

This past week we held a Town Hall meeting to give the community and myself the opportunity to reflect on my first year as your rabbi. I wanted to hold this kind of dialogue for a couple of reasons ... one of them having to do with acknowledging the fact that the transition period of me becoming your rabbi is still happening. In some ways it is beginning again. When I think about it, it strikes me that transition is really another word for something that we must face, something that is constant in every aspect of our lives, something that is sometimes welcomed and even anticipated and something that is also dreaded, denied and dodged because of the loss and pain attached to it. This something, this other word for transition is ... change.

Funny, how Torah so often serves as that mirror by which we can examine and consider the matters we face in our lives. Wouldn't you know it that this week's Torah portion, Korach, is one that takes the concept of change head on? Although, it does not appear to be any way a story that celebrates or even acknowledges change. It seems to recognize the anxiety and reactive-ness that change and those who represent change arouses in so many. Korach and his followers rebel against Moses. He asserts that Moses does not recognize the holiness of all Israel and hording that sacredness and the power attached to it all to himself. Moses tells Korach and his followers to gather the next day with their fire pans and incense to settle the matter. The manner is settled by earth opening up and swallowing Korach and his followers.

As our rabbis examine this story, they see Moses' benevolent authority challenged by the evil Korach, who feels thwarted in his own attempt to gain power in the Israelite community. Tradition asserts a couple different interpretations of this story: (1) At heart of Korach's rebellion was an attempt to discredit Torah and Moses by asking ridiculing questions -- if a house is filled with Torah scrolls, do you still need to have a mezuzah on the door since they possess the same material? If one is wearing a blue shirt does he still need to have a string of blue in his tsitsit?; (2) Korach's concerns are merely for personal glory and power, while Moses' concerns always held the people's best interests at heart, witness how he defends them countless times against the wrath of Adonai; (3) Moses is commended for his handling of the situation and directly facing up to his opponents and showing them that individual honor and personal glory are not most important parts of leadership

Tradition seizes the opportunity to teach us about having faith in our leaders and our mission as a people -- not being swayed by smooth, yet manipulative, power seekers, and how good leaders handle themselves in the face of derision. The story has the effect of teaching certain truths, reinforcing certain loyalties, and instilling fear into those who would challenge the authority of the priestly class.

I think that we need to go deeper than this kind of understanding. As we reflect on the nature of change as a synagogue and consider how it affects us and how we respond to it, I think that Korach has a great deal to teach us about how human beings deal with change.

Acknowledging how our tradition regards Korach, if we merely look at his words – how he expressed his vision – we find them rather, well, familiar. They are not unlike the sentiment expressed in the prophetic tradition. They are not unlike some of the ideas championed by the early Reformers. They are not unlike how we talk when we speak of our idea of Judaism and our community – everybody has equal access to God, period. If we get beyond the anxiety of someone speaking against Moses and see beyond Moses angst – we encounter a change, that is now part and parcel of who we are today. How many of the traditions, customs and even ideas that we hold dear today – were once very different and even threatening changes to the status quo?

Speaking of that reaction to change, let us examine it more closely. Korach's protest was threatening and challenging, BUT it was nonviolent. The portion describes a public expression of discontent by a large group of 'men of repute'. No bloodshed, no mention even of weapons. Moses and God's reaction is to promise them a public response to their cries, they faithfully assemble the next day with their fire pans ready to offer incense to God, hoping for some resolution. They are then systematically eliminated as Torah describes, by a swallowing earth and a consuming fire that came out from Adonai. God and Moses' reaction seems out of balance with the 'challenge'. I think that we can all identify with God and Moses' anxiety in facing change – and from a safe distance, can also see how destructive that reaction can be.

We are told that the rabbi of Rozniatov, Rabbi Elieazar Lippman, persistently inquired from Rabbi Mendel of Kossov why the Messiah had not come and why the Redemption promised by the prophets and sages had not been fulfilled? Rabbi Mendel answered: "It is written: 'Why has the Messiah not come either today or yesterday?' The answer lies in the question itself: 'Why has he not come? Because we are today just as we were yesterday.'" Rabbi Mendel's response sheds light for us as we pose this challenge to Torah's account of Korach and Moses. He feels, that the Messiah will arrive (the messianic age as we may refer to it in modern day parlance, a time in which are greatest potential as human beings is realized) -- when are able to makes changes, accept changes in our world.

The only constant in our world is change, and it is at those times that we resist change that we put off the coming of messianic-type reformations in our lives. The story suggests that as long as there is change there is hope for transformations, and as long as there is transformation there is a hope for the greatest transformation of all, the coming of a time in which our ultimate potential is realized. Even an attempt to change which does not succeed is a change, for it requires some alteration of past routines.

The spirit of change manifests itself in Korach's revolt. Although Torah portrays it negatively and they ultimately did not succeed -- it gives us hope for the greatest transformation of all. Where in Torah can we find an inkling of this message? Remember the fire pans, the ones that Korach and his party brought to the altar for their moment of truth, the ones that were abandoned by their owners as they were either swallowed up by the earth or consumed by Adonai's fire? These very same firepans, a symbol of Korach and his group, were hammered into sheets as plating for the altar.

The very symbols used to invoke change were used to form the focal point of the religious life of the community. Torah tells us that this was done to remind others who thought of rebellion what their inevitable fate would be. It is possible, however, to see a different reminder in this act. At the heart of the religious life of Israel was a reminder of the presence of change in life, on the altar was the metal of the firepans of Korach and his party. They teach us that at the very heart of our spiritual existence, our growth, and our ability to thrive and to repair the world depends on our acceptance of the process of change. It is there and if we do not recognize it, even embrace it -- we are destined to stagnate and to die.

In other words, what happened in this week's Torah portion was a natural part of life and of growth -- no matter how it is portrayed in Torah or in our tradition. I dare say that Korach's rebellion -- in the context of its time, not necessarily in how we have come to know about it -- was a healthy, natural part of the growth of our people. In our lives we face many "Korach's rebellions" when we face the forces of change in our lives. We face it when we examine the scope of history, we face it when we see our city boom before our eyes, and we face it every day as individuals encounter the most profound of changes that life throws our way. I pray in those moments when change threatens and frightens us, we are able to clearly see the altars of our souls and witness the fire pans of Korach's rebellion -- and remember to embrace the flow of life for the sake of love, for the sake of growth, and for the sake of peace.

AMEN.