

Parshat Korach
The Hidden Longing of Dissent
Yali Szulanski

We all know longing. This longing takes some of us to the past - we reminisce longingly about the towns in which we grew up, the friends we had, and what felt like endless opportunity ahead. For others, it is projected into the future - we long for a time of peace, of plenty, and – especially – for a feeling of power in our own lives. Then, there are those of us who are longing for something bigger than ourselves, for a connection to God that helps us find our purpose, and can be our guiding light as we move forward. When our longing goes unfulfilled, we pass it along to our children – hoping that they will do better, be stronger, and live more fully than we ever could.

The Children of Israel are in perpetual exodus – they have been leaving home since the very first exile of Adam and Chava from Gan Eden, and they carry with them the longing for a better future. They have wandered for generations, and found themselves in Mitzrayim, where they were subjected to gradual, and eventually complete enslavement and oppression. Each generation has passed down a sense of longing into the next – with hope that their children will realize the promises given to their forefathers. When Moshe finally comes along and takes them out of Mitzrayim with fanfare, miracles, and promises of abundance – they are ebullient – finally! They will live the destiny that is our birthright.

As is often the case with hope – it floats high into the heavens, while the reality on the ground tends to be a bit grittier. B'nei Israel very quickly realize that the promised land, is, in fact, on the other side of still more wandering, and still more waiting, which re-ignites their longing. Now, however, they are longing both for what is promised ahead, and for what they left behind. They feel lost. As many of us can relate to today, when we are lost, we long towards connection, and sometimes in that longing, we stray, and we are pulled in directions that don't serve us.

Where we find ourselves this week is with the deep longing of The Jewish People - the longing for a home, a place to call our own, the place where we are safe. The ways in which our longing for God, and for the presence of the Shechina with us, drives us can lead us both forwards towards action, and backwards towards regret.

The people are longing for a change that will compel them to trust - that they will be safe, that they will be well fed, and that the land that is promised to us is good. They are weary, and when they have expressed their needs and their fears, they have been met with retribution from God. Korach arises within a sea of dissent, of hopelessness, and of fear. Korach questions why his cousins, Aaron, Miriam, and Moshe, have elevated themselves above the rest of the Israelite community. He gives voice to the longing of the people who wonder - why them, and why not me? As Rashi tells us in his commentary on Korach's rebellion, this is already the fourth instance of rebellion in the wilderness - after the golden calf, complaints about the manna, and the spies' negative reports on the promised land.

“You have gone too far!” cries Korach to his brethren, “For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the congregation of

God?” (Bamidbar 16:3). Korach’s plea for the distribution of the Divine presence is a plea for the longing of the people - God is with all of us, do not keep God from us. When people search for a leader, they look for strength - in voice, and in spirit. While Korach challenges Moshe directly in a way that raises eyebrows and heartbeats across the camps, his words are the expression of longing of The Jewish People. We long for safety in our homeland, we long for peace in our hearts, and we long for a time where we can all be **אחד עם**- one nation. When he arrives with his followers, everyone’s emotions are flying, and there is no space for calm discourse. Korach’s pointed finger and harsh words cause a bristling reaction amongst the leaders who have humbly led the people - who continue to carefully create opportunity for them.

The people join Korach because he speaks to their longing for connection with God, not knowing that God’s presence rests with them whether they can hear it or not. God, who loves God’s children, must also show strength and discipline. There cannot be effective love without boundaries, and there cannot be growth in a population without structure. Rashi comments that the moment in which Korach and his followers are swallowed into the Earth creates a meaningful gap in the Jewish population. There are entire families lost in that moment - a moment which resonates down thousands of years to us today. We know what it means when entire family lines are erased. We still struggle today with a reality which contains the erasure of families, and the killing of children.

Perhaps Korach wasn’t entirely wrong. Certainly, he wasn’t in his expression of the longing of the people. Perhaps, in hindsight, some calming strategies and gentle words might have helped him get his point across without divine retribution. Perhaps, he could have found a road to collaboration with his cousins. Perhaps, the story is told so that we know to check in with ourselves before we raise our arms in protest.

There must be space for constructive dissent amongst us, if we are willing to face the challenges that still accompany us on our journey towards our promised land. We still inherit a longing for home from generation to generation - many of us having been displaced in the Diaspora through war, famine, and financial ruin. Our longing is as alive today as it was with B'nai Israel in the desert, year after year. When we disagree with text, when we challenge halachic structures that have existed for thousands of years, we express that longing. We give voice to this longing when we ask “why not me?” - as women longing to be counted, as ba’alei tshuva longing to feel belonging, and as the dispersed longing to feel connected. When our longing is expressed - in constructive and meaningful ways, we create that change - and we get closer to a full, powerful sense of home and belonging.



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