

Between Korach and the Prophet

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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Today was my first day working in my new study. The room where Rabbi Rudin, Rabbi Davidson, and Rabbi Meir crafted the words they would say to this congregation.

They were giants of Reform Judaism. I stand puny and meek in their shadow; I know that.

Eighteen years ago, on the day of my ordination, I listened to a recording of a sermon by Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, the emeritus rabbi of my home congregation in Houston. I've listened to it and quoted it countless times since.

He describes the experience of rabbinic ordination by the president of HUC:

It was "as though from him and through him there came a power from the ages. As though the hands of Wise and of Kohler, of Rashi and Rambam, of Akiva and Moses all were laid upon my head—demanding of me that I seek to live by the highest and truest of the rabbinic tradition."¹

I think I finally understand what he meant. I've felt it more strongly in the past six months than at any point in my rabbinate.

Just as all of you are entrusted with the legacy of this congregation, I am entrusted with the legacy of my rabbinic predecessors. And that's a duty I do not take lightly.

As I renew my covenant with you on this four-year anniversary of my rabbinate here, Parashat Korach presents me again with the opportunity to reflect on my task as I see it.

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Korach, the man, is reviled by the Torah. Why?

Because he stands up against Moses and says: "The entire congregation are all holy. So why do you raise yourself above God's community?"²

Now, that seems like a perfectly fair critique. And yet Korach and his allies are swallowed by the earth for it.

Not because they were wrong per se. Our sages say it was because of their motivation and their style of critique.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains that Korach enlisted influential community leaders to his cause "by using clever and intelligent words. He began to conspire, to criticize Moses, to attack and ridicule. He used all the weapons in his arsenal. In conversation with some, he was serious; in conversation with others, he was humorous. With some, he played the role of prosecutor; with others the role of champion of justice."³

Korach's goal was to bring Moses down, and he was willing to tell people whatever they wanted to hear to accomplish that.

Jewish tradition casts Korach as the anti-Moses not merely because he was arrogant and Moses was humble. It's because he sought to silence Moses as a prophet.

In fact, Korach is the anti-prophet.

What do I mean?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the foremost scholars of the ancient prophets. His description of the prophet's personality and role offers a useful contrast to Korach.

- Korach is a skilled politician. He successfully recruits powerful community leaders to oppose Moses.

But the prophet is a lousy politician. Heschel calls him "a lonely man. He alienates [people because] to be a prophet means to challenge and to defy. ..."4

- Korach is a smooth talker and very convincing. He knows exactly what to say to get people on his side.

By contrast, as Heschel puts it, "[the prophet's] tone [is] rarely sweet or caressing...his words are often slashing... designed to shock rather than to edify."5

- Korach intimidates and entraps Moses with sophistry and impugns his integrity.6

The prophet, by contrast, minces no words in calling out immorality, hypocrisy, and guilt. He could fairly be criticized for being too direct and too indifferent to people's response to his message.

- Korach's attack on Moses, the sages say, was not l'shem shamayim, not for the sake of heaven. He was driven instead by ego and self-aggrandizement.

The prophet is the opposite, driven by moral outrage and God's word burning like fire in his bones. And because of that, he is "stigmatized...by his contemporaries. ..."7

And yet, as the poem in Mishkan T'filah puts it, we come to the synagogue, even subconsciously, to be disturbed from our indifference to injustice and human suffering. To be rattled out of our complacency with the status quo while corruption and cruelty reign.

As Rabbi Kahn said, Reform Judaism has always "called for a kind of prophetic preaching which was critical of the social and political conditions of the day."8

That's a hard job in times like these.

He advised that rabbinic preaching should "hold up the highest of ideals, call for the noblest of deeds, but in a mood of affectionate urgency."

The goal, he said, is not to condemn or shun our congregants, but "to win people, to move them, to lift them...and let them feed on the heights of inspiration."9

I think that's what my rabbinic predecessors at TBE did, and that's my goal, as well. I am still learning to do it effectively.

A covenant is a two-way commitment. I genuinely care what you think, and I hope you care about what I think, too.

So, I will strive, as Rabbi Kahn taught, to be a faithful shepherd who leads our congregation with love, compassion, and respect. My only ask is that you share your feedback with me with love, compassion, and respect, too.

In these harsh, polarized times, our challenge is to find a path between Korach and the prophet: to speak honestly, listen carefully, and remain bound to one another in covenant.

Thank you for giving me the privilege of being your rabbi.

1 Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, "The Faithful Shepherd" (1960), audio recording.

2 Num. 16:3.

3 Ibid., s.v. Vayikach Korach, 129.

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, 22.

5 Ibid., 8.

6 Num. Rabbah 18:3: "Korah interrupted and said to Moses: 'A garment that is crafted completely of sky blue wool, would it be exempt from tzitzit?' He said to him: 'It is obligated in tzitzit.' Korah said to him: 'A garment that is crafted completely of sky blue wool does not exempt itself, but four threads exempt it? A house that is filled with Torah scrolls, would it be exempt from mezuzah?' He said to him: 'It is obligated in mezuzah.' He said to him: 'The whole Torah in its entirety, which consists of 275 paragraphs, does not exempt the house, but one paragraph that is in the mezuzah exempts the house?' He said to him: 'You were not commanded these matters but, rather, you are fabricating them from your heart.'"

7 Ibid., 21.

8 Kahn, *May the Words of My Mouth*, "Foreword," xv.

9 Ibid., 105-106.