This July 4th, Reject Political Sectarianism

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It's very common that Parashat Korach falls on the Shabbat of July 4, and although it's a coincidental alignment of two completely different calendars, I find it to be particularly relevant this year.

The story of Korach is a story of deeply rooted political tension within the Israelite community that finally boils over. But characterizing Korach's response to that tension is a matter of perspective.

From the vantage point of Moses and Aaron, when Korach and his allies band together to challenge their leadership, it's a rebellion against the legitimate authorities. From Korach's perspective, he and his supporters are protesting a leadership that has acted arrogantly and denied them their voice.

Sound familiar?

The Torah and the sages insist that there is only one correct way to explain it. Moses excommunicates Korach and his followers, forbidding other Israelites from associating with them. God, enraged, opens the mouth of the earth to swallow them alive. Later, the rabbis condemn Korach for maliciously starting a conflict that was "not for the sake of heaven."

Maybe they're right; maybe there is only one reasonable way to describe what Korach did. And maybe he and his people got what they deserved.

But even if so, there is still one unavoidable problem: Korach and his allies didn't see it that way.

Even if they were 100 percent in the wrong, the problem could not—and would not—be solved simply by condemning them to stew forever in the belly of the earth without making any effort to contend with their grievances. This is an important lesson of Jewish history, learned the hard way.

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We know that, in the year 70 of the Common Era, the Roman legions destroyed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. It was the final, overwhelming blow to crush Judea's rebellion against Roman rule.

In the Talmud, the sages say the destruction was caused by *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred. What they mean is that during the Second Temple period, the Jewish community in Judea was deeply fractured along partisan, or sectarian, lines, and that made it vulnerable to collapse.

Shaye Cohen, a prominent historian of that period, explains that "A sect asserts that it alone embodies the ideals of the larger group," and that this "is based on its claim that it alone understands God's will."[1]

In other words, sectarians believe that there is only one real truth, and that they—and they alone—have access to it. So, it's no surprise that the different sects of Judean society were at each other's throats.

But Cohen explains that it wasn't only religious disagreement that divided the community. As in our own time, there were deep political divides as well, most importantly along class lines. To quote Cohen:

"Jewish society of the Second Temple and rabbinic periods…consisted mostly of the poor and the very poor. The aristocracy and the learned elite, who wrote most of the extant literature and figure prominently in the historical narratives, were a small percentage of the population. The "silent majority" included not only the poor but also other powerless groups as well (notably women and slaves).

"The poor hated the rich with a hatred that occasionally flared into violence. The country dwellers envied and hated the city folk, since the city was the home of tax collectors, landlords, and decadence (that is, culture). The Maccabean rebellion was the triumph of simple priests from the country over high priests from the city."

Cohen points out that these dynamics also underlay the war that culminated in the destruction of the Temple. We typically think of it as a war between the Judeans and Rome, but Cohen explains that it was actually much more complex than that.
"The war of 66-70," he writes, "was in large part a civil war between the lower priesthood and the high priesthood, between the poor and the rich, and between the country and the city."[2]

Again, sound familiar? It should.

Korach was a Levite, a member of the "lower priesthood" that Cohen refers to. His backers were "chieftains of the community…men of repute." (Num. 16:1-2)

Their quarrel with Moses and Aaron, whether we call it a rebellion or a legitimate protest, was a conflict between elites—people with wealth and power. This is an important dynamic, but it's not the *only* dynamic, either then or now.

What about the regular people? How did they feel about Moses and Aaron's leadership? The Torah doesn't say.

In fact, the ordinary community members—the amei ha-aretz, to borrow the sages' condescending term for them, which basically means "schlubs" or "Joe Schmoes"—they're barely mentioned in the Torah at all.

That's not uncommon. Even today, history books generally focus on the kings and queens, and nobles, and generals, and presidents, and prominent earth-moving people. It's as though the ordinary, nameless people who lived at the time didn't even exist.

And it's not just about history. Many Americans today feel they're ignored in their own time by the people in power.

We may or may not agree with that, but our opinion on their feelings is irrelevant. That's how they feel, and it's wrong to dismiss it.

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Election season is underway, and we all know it's going to be really hard on the American community. To say that tensions will run high is a crazy understatement. Everything is going to be turned up to 11, all the time.

We've seen in recent election cycles that one key factor contributing to the division in our country is that we Americans don't know each other. We live in silos. We are clueless about people whose lives and circumstances are vastly different from our own.

One of the most telling statistics is that, in the 2016 election, 76 percent of counties with a Cracker Barrel voted for Trump, while 78 percent of counties with a Whole Foods voted for Hillary. This gap was 2 ½ times what it was in the 1992 election[3], before social media and other forces led to the extreme polarization of today.

We don't know each other. And when you don't know people, it's that much easier to discount and ridicule what they have to say. And that's exactly what we do.

So, just like the people of ancient Judea, we Americans are perilously fractured—along class lines, particular. This has become manifest in recent political movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street and social-justice progressivism and Trumpian populism.

Some of these movements we might identify with, some of them we don't. But it's clear that many people in America feel disenfranchised by the powers that be, politically, economically, and culturally.

If we want this country to thrive into the future, it's important that we try at least to understand them—not as caricatures, but on their own terms.

So, tonight, I'm asking you to do something counter-intuitive and counter-cultural this election season: try to read and listen to perspectives that differ from your own. Try to *hear* them. That doesn't mean agreeing with them. It just means resisting the impulse to insist that *our* group is the only one with the truth.

On this July 4th weekend, I ask you to reject political sectarianism.

No one has an exclusive claim to truth. And everyone is entitled to dignity.

The earth is not going to open up and swallow our political opponents. If we truly care about this country, we have to find a way to listen to each other.

1 Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 125
2 Ibid., 121
3 Cited in Trumping the liberal elite: Kirsten Powers (usatoday.com)