

The Song of Korach's Children

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What do you do When you have a vision It's a real vision, a true vision, a true chazon, and you can't wait. What do you do

when the gap between what should be and what is becomes so painful that you push?

You push, you force it, you say, this has to happen now or I'm leaving. Anybody? Any wisdom?

How about before giving advice, anybody know this experience? We've all been there. We've all been there.

And maybe some of us are right there right now and some of us think that we know the answer is great. Maybe it's a relationship you needed the other

person to be ready for and they weren't. Maybe it's a community that should have been further along by now.

Maybe it's a country, a movement, a family. Maybe it's God. Maybe it's God who should have made the world more safe, more just, more bearable, and

hasn't yet.

And the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be has become a kind of agony. And when that pushing fails, when the vision collapses and

the effort comes apart, what do we do with the wreckage? Do we walk away?

Do you pretend it never happened? Do you bury the whole thing because it's too painful to look at? This week's tour portion has a very specific answer.

With what do we do with the wreckage of visions whose time has not yet come, that in some way failed by the efforts and the pushing? This week, there's great advice in the Torah. You know, the Zohar calls the Torah, new advice.

Like not a dear abbey, but like a dear rabbi, like a dear something. Torah has good advice. Torah has one beautiful little Nikudah, beautiful little point, a little

something.

It's buried in somewhere where you never would have looked for it in a bureaucratic census, two chapters after the actual catastrophe that is described in the

Torah happens. It's almost hidden in a list of names. We'll get to that.

But first, we have to meet our main protagonist this Shabbat. Let's meet Korach. Korach, shhh.

Korach, Ben Yitzhar, Ben-Kahas, Ben-Levi, the Torah gives us his whole genealogy. Right, Yichas, he's got it. He goes all the way back.

He's Moshe's cousin, a Levite, he's on the inner circle, he's elite. He's not a rabble rouser. He's not someone you would have expected to go in the direction

that he went.

He's a man of real standing, real intelligence, real spiritual seriousness. And he gathers 250 chieftains, Nisiei HaEidah, Anshei Sheim, men of name,

Machers, 250, gathers them around, leaders of the entire congregation. He says to them, he says together with them to Moshe, to Moses, to his cousin, He

says, the whole congregation is holy and God is in their midst.

Who made you, why would you elevate yourself over them? All of them are holy. Every single one.

Is he wrong? He's not wrong. It's a legitimate complaint.

They're all holy. The Torah already had said this. He's only quoting the Torah back to itself.

God had said at Mount Sinai, you are all holy. You are all priests and you're all holy. You are a holy nation.

Korach is just quoting the Torah back to itself, to Moshe. You said it, Moshe. I didn't make this up.

Moshe hears it. He knows the vision is true. The radical equality of all the souls before God, that is not heresy.

That is prophecy. In fact, in the 19th century, a rabbi named Mordechai Yosef Lehner, I've quoted him here in the shul almost every week for the last 20

years, Mordechai Yosef Lehner of Ishmetz, the Ishmetz rabbi writes, in one of the most incredible readings of this story, he says that Korach is, he's holy. He

had a genuine flash of divine consciousness.

He saw something that was real, and here, listen to this, but the world wasn't ready to hear it. The world did not have the capacity to hold the vision of There's

a part of what Korach was saying that was literally like a future vision of a world of John Lennon. Imagine all the people living for, that's Korach, Lennon got

that from Korach.

I'm pretty sure he didn't, but okay, but here's what happens, rather than living in the attention of a vision not yet realized, he forced it. He said this vision has

to be now, immediately on his terms, and then something happened, a vessel broke. The vessel shatters.

The Torah doesn't tell us that his vision was false, says the Ishmetzer. It says that the vessel couldn't hold it yet. We had a Kabbalah class last night,

Kabbalah Cafe, we talked about a radical idea that's introduced by Isaac Luria, the great Kabbalist, the greatest Kabbalist of all time, the Ari.

In the 16th century, the Ari came along and said, you know, when God wanted to create the world, for some reason, God, unbeknownst to the Ari, doesn't

explain this in his text, God made a world, but the first attempt was cataclysmic. God tried to bring about a world with a certain intensity of divine light, and the

vessel, said the Ari, said this Isaac Luria character, the vessels were too brittle to hold the original light of God, and the vessels broke. He called this the

Shirat HaKelim, the breaking of the vessels.

So there's a catastrophe, the Ari says, it's embedded in creation. Even God tried to push something before it's time. So Korach, in the mind of the Ishmetzer,

is somebody who starts a movement and says the revolution is happening today.

I'm coming into a corporate structure, it should conform to my vision today. Today, today, today, hayom, hayom, hayom. And the Ishmetzer says, what a holy

vision.

What a holy imagination. But it was at the wrong, maybe it was the wrong time, maybe he pushed, maybe he had to push, and it broke. I was reading an

article today from my friend Shaul Magid, Professor Shaul Magid, who was writing about a book by a woman named Molly Crabapple, who just wrote a book

about the Bundists, and he was being critical of the critics.

It was a kind of meta-critique. He was critical of the critics, and the critics were talking about the Bundists and about that whole movement, and all the

movements that were at that moment. And the critics of the book were saying it failed.

And it's undeniable that that movement itself failed. Whatever was happening at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there was

a, there's no doubt that empirically the Bundist movement failed. But what Shaul pointed out, which is of course true, and what's true in this story too is that

even though it failed, it didn't fail, one shouldn't deduce from its failure that its principle, that its vision itself was intrinsically wrong.

Just because it failed doesn't mean definitionally that it was wrong. It could have been a vision that was a beautiful vision, it was a vision that was utopic, it

was a vision that should be one day realized, maybe. But its failure itself doesn't signal that it's corrupted in its core.

Korach fails, his rebellion fails. He's punished. Moses sets up a test and a fire comes out of heaven, and God says, I choose Moses and not you, Korach, and

we won't go into what happens in the rest of the story. You can look for the gory details in the Parsha. The earth opens up, I should say, the earth opens up and swallows him. There's a second layer to this.

Korach speaks the language of inclusion, everyone is holy, make room for all of us. But what he can't tolerate actually is Moshe's place and Aaron's

appointment, his two cousins. He says everybody's holy, but when he complains, he complains about Moses and Aaron, a younger cousin, according to the

rabbis, what was happening inside of Korach was that a younger cousin had been given a prestigious job that he thought because he was the older cousin he

should have gotten.

There was a private wound beneath the public theology that he was performing. He wasn't only saying I have a vision of what the world should look like, he

was saying I want what he has. Also very human.

I think there's somebody running for Congress on the east side who has a very similar motivation, frankly. He says out loud publicly I want to make room for

everyone, but he means on the emotional level make room for me. Make room for me.

He speaks of inclusion and he practices exclusion. And that gap between the vision he proclaimed and the wound that he actually was driving him is what

makes the collapse so complete. And so the earth swallowed him up.

And the earth opened its mouth. It opened its mouth and it opened its mouth. It wasn't just an opening in the ground, it was a mouth because Korach's sin

was in his own mouth.

He says you have gone too far, you too Aaron and Moses, too much. He's spoken with the full force of his certainty, mouth answered by the mouth. What you

use to close off the world, Korach, is what the world will use to close you off.

The 250 of his chieftains who filled fire pans with incense and stood at the entrance of the Oel Moed, of the entrance of the tent of meeting, fire comes out

from God, consumes them, the catastrophe is total, the rebellion is over, except the Torah doesn't close it. God tells Elazar, Aaron's son, go collect the fire

pans from the ashes and scatter the coals, but the pans themselves, these, these, these pans in which they placed the incense, part of what proved them to

be not yet ready for the vision, those pans, they are holy. The men were wrong, they sinned with their lives holding these pans, they're dead and yet God

says the fire pans absorbed something real in the encounter with God's fire.

Those fire pans touched something true and they can't be discarded. And so Elazar gathers the two, all of those pans together and he, he, he puts them

around the altar and he starts to bang the bronze, I'm sorry, the copper pans into the altar, the copper of the failed rebellion is hammered onto the sacred

center of Israelite worship. Every sacrifice from that day forward, every prayer, every act of approach to God happens against the backdrop of Korach's

catastrophe reshaped into something holy, reshaped into something holy.

The Torah is saying the effort was wrong or the, the effort wasn't wrong, the effort wasn't wrong. It wasn't saying throw it away and start over, it's saying go

into the wreckage of those fire pans, find what was real, find what actually touched the holy even in the failure and give it a new form. So those two frames

are the frames we walk into this weekend with.

The frame of someone who had a movement and an idea and a vision, a goal, a longing, an end, but pushed and also of someone who maybe on the inside,

even if his vision was pure, came from very personal lacks, very personal weaknesses, very personal shadow and that that also was part of the frame. It's

with that this week, of course, is Pride Shabbat and the vision at the heart of the LGBTQ movement that every human being deserves to be loved and to love

whom they love in the fullness of who they are is a vision of kulam kidoshim, everyone is holy, every one of them, and God is in their midst. And that has

always been true.

The movement didn't make that true. It was true. The movement just said enough's enough.

It's time. And for decades, this world has not been able to hold that full vision. Not because the vision was wrong, but because their vessels kept breaking

and using that as an excuse, the vessels kept breaking, but families that couldn't make room, communities including Jewish communities that spoke the

language of dignity and practiced something else sometimes.

The world's failure to hold the vision is not the vision's failure. The world's inability to hold that vision is not the vision's failure. The copper was real, and look

what has been hammered from it everywhere, thank God.

Not giving up on Korach and his beautiful vision. Not giving up on setbacks. Not giving up on inabilities of given vessels to hold that light, knowing that even if

that light is not yet fully realized because of the vessel, we keep building the vessels, we keep going back, we keep trying to take the energy of that and push

it out into the world, and especially at a moment now where LGBTQ rights and other dignities have been stripped and threatened, it's vital that those who

believe in human dignity continue to hold up a vision that isn't yet fully realized, not because of the vision, but because of a world that isn't fully ready for it

yet.

And same can be said of Juneteenth, the announcement of freedom that had already been declared two and a half years earlier because the vessel for that

freedom kept shattering, kept needing to be remade, the copper of human dignity was real and is real. It keeps finding new forms because the work is not yet

finished. The vision is pure even if it's a world that's not yet ready for its full actualization.

And of course, all of that is true about Father's Day too, guys. I got to get Father's Day in there. Come on.

It's Father's Day on Sunday. Korach was a father. Korach was a father.

Those of you who had fathers in your life who made room for you, who gave you the gift of being exactly who you are, all of your colors of the rainbow, how

lucky were you. Neely Weissman, who lost her father, Arthur, this past week, the first thing she said to me when we sat down to talk about what the funeral

would look like, she said, we have three of us, or three siblings, and we're all very different. And the funeral has to reflect each of us because all we want is

that each one of us will be happy. Where did you learn that, Neely? My father, my mother, my home. If you had a father who saw you, asherach.

But some people had fathers who didn't see them. Fathers whose vision was incomplete, a father whose vessel couldn't hold the light that you had, it couldn't

hold you in your complexity and in your beauty, and the vessel broke, that copper can also be lifted up, that fire pan can also be hammered onto the altar of

your heart, that shard has a holy spark in it, too. Your father's inability to hold the vision is not the end of your story.

The question after any collapse is not, was the effort perfect? The question is, what did it touch that was real? And so there were children of Korach whose

vision was not actualized.

The Korach who was gestated like a seed into the ground had children, and in that verse I alluded to in the beginning of the talk, there's a little verse in the

census where they're talking about numbers of people and who was there and who wasn't there, and these four words, u'v'nei korach lo metu, and the

children of Korach didn't die. We thought they died. Weren't they also swallowed by the earth?

No. In the Torah it says, u'v'nei korach lo metu, they weren't dead. Buried there in that census is a little clue that the Talmud picks up on and says that those

children did shuva, they repented in that suspended moment, they held onto a ledge while the earth closed above them and they were saved.

And they become poets and singers and prayers. They become part of the temple and we have psalms in the book of Psalms that are the songs of the

children of Korach. Did you hear that?

The songs of the children of Korach. The songs of the children of Korach. He wasn't erased and canceled.

Korach buried in the ground the censors of his revolution that came too soon or his own lack, his own limitations as a father, as a leader. No, no, no, the

Torah says, no, no, we're going to get, got to grab it, got to grab it, and then there are children there. We have songs from the children of Korach.

It's unbelievable. Their inheritance is in the ground and they opened their mouth and they sang. God is our refuge and strength, they sing, help in trouble.

Very present. Written by people who knew trouble from the inside, whose father's vessel was shattered, whose inheritance was a hole in the ground. They

didn't wait for a perfect inheritance.

They took the copper of what their father left and hammered it into song. After the collapse, the Torah says, find the fire pants. Find what was real in the

effort.

Find the spark that touched something holy even in the failure. Give it a new form. Whatever vision you've been holding that the world wasn't ready for, the

problem was the world, not your vision.

Whatever effort collapsed around you or someone you love, whatever copper is sitting in the wreckage of something you tried and lost. Don't discard it. Don't

bury it.

Find it and hammer it into what you're building now. It was 20 years ago on Shavuot that a lost 35-year-old rabbinical student twice dropped out of rabbinical

school who had spent his entire 20s doing yoga, recovering from being an ultra-Orthodox Jew, who had done Rubinfeld synergy and rebirthing and studied

Ohashi Shiatsu and done Reiki and had studied psychology and philosophy in different schools. It was that young man had a fortuitous meeting at a retreat

center in upstate New York, a meeting that would change the course of his life.

And in that meeting, he met a scholar, a sage, a wise master. And that wise 79-year-old master looked at that young man who told him of journeys in and out

of different traditions and a longing to return to Judaism but not being able to find the right place for him. That wise man, 79-year-old genius and creative, said

to him, everything that you have done has a spark you will use.

Everything that you have done has a spark you will use. Every incense pan that you rushed to bring before its time will have its time. Find it and hammer it

and make it a space where others who have similar journeys, who live in the aftermath of some catastrophe or cataclysm or broken vessel or broken dream

might come and be healed and be warmed and be inspired.

And tonight is that great teacher's yortzeit. That great teacher, Rav Zalman Shakir Shalomi, and I met in 2004. And tonight as we lit this candle, I was

reminded that one of Rav Zalman's greatest contributions to the Jewish world besides his brilliance and his heart was that he created a rainbow tallit.

If you go anywhere in the Jewish world, you will find a rainbow tallit. And you might think it was, you know, I don't know, maybe CBSD put it out because it's

the biggest LGBTQ, you know, synagogue in the world. Maybe.

Rav Zalman in the 50s said that the capitalistic vision of the world is that every color in the spectra has its place. And so I'll be in Jerusalem sometime and I'll

be sitting next to somebody who's wearing this beautiful rainbow tallit and I'll just sidle up to them and say, who do you think made that? And they'll say, oh,

it's all the way back.

It's all the way back. Ancient tallit. And I'll just smile with a twinkle in my eye and go, the one who made that tallit is the one who knew how to hammer copper

that was lying in the wreckage and lift it up.

The one who made that tallit was the one who could look at every human being and say, you are a child of God. You are a child of God. You are a child of

God.

That was my teacher. V'nei Korach lo metu. The children of Korach didn't die.

They sang songs. And I can readily imagine that one of the songs that they sang in the temple would have been the song that goes, by these words, why are

there so many songs about rainbows? It had to be that they sang that song. Let's rise together.