people and placed it in the hands of just one family. This was seen as so threatening to ancient Israelite society that Korah and his followers had to be eliminated. And as long as we continue to vilify Korah, we persist in reinforcing an unjust hegemony.

All over the world, from Baltimore to Damascus, people are fighting against unjust governments and brutal leaders. They are fighting against a system that has marginalized them by nature of being born into the wrong families. In many cases, the earth is swallowing them alive, and soon we may have no record of their existence because the system they are fighting is much more powerful. Don’t let what happened to Korah happen to these heroic dissenters. Remember, we were once dissenters too.

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