

Which Tire? Justice and Mercy in Parashat Korah

The story that I'm about to tell may be urban legend, but I love it all the same. The version that I heard took place at Penn State University amongst four sophomore chemistry students, all going into their final exam with a solid "A" average. Pleased with their performance and confident about the upcoming test, the four friends decided to take a road-trip the weekend before finals and returned to campus exhausted from days of partying and revelry. Unprepared for the Monday morning exam, the friends concocted a story about a flat-tire delaying their return to school and were granted permission to take a makeup test one day later. The four boys studied hard and walked into the classroom on Tuesday morning, opening their exam books with confidence. The first problem, worth five points, was simple enough and they quickly flipped to page two. On this last folio of the exam booklet was just one question worth 95 points: Which tire was it?

Din and Rahamim – justice and mercy. While we generally think of these two concepts as being connected to the High Holiday season when we examine our deeds and hope that God's compassion will overwhelm God's judgment, for most of us the question of how to balance justice and mercy is a daily pursuit. As parents, teachers, partners, and professionals of all stripes we feel a responsibility towards creating good citizens and maintaining fairness within society; as human beings, ourselves fallible, we recognize the difficulty of always being true to our best selves and have great empathy when others similarly fall short. Whether it comes to evaluating the behavior of those close to us or exploring our own patterns and choices, it can be very hard indeed to know when to proffer the carrot of mercy and when to rule by justice's unyielding stick. As our Torah portion for this morning, *Parashat Korah*, reminds us, this is hardly a new struggle.

Parashat Korah tells the story of a thwarted rebellion, one waged by Korah, a cousin of Moses and Aaron, along with Dathan, Abiram, and On, members of the tribe of Reuven. All four individuals feel entitled to share in the privileges of leadership that have up until now been conferred upon Moses and Aaron alone. Korah, as a fellow Levite and relative of the two brothers sees access to power as his right; the others claim this authority on account of the fact that their great-ancestor, Reuven, was the first-born of Jacob's children, according them privilege over the junior Levite tribesmen. While there is much to be said, for sure, about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the rebels' complaints and the way in which they go about asserting their desire for shared leadership, what interests me most about our Torah portion is the respective responses of both Moses and Aaron to this challenge to their authority. Moses addresses the rebels head-on, warning them that God will show Divine displeasure by bringing about a punishment unnatural and unheard of. Scarcely has he finished speaking when the earth beneath the men opens up, swallowing them and their households to their death. Aaron's approach is a bit different. He takes his staff and deposits it in the Tent of Meeting along with twelve others, each representing one of the tribes of Israel. The next day when Moses enters the Tent, the Israelites can see that only Aaron's staff has flowered, producing beautiful blossoms, while the staffs of the other tribes remain stagnant. Two different ways of proving legitimacy: one through over-powering, the other through out-producing. Two different models: *din* and *rahamim*.

The rebellion of Korah and his followers is not the first time that Moses and Aaron have displayed different responses when confronted with similar sets of circumstances. Way back in the Book of Exodus, Moses sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew and immediately kills the man. When he later comes upon two quarreling Israelites and confronts them about their argument, the men are afraid, wondering if Moses plans to attack them as well. In contrast, there is a *midrash* in the compilation *Avot d'Rabbi Nathan* about Aaron and the way he would respond when he saw two people

in conflict. Aaron would approach each party privately and say to him: “My friend, hear what your colleague is saying. He beats his breast and tears his clothes and says, ‘Woe to me!’ How shall I look upon my fellow?! I am so ashamed for I have treated him foully.” Aaron would sit with the first man until there was no more anger in his heart and then would approach the second with the same short speech. When the two quarrelers eventually came together, they would immediately embrace and kiss one another.

Perhaps it is no surprise that Aaron is referred to in the great rabbinic anthology *Pirkei Avot* as *ohev shalom v’rodef shalom*, a person who loves and pursues peace. While Moses displays passionate conviction and a courageous willingness to act, Aaron is more of the strong, silent type – this despite the fact that he is also the public mouthpiece for his stuttering brother. When Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Abihu, are inexplicably killed while offering “strange fire,” Aaron’s response is not protest but silence. When the Israelites clamor to build a Golden Calf, Aaron acquiesces in order to keep the peace. The 13th century French commentator the Meiri says that when confronted with evil people, Aaron would never challenge them directly but would rather seek out their company, always acting his very best. Eventually, says the Meiri, the wrongdoers would become embarrassed and say to themselves: “Woe unto us! If Aaron knew what we were really like, he would resolve never again to set eye upon us. He must think we are worthy and we ought to at least try to make our conduct correspond to his thinking.” Thus, they would change their ways. As in our *parasha*, Aaron’s approach to his rivals seems to be to join with and then disarm them, to out-produce rather than out-muscle his opponents. *Ohev shalom v’rodef shalom* – Aaron, indeed, is a model of peacefulness.

We notice immediately, of course, that there are clear advantages and disadvantages to both Moses and Aaron’s approaches; both men’s styles of leadership have significant pros and cons. Moses is quick and

decisive, unambiguously punishing wrong-doing and exhibiting great moral courage. When he sees evil – be it in the form of an abusive taskmaster or a rebel whose insubordination threatens communal stability – he puts an end to it immediately, thereby protecting the safety and security of those around him. Moses is the voice of justice, but his approach is limited in that the judgment he doles out leaves the guilty parties dead and buried. There is no possibility for contrition, for reconciliation, for repair of fractured relationships.

On the other side of the coin we have Aaron, whose own approach to wrongdoing allows for the very items which Moses' approach renders impossible. Rather than perpetuating cycles of violence and mistrust, Aaron moves disputants towards improved behavior and improved relationship, using persuasion, productivity, and personal example as tools rather than fear or brute force. And yet, Aaron's tactics are at times too subtle and passive, as with the incident of the Golden Calf where challenging the people would have been far more appropriate than facilitating their wrongdoing. Because he does not definitively stand up for what is right, circumstances sometimes get out of control and stronger individuals come to take advantage of the void he has left open to them.

So where, then, does this leave us, those who walk through the world continually trying to decide between *din* and *rahamim*, justice and mercy? I, personally, find myself unable to fully embrace either Moses or Aaron's approach and I imagine that many of us here may feel quite the same way. Forced to choose, I suppose I am more of an Aaron – relationship-oriented, diplomatic, consensus driven. And yet, I am quick to recognize the shortcomings of my own preferred style – that I sometimes shy away from conflict, that my desire to please others can keep me from saying what I really think, that in attempting to “gain buy-in” and understand what others believe I can appear indecisive or lacking in my own ideas and convictions. There are times when I could use a little bit more Moses, and I imagine that for the

Moses' out there, there are times when channeling a bit of Aaron would be useful as well. Perhaps this is why our Torah provides us with both models of leadership. Either one on its own is insufficient.

Every morning in our liturgy, we repeat a line from *Pirkei Avot: Nihiyeh mitlamidav shel Aharon hakohen* - May we be like the disciples of Aaron the Kohen, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving our fellow creatures and drawing them close to Torah. Aaron's sensitive and diplomatic nature preserves unity and good feeling, stitches together even the most fragmented of relationships and helps people live together in harmony. How much there is to learn from his outstanding example!

And this morning we perhaps add another blessing to our repertoire too: May we be like the disciples of Moses the Prophet, loving justice and pursuing justice, loving our world and bringing to it a sense of what is right. Moses' decisive and courageous nature helps to create moral behavior and nurture societies committed to fairness, decency, and good. How much there is to learn from his inspiring vision!

On this Shabbat of *Parashat Korah* may be merit to be like both Moses and Aaron, recognizing the respective gifts of these two important leaders using the qualities that each stood for as appropriate. *Nihiyeh mitalmidav* – let us see ourselves as the disciples of both of these great legacies!

Shabbat Shalom

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