



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Korah* Numbers 16:1-18:31, 28:9-15

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Parashat Korah (Numbers 16-18) is a disquieting read. Not the sort of thing one would ordinarily turn to in the night for solace or comfort. It is a tale of human strife and contentiousness that results in severe divine punishment: the earth opens to swallow the rebellious ones; a plague destroys thousands in the Israelite community.

Actually, though, this section of the Torah might surprise us, and prove helpful when we feel embattled and wounded.

The *parashah* begins and ends with “taking.” In Numbers 16:1, “*vayikah Korah*” — Korah challenges the authority of Moses and Aaron, and threatens to take over; and in 18:26 and 28, “*tik-hu mei-et b’nei Yisrael*” — the Levites take tithes from the Israelites. The verb *lakah* (‘take’) frames the movement from rebellion and violence to a final portrait of the levitical social order. Indeed, this verb is like a musical note running through these three chapters—eleven occurrences in all, each one resonating against the others to teach us that a dynamic and meaningful process is unfolding.

Particular words resonate in our lives, too. The words we choose to describe our circumstances, the way we tell and retell our stories, matter. And, if we pay attention, these words and stories can help us understand the process that is unfolding in our own lives. “There is something about telling a tale again and again,” writes Diane Cole in *After Great Pain*, “that in and of itself gives shape and meaning to experience.” We see this patterning of words also in the Psalms. Martin Marty points out, in *A Cry of Absence*, the consistent images of Psalm 88 that reflect physical illness and pain (“My eyes pine away from affliction...I cry out to You”). There is little comfort in this disturbing psalm; it is simply a powerful evocation of anguish — but the very power of the language is a clear signal that something larger, in this case a movement toward faith, is occurring.

The turning point of *Parashat Korah* is Numbers 17:13: Aaron “stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked.” With incense and fire pan, his priestly toolbox, he makes atonement for the people, and brings the plague to an end. It is as dramatic as anything in the Bible: Aaron stands

between the dead and the living — and in that instant chaos turns to order; life is restored; and a meaningful pattern emerges.

Why read Korah? Or Psalm 88? Don't we have enough to worry about already? Well, for one thing, as Diane Cole puts it: "In other people's stories we may find journeys that presage the ones we fear in our own lives." In times of illness or crisis, it can bring us comfort to read even the "darkest" narratives and prayers of our tradition. Not just because the words are familiar, but because the experience they reflect rings true. As we travel with the psalmist from despair to faith, as we travel through *Parashat Korah* from crisis to stability, we learn to discern the dynamic movement that unfolds within our lives, as well. We know what it is to dwell in the darkness, to cry out in anguish, to rebel, like Korah, against "the way things are" and to stand in stubborn defiance. But we know, as well, that we will not stay in those dark places forever.

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