

JUNE 11, 2007

Parashat Korach

Green with Envy

Korach ben Yitzhar “Korach son of Yitzhar” (Numbers 16:1)

We know that Korach tried to foment rebellion against Moshe, but why does the Torah begin our *parashah* with his genealogy? Midrash Tanchuma (Korach 3) explains that Korach was upset that Elitzafon, not he (Korach), was chosen to head the Kahat family. So dishonorable are Korach’s motivations, Rashi notes that his lineage stops one generation short of mentioning Ya’akov Avinu; as if our revered patriarch wants nothing to do with Korach.

In Pirkei Avot (4:21), R. Eliezer HaKappar warns us that envy is one of three things that destroys a person. Later in Avot (6:5), we’re told not to seek greatness for ourselves or covet honor. We all know people who act with only their image in mind or whose blind ambition clouds every action. In everyday life, such people can have relatively limited impact on others; they are annoying but, ultimately, harm mostly themselves. On a larger scale – as in the example of Korach – they can wreak havoc on a whole group or even an entire nation.

Sadly, we see such a person in power in Iran.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has made no secret of his desire to destroy Israel. Only last week, he reiterated his wish that Israel be “wiped off the map,” this time claiming that “the countdown button for the destruction of the Zionist regime has been pushed by the hands of the children of Lebanon and Palestine.”

Such rhetoric from Ahmadinejad is so common that it would have long ago ceased to be newsworthy were it not for Iran’s progress in its drive to develop nuclear weapons. Mohammed El-Baradei, the head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency, recently reported that Iran may be only three years away from a nuclear weapon. Other experts say it may be even less.

With the passage of two U.N. Security Council resolutions finding Iran in violation of its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, it has become global policy to deny Iran a nuclear weapon. In spite of such international condemnation, Ahmadinejad continues his hateful diatribes and Iran’s nuclear program remains on course. Ahmadinejad and the ayatollahs seem so consumed by their own nuclear ambitions that they can’t spare the time to care about the damage they will inflict on their people. Just like Korach.

Korach’s jealousy and hubris destroyed him and his followers, just as R. Eliezer warns us it does to all people. We pray that the leaders of Iran turn from their dangerous course before it is too late. ■

Waiting for a Call

V'lo y'hiyeh k'korach v'cha'adato "he shall not be like Korach and his band" (Numbers 17:5)

In our *parashah*, Moshe tries over and over again to peacefully put an end to Korach's rebellion. He speaks to Korach and asks Datan and Aviram to meet with him. Despite Moshe's best efforts, the rebels will not be swayed. Talmud (Sanhedrin 110a) teaches us that this *pasuk* – instructing us not to be like Korach – means we should not keep up a quarrel.

Last week, we commemorated the 40th anniversary of the Six-Day War. As we remember Israel's stunning victory fought in self-defense, we rejoice in the miracle of the reunification of Jerusalem. We also lament what might have been had Israel's neighbors cared at all about peaceful coexistence.

Days after the war started, the great Abba Eban went before the United Nations and said that Israel was "ready to demonstrate her instinct for peace." Defense Minister Moshe Dayan let Arab leaders know that he was "waiting for a phone call." Israel celebrated a great victory not just for the military prowess it demonstrated or the survival it ensured – Israelis celebrated the hope of a peaceful future. Over the years, Egypt and Jordan seized on Israel's instincts for peace and found in the Jewish state a good neighbor.

Sadly, all these years later, Israel's other neighbors and enemies in the Middle East have not learned the lesson of Korach.

You can learn more about the Six-Day War at http://www.aipac.org/The_Issues/3403.htm. ■

Covenantal Relationships

Brit melach olam "an eternal salt covenant" (Numbers 18:19)

As our *parashah* discusses the portions set aside for the *kohanim*, we find a unique description of the covenant that HaShem is making. While the term *brit olam* appears sixteen times in Scripture, this is the only instance of the phrase *brit melach olam*. The Sifrei (118) describes salt as "something healthy that makes others healthy." Rashi paraphrases this description as "healthy and lasting." Rashi tells us that, just as salt keeps things from spoiling, so too does the covenant established in the preceding *p'sukim* keep people from figuratively spoiling. Just as salt doesn't go bad, so too is the covenant eternal.

The connection between *Eretz Yisrael* and the Jewish people is, similarly, eternal. The centrality of Israel and Jerusalem in Jewish culture, literature, and liturgy has marked the millennia. Many of us visit Israel regularly to "recharge our batteries" or, in a way, to keep from spiritually spoiling.

As we move in to summer months full of vacation, summer camp, and recreation, let us remember our responsibilities to *Eretz* and *Klal Yisrael*. What we do this summer may determine whether or not Iran develops nuclear weapons. What we do this summer may determine whether Hizballah is allowed to rearm. We can act to stop the world from recognizing Hamas. We can work to free IDF soldiers Gilad Shalit, Ehud Goldwasser, and Eldad Regev.

This summer has to be about more than a day at the beach. We must uphold our part of the covenant. ■

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