

KORACH

Dvar for Beit T'Shuvah Lisë Stern 6.24.23

The rabbis say
Korach was a rich man
A very very rich man
A big man on the campus of Egypt
Who, they say, held the keys
To Pharoah's treasuries
But it wasn't enough
Gold is only good for a mishkan
A portable sanctuary
(or a poisonous calf) in the desert.

A man of stature used to star treatment
Don't they know who I think I am
He must have thought
Trudging day after day after night in the desert
Only to be told
Two years into a journey
That should have taken a week
You ain't never gonna see that promised land
No matter what you demand
Because you too bought into the story
The scouts told
We'll never make it,
The spies said
For the land that flows with milk and honey
Will swallow up those who settle there
So beware we're scared we just can't can't can't

And God replied, you can't, then you can't, and you won't
Only the two he named, Joshua, Caleb of that first generation would lead
The nation to the promised destination

But, you, Korach, didn't argue, then, did you?

Then, you were just another unnamed face in a crowd
But now, rich man, you step up and wonder
With brimstone and thunder
With all you had, why didn't it buy you a place at the altar
Not called for
A space in the priesthood
Make good

Afterall, you could slit the throats of turtle doves and red heifers
on that blood-soaked altar
just as well as your cousin Aaron,
Right?
Them's fighting words now
Could you speak with stumbling assuredness like cousin Moses
Surely your way with words was so much smoother
With no effort you gathered 250 men of note
To jump into your boat
On hand to promote
Your mutiny
As their destiny.

Could you conjure up wells of water like cousin Miriam
Saving a condemned babe
Dancing with timbrels in celebration of deification
No, but
Could he speak with God?
No, but
Oh, but
How he
Did he long to, to belong to
The inner sanctum,
The keys to that holy of holies
The opportunity
To come face to face
With the holy blessed one.

You've gone too far, Korach said,
with support of 250 of Israel's finest
Underminingest
Men of name,
Not just any old Israelites.

What was the "too far"?
Was it the commandment to wear fringes, tzitzit, on the corners of our clothes?
Reminders to remember
Like a red string tied around a finger.
Or the stoning of a man who collected sticks on the Sabbath?
Imprisoned as he awaited God's death decree.
Or are these just the soft fillers hiding the truth
And all those 250 men of repute
Who refute and refuse to excuse their doubt
Y'all aren't going to the promised land

You, Korach, Dotam, Aviram
And even Moses Aaron Miriam
The Leader and the Priest and the Prophet
The holy sibling trinity
The ones who unasked heard God's call
Who said Hineieni
Directly
Or by association
And spoke with God

Because if you have to ask...

The task is not to want
What you want so dearly
Fearing
Unknowing
Just where exactly you're going
with these thoughts
these uncertainties these
Certainties that I must be the best man for the job
because if I envision myself there, that means that's what God wants, right?

How do we know the vision comes from a harmful place
Rather than humble
Rather than awe filled
Rather than broken

Moses was a lonely refugee when
God lassoed him into the fold
He saw the eternally burning bush
No one else did
He heard the angel call
No one else did
And then
After everything everything exodus leading through sand and sea
and so much complaining
He too had been told he'd never see the promised land
No problem with the fringes
But, really, God, you're not gonna let me,
your chosen one, the one you talk to like no other, enter the promised land?
And still he led.

Two men
Cousins,

Levites, Descendants of the man who wiped out a town of men recuperating from circumcision
Along with his brother Shimon

But The sons of
do not in fact carry the sins of their fathers

The Red Sea opened up to let Korach and everyone else through, rich, poor, old, young
Walking on firm land
But the earth opened her mouth and swallowed him whole, an answer to his challenge

The challenge of the scouts Korach believed, that a swallowing land existed
On the other side of the Jordan

No, God said
In not so many words, no, rich man,
it was not enough that you had earthly rewards,
you had to challenge and seek what wasn't yours to seek

Instead of the heights he sought
Korach sank to the depths, swallowed up like the scouts deemed the
Temperament of the promised land
Karma has biblical roots, after all

The earth swallowed him whole
to that mysterious place
Sheol
A kind of hell hole that people can return from.
But not everyone.
Korach never came back, but, like a bad seed that once had good intentions
Abstentions from mentioning the need to lead lord over
Those interventions sprouted forth,
Seeds need darkness to germinate a new generation
His cravings kept him down,
But
They did not drive down his sons
Who lived
Who came back from Sheol
Whole,
Ready to love God, to praise god
Asking for nothing in return.

The prophet Samuel is a Korach descendant
Resplendent, dependent on God's
Accepting the monarchy-seeking will

Of the people
Samuel, the Moses of his generation,
(So closely connected, his changing leadership is tied directly to this parsha
In an accompanying haftarah)
At the very moment his leadership is challenged
Samuel holds on to priesthood
But loses secular leadership
Because the people want a king

And from Samuel, other sons of Korach appear
As poets and songwriters, given bylines in the Psalms
Including the Psalm 48 assigned for Monday

These sons came back from Sheol, the pit,
The swallowing earth place,
The belly of an earthbound whale.

Perhaps it was their words of praise

Singing of God's greatness
And asking nothing in return
Other than, perhaps, the privilege to return repent T'Shuvah
That lifted them
And lifted, perhaps, the rebelling legacy of their father
And their roots
A promise of redemption
Breaking the cycle
Singing,
This Elohim is our God forever and always
Tell us now, declare it to the final generations

Even as they remember a place of darkness
Grateful for the opportunity to once again feel sun and rain and wind
And breathe unanchored air.
The discovery
Of recovering
A sweet whole world,