

## Cooling Our Senses

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There's a story they tell about two Jews living in the Old Country. There were two newspapers in town – the state-sponsored paper that had a reputation for being rabidly anti-Semitic and the Yiddish paper put out by members of the Jewish community. One day Shmuly finds his friend Chaim sitting on a park bench reading the state paper. Shmuly's in shock. "What are you doing reading all that slander they write about us? You should be reading the Jewish paper!"

"The Jewish paper is so depressing," Chaim says. "All the stories are how hard it is to keep our shuls and yeshivas going, this one got arrested, that one should have gotten arrested – it's nothing but tzuris. Now in the paper I'm reading – it's a totally different story: Jews have all the money...the Jews control the banks...the Jews control the media. If I'm gonna read the news, I like to read good news."

Everyday it seems it gets harder and harder to read the newspaper. Which is why, I believe, Parshas Korach comes to us precisely at the right time.

Let me ask you a question: Does Korach really think he'll succeed? In his heart of hearts, does he really believe that his rebellion will overhaul a cadre of leaders that's ushered the people from bondage to freedom, protected them from pursuing armies and delivered them to the foot of Har Sinai?

All of the מאמרי הז"ל make Korach out to be an exceptionally clever man and an expert rhetorician. Does he have no sense of current events? Think of those who oppose Moshe's leadership or question his judgment. What becomes of those who promoted the Golden Calf? What becomes of those who lusted after meat in the wilderness? What becomes of the spies? Even Miriam – who only spoke *about* Moshe. For Korach – in the great timeline of Jewish history – they're all recent events – each of which demonstrates quite incontrovertibly the notion that one should tread carefully when lodging a criticism against God or His chief prophet.

So how do we explain such an illogical ploy by such a logical man?

We could imagine any number of explanations. Perhaps Korach is driven by power or greed – such dominant emotional urges that they overrun his cognitive sensibilities. Or perhaps he's possessed of so inflated a sense of self-worth that he really convinces himself that he'll make a better leader than Moshe. Maybe in his own mind he's acting for the good of the people and can't be slowed by the prospect of failure.

But this morning I'd like to explore a suggestion based on an observation by a number of Chassidic thinkers. They note that Korach is made up of the same three letters that spell the word Kerach – the Torah's word for ice.

Maybe Korach knows that he'll fail. But maybe instant success isn't what he's after. Whatever his deeper motives, I would suggest that Korach is so intent on weakening Moshe, that he is willing to sacrifice himself on the altar of controversy for what he perceives to be a greater good. His goal is to cool and dampen the voice of Moshe's influence. Once a precedent is set, Korach reasons – once people recognize that Moshe's authority is not unassailable – perhaps someone else will succeed even I fail.

This approach is not without precedent in the Torah. Think back to Amalek. The Torah describes them as: אשר קרך בדרך – which we translate to mean that they happened upon us on the road – they ambushed us. But Rashi suggests an alternative translation. קרך from the language of קר – of coldness - and not unrelated perhaps to our language of קרח. Amalek knew they would fail. They knew that would never defeat a divinely protected people. But, they reasoned, we'll cool the waters. Perhaps it will have little or no effect today. But who knows what it might accomplish in the minds of our successors tomorrow. In a flash, they end Israel's brief reputation of invincibility. If we were truly invincible, no one would dare attack. By being the first avowed enemy of our people, Amalek opens the door for other nations to quarrel with בני ישראל. In precisely the same vein, Korach sets the precedent for individuals to challenge convictions held so deeply no one would have ever ventured to dispute them.

Now look what Korach accomplishes even in failure. Notice the language of his lieutenants, Dasan and Aviram. Others had uttered doubts and skepticisms about the land of Israel before them. Once Korach opens the door, however, they ratchet up their rhetoric to a level unprecedented in the Torah:

ויאמרו לא נעלה. המעט כי העליתנו מארץ זבת חלב ודבש להמיתנו במדבר?  
*We're not going up to Israel, they say. For is it a small thing that you brought us out of land flowing with milk and honey so that we could die in the wilderness?*

It's staggering. In a heartbeat, they've turned reality on its head. It's no longer Israel that's the ארץ זבת חלב ודבש – it's Egypt! Who would dream of saying something so bombastic – so utterly false? The answer is no one – until Korach creates the opening. As soon as does, even the most basic truths can be called into question.

When it's attributed to someone with the standing and stature of General David Petraeus that the blame rests on Israel for hindering US progress in the Middle East, it opens a Pandora's Box. Now it's commonplace to hear the language of Israel-as-friend-and-ally replaced with the language of Israel-as-liability.

Without knowing anything about Helen Thomas, I'm quite confident that this past week wasn't the first time she thought or said privately that the Jews should go back to Germany or Poland. But now that her peers have created an environment spewing toxicity toward Israel – it's comfortable to join the chorus and say publicly what's really on your mind. What was once offensive and odious suddenly enters the realm of the acceptable.

And now the linkage argument isn't an outrageous conclusion, it's a working assumption. As the historian Tony Judt wrote in the New York Times on Thursday:

“Along with the oil sheikdoms, Israel is now America's greatest strategic liability in the Middle East and Central Asia. Thanks to Israel, we are in serious danger of “losing” Turkey. . . . The time has come to cut through the clichés surrounding it, treat Israel like a “normal” state and sever the umbilical cord.”

It's true that Tony Judt has never been a friend of our agenda, but now his radical voice is creeping ever closer to being thought of as mainstream. So allow me – if I may – to make two humble observations that emanate from the story of Korach.

First, notice how our leaders act at a Korach moment. Moshe has to know how the story is going to end. He has to know that his own leadership will survive and Korach's rebellion will be quashed. He could have opted for passivity and left it to God to intervene. But that's not his response.

וישמע משה ויפל על פניו.

*Moshe heard the story. And he fell on his face.*

He recognizes right away just how damaging the Korachs of the world can be – even when they fail. So he makes a public show of his indignation.

Helen Thomas is out of job as well she should be. But that shouldn't stop us from being exercised. When the media refer to her comments as *controversial* – we should be outraged. Bigoted, prejudiced, anti-Semitic. Let's call a spade a spade and insist that others do the same. Sometimes we're so careful not to overreact that we under-react – which can be an equally dangerous response.

Second – there's something the Torah says later in פרשת פנחס. It tells us ובני קרח לא מתו – that the children of Korach weren't killed.

A senior colleague of mine used to joke – ובני קרח never died – they daven in my shul.

But it's actually a really important message. Just because an individual is in the same figurative family or otherwise associated with someone reprehensible, doesn't always make them guilty by association. In our outrage, we still have a responsibility to be fair-minded.

- Helen Thomas said something profoundly offensive – but that doesn't mean every CNN reporter is out to get to us.
- Or maybe a member of the Israeli government made a mistake; that doesn't mean we should abandon our support for the Israeli government.

ובני קרח לא מתו – don't throw out the baby with the bathwater.

I'm afraid the reality is that it's not going to get any easier to read the news. If anything, it may well get harder. The only good news is that we occupy a position in which we can actually make a difference.

You're among the most educated, capable and influential voices in the American Jewish community today. As lovers of Israel, each of us is duty-bound to be an activist: Daven; write letters; attend rallies; get involved with AIPAC and worthy causes in Israel. Too much is at stake for us to remain passive observers at these fraught moments of Jewish history. Our sidelines are packed with well-meaning bystanders. The view is better on the inside. Now is the time to act.