



Sermon Tidbits

JUNE 19, 2017

Parashat Korah

Bias in the Name of Neutrality

And Korah took (Numbers 16:1)

ויקח קרח (במדבר טז:א)

In February of this year, Muhammad al-Jamassi, a senior engineer who served as board chairman for the U.N. Relief and Works Agency's (UNRWA) engineering department in central Gaza, was one of 15 members elected to the Hamas political leadership during internal elections, [i24news reported](#). "Al-Jamassi, who oversees all of UNRWA's infrastructure projects in central Gaza, has held various positions within Hamas since 2007." That same month, according to the [Times of Israel](#), "UNRWA suspended Suhail al-Hindi—the chairman of the agency's Palestinian workers' union—pending the results of an internal investigation sparked by Israeli accusations that the school principal was a member of Hamas's new political leadership." These revelations came to light after a U.N. watchdog group released a report showing screenshots from the Facebook pages of 40 UNRWA school employees in Gaza and other parts of the Mideast that it said "incite to Jihadist terrorism and anti-Semitism, including by posting Holocaust-denying videos and pictures celebrating Hitler." UNRWA spokesman Chris Guinness told The Times of Israel that UNRWA was aware of the incitement allegations, and was "looking into [them] as part of our ongoing commitment to maintaining the Agency's neutrality." This is precisely the problem. While the UNRWA claims to represent the ideal of neutrality, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Korah would certainly have appreciated the tactic of claimed neutrality, because he made the identical claim during his dispute with Moses. Parashat Korah begins with the unusual phrase, "And Korah took." Commenting on this strange choice of words, Rashi (on verse 1) quotes *Targum Onkelos*, explaining that the phrase means that Korah, "took himself to one side to dissociate himself from the congregation, to contest the [appointment of Aaron to the] priesthood. This is what Onkelos means when he renders it *ve'itpalag* [meaning] 'and he separated himself.'" Yet, if the phrase teaches us that Korah separated himself and initiated a dispute, why use the language of "taking?" Taking implies theft, in the sense of taking advantage of others' good will, and using their desire for fairness and equality for one's own benefit. Korah claimed to be interested in the public good, challenging Moses' leadership by arguing that, "The entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Numbers 16:3) Under the guise of impartiality and the interest of the community, Korah initiated a dispute with Moses for his own personal benefit. This is the most sinister type of behavior: hiding one's biases in the veil of fairness and even handedness, pretending to be that which you are not with the aim of taking advantage of the situation for your own gain.

Today, under the guise of neutrality and impartiality, numerous United Nations agencies act with impunity both in Israel and its neighboring countries. Yet, rather than promoting peace and neutrality, these arms of the United Nations are at best willfully ignoring dangerous aggressive behavior in their midst, and at worst supporting and abetting the actions of the very terrorist organizations they were created to reign in. Days after the discovery of a [terror tunnel under two UN-run boys' schools in Gaza](#), Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu "called for the closing of UNRWA, the United Nations' agency dealing with Palestinian refugees," the [Times of Israel reported](#). "Netanyahu accused the organization of inciting against Israel while doing nothing to help the plight of Palestinian refugees. He asked why they needed a specific body, when the UN High Commission for Refugees has helped tens of millions of displaced persons since World War II. 'The time has come to dismantle UNRWA and have its parts be integrated into the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.'"

When UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness condemned the construction of the tunnels under the boys' schools, he noted that, "international law...provides that UN premises shall be inviolable. The sanctity and neutrality of UN premises must be preserved at all times." The United States must pressure the United Nations to finally address the issue of bias against Israel with the UNRWA. For too many years, it has been acting under the guise of neutrality, while tolerating and even supporting Palestinian incitement to violence against Israel. If the United Nations wants to be respected as a neutral organization, it must act like one. ■

Celebrating Democracy and Diversity

The entire congregation are all holy (Numbers 16:3)

כי כל העדה כולם קדושים (במדבר טז:ג)

This month, over 200,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv for Israel's Pride Parade, the largest ever in the Middle East and Asia. People of diverse sexual orientations and religious affiliations attended this year's event, including many politicians from across Israel's ideological spectrum. The event highlights an aspect of Israeli society unique in the region: Israel's rich diversity. In a society constructed of immigrants drawn from countries and religions from around the world, Israelis celebrate the value that each community brings to the larger society, and ensure the protection and equal treatment of all Israelis, irrespective of their religion, gender or sexual orientation.

It is this diversity that Korah fails to appreciate and understand. At face value, Korah makes an argument that Americans would wholeheartedly embrace. "The entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst," he argues to Moses. We're all valuable. We're all important. Moses himself undoubtedly agreed with this sentiment. Every individual is indeed holy and not valuable, but invaluable. Then Korah expands his argument to challenge Moses' role as leader, essentially asking Moses and Aaron, "Since we're all equal, why should you lead us? What's so special about you?" According to Rabbi Bradley Artson, Korah fails to distinguish between equality and diversity. He [writes](#), "All people are indeed equal (in comparison to the infinite God who created us), but we are not all the same. Equal in worth is not the same as identical in skills. Korah's flaw was to confuse those two traits—equal worth and identical characteristics. The fact is that people are not all the same. The most rudimentary glance around a crowded room confirms various degrees of intelligence and strength, different personalities and health. Great athletes are different than the rest of us, and Nobel laureates do, in the words of the Wizard of Oz, 'think deep thoughts with no more brains than you have.' There is a difference. Korah was threatened by diversity, by specialization, by distinction. Yet Judaism is based precisely on the celebration of diversity, the importance of distinction. One can be different and still be equal."

Today, Israeli society celebrates both of these critical values of equality and diversity. A vibrant democracy, Israel honors and cherishes the rights of every Israeli citizen, man or woman, Jew, Christian or Muslim. In addition, created to be a refuge from discrimination, Israel remains committed to ensuring equality among its diverse populations, leading the way in protection and acceptance of diverse lifestyles. Israel has always been at the forefront of gay rights issues, prohibiting workplace discrimination in 1992 and granting spousal benefits to same-sex couples in 1994. For nearly two decades, since 1993, members of the gay and lesbian community have openly served in all branches of the Israel Defense Forces. Discrimination in recruitment, placement or promotion based on sexual orientation is illegal, and as of 2015, the IDF recognizes the full rights of same-sex partners, regardless of marital status, on matters including parental rights, inheritance rights, and entitlement to leave. Support for LGBTQ rights in Israel transcends party politics, from right-of-center Likud to left-wing Meretz. Upon entering the government in late 2015, Amir Ohana of Likud became the first openly gay, right-wing member of Knesset. Another openly gay member of Knesset, Itzik Shmuli, is a leader of the left-of-center Zionist Union.

Parades, while important, take place only one day a year. Israel's Pride Parade serves not only to support Israel's LGBTQ community, but also to celebrate the fact that from its inception, the state of Israel has cherished, encouraged, protected and defended the diversity fundamental to the unique framework that forms Israeli society. ■

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