

Torah Commentary: Korach's Rebellion

The piece below is taken from notes for my talk on Korach's Rebellion last year. I was attempting a Torah portion commentary for the first time in my life. I found it a rewarding experience, and very much in line with some talks by long-time member Allan Malkis and by our madrikh Dr. Harold Londer. They have both spoken about the values of ancient purportedly sacred texts to Humanists. (One warning: As a scholar, I am afraid I couldn't resist talking at length about this general issue in leading up to the actual commentary.) - Richard Logan

Torah Portion Commentary: "What is there of value to us as humanists in sacred texts? The case of Korach's Rebellion"

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1. This is a brand new thing for me. I simply chose the Torah portion generally assigned to this week. I wanted it to be that way to have the purest kind of experience: no pre-selection; just the way it is done traditionally. It happens that this Sabbath's Torah portion is *Numbers 16* the story of Korach's rebellion against Moses in the Sinai wilderness: **Summary:** Korach goes to Moses and asks: "Why are you and Aaron above the rest of us? You are our ruler and your brother our head priest. Aren't we all equally holy?"

First, I want to put this in context:

1. There is a long tradition of commentary on old texts and finding meaning in them for today. Many sermons or homilies with lessons for today, for example, take their inspiration (generally a moral one) from biblical or Torah sections. Evangelical Christians do this constantly; and so I gather do Orthodox Jews, and Muslims with the Qu'ran.
2. Some commentary about the lessons from bible (or Torah) stories can be quite tortured, a point made humorously in a ***Beyond the Fringe*** skit: "my brother Esau is an hairy man, while I am a smooth man". J. Cast

member Alan Bennett plays an Anglican preacher who goes on and on making God-knows-what out of the passage. On the other hand, some serious scholars suggest that this verse is NOT about literal brothers but makes a much broader reference to the historical change from the people being brutish hunters and gatherers, bearded and wearing furs (“hairy”), to now being more civilized settled farmers, shaven and wearing cloth (“smooth”). “Brother” is not literal, but rather means another fellow human, related over long history. Another e.g: Are the names of “children” of Adam and Eve actual individuals or entire clans or tribes? Whatever the case, these examples establish the precedent for us that Torah references can be broad and allegorical. But let’s set this idea aside for a moment...

3. The more immediate question for us, well addressed by Allan Malkis in April 2013, is what do old, purportedly sacred, texts have to say to us today?

1. The answer to this is partly found in the extent that modern ethics can be traced back to biblical admonitions, e.g., killing is wrong But, in the bible killing is wrong because God said it is wrong, not because it violates some ethical principles derived from reason and empathy and democratic deliberation, as we hope our moral reasoning is.
2. When it comes to ethical things, in the early history of many religions and civilizations there is also the figure of the Law-Giver, the supposed originator of moral and ethical behavior among humans- e.g., Moses, who gave mere mortals incapable of ethical conduct on their own their rules to live by, direct from God. Likewise, the Messenger Mohammed.
3. But besides admonitions delivered to humanity, was there what we could call principled ethical reasoning — as we understand ethics today — in ancient texts?? On the surface it is hard to see what principles of high-level ethical reasoning might underlie the Ten Commandments because what has come down to us is the **admonitions**. On the other hand, note how many of the Ten Commandments deal with people getting along with each other: *Honor thy father and mother; Thou shalt not kill/murder; not commit Adultery; not Steal; not bear false witness; not covet*. One can certainly see that **these six** are **necessary to society**

functioning well: — They are rules to live **together by, and avoid conflict, so** that could be the underlying reasoning. And note that clearly no supreme being is needed for these six commandments to exist. Therefore it is entirely plausible that they actually derived from the collective deliberations of people capable of ethical reason. On the other hand, the four that deal with religion sound more like authoritarian edicts given by a priestly class, not at all different **in form** from pre-monotheistic edicts about who/what gods to worship, and how to do so.

There is also the Golden Rule, predated by Hillel's statement: *That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn it*, as seemingly an even more principled item. It is highly respected in secular circles because it is indeed an eloquent statement of the essence of ethics as we now understand them: i.e., **put yourself in the other guy's shoes and then judge as if you were on the receiving end of your own actions**. To Post-Enlightenment moral philosopher Immanuel Kant this is called the Categorical Imperative- "Act only in accordance with that maxim which you would want to be a universal law" ... i.e., something that applies to you and everyone else too, equally. Mohammed says it this way (from the Hadith, not the Qu'ran): "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them." (This sounds like it borrows both from the Golden Rule and Hillel.) Indeed, Greg Epstein, Humanistic Chaplain at Harvard, observes as many other scholars have that virtually all of the world's major religions have some form of what we recognize as the Golden Rule. Some scholars also say that such a principle is less central to Islamic doctrine than the Golden Rule is to Christianity and Hillel's statement is to Judaism. However, cultural prejudice could figure in this view.

1. What kind of statement is Hillel's statement and the Golden Rule? Well, instead of simply responding in kind, Hillel admonished us to treat others **as we would hope to be treated** if our roles were reversed: "as you would have them .." In other words, instead of payback, the Golden Rule/Hillel is about paying it forward. In effect it says: "**Do proactive, preemptive good rather than reactive retribution.**" Now, the earlier Code of Hammurabi was also principled, but as it stressed simple

reciprocity, paraphrased as “an eye for an eye” — payback, it allowed no way beyond perpetual conflict, except having the greater strength. This is not a basis for civilization to advance: I would argue that Hammurabi’s principle reflects a more thoroughly tribal way of life of continuing feuds among kinship groups (note “feudal”!), whereas the Hillel Golden Rule emerges out of a more settled and urbanized culture where the cost of continual feuding is too much disruption, and there must therefore be a central authority and rules to manage internal conflicts between families and clans.

2. Now, if it is true that Islam puts more stress on retribution, and we look at where Islam emerged, it was in the thoroughly tribal Arabian peninsula, beset by enduring feuds among families and clans for centuries. Is this culture of continual feuding fertile ground for stressing reciprocity over pay it forward ? Perhaps. Note that it is now called **Saudi** Arabia because the Saud **family** ended up as the most powerful after centuries of clan and family feuding.

1. The question of the value of old “sacred” texts for us as Humanists can be found partly in the exercise of comparing what people once believed with what we now believe, using the values in these texts as a “distant mirror” to ourselves. The question of whether they contain any timeless wisdom is also illuminated by one indisputable historical fact: i.e., Jews have always debated the meaning of sacred texts, and in so doing they helped found:

1. the tradition of Jews as an intellectual people — questioning, debating, wondering,
2. the argument we call democracy,
3. respect for diverse points of view - the foundation of modern ethics as well as cosmopolitan society.
4. And, in a word, MODERNITY!!!

So, the timeless wisdom is not always found in the content of ancient texts, but **in how they were used - i.e., in the process of informed debate about important questions!**

1. So, even though ancient Jews were monotheistic, they were not mono-

dimensional - even the most orthodox studied, questioned, and debated.

2. A telling example:

Does ‘Thou shalt not kill’ mean simply no killing, or does it mean no murder? (“Thou shalt not kill” is a simple sweeping prohibition, while Murder is a legal, rule-based concept.) Debating this statement then leads to concepts of some killing being justified, and even up to concepts of Just War, among other things. Therefore, Jews did not simply accept that the articles of their belief were simply inscribed for all time and merely needed to be memorized and followed — although the early, pre-rabbinic, priestly class (represented by Moses and particularly Aaron in the tale of Korach’s rebellion - which I address below — may have tried to impose strict unquestioning obedience.

1. Now, an example of what we humanists might get from ancient texts: The story of Abram and the idols: According to Jewish tradition, the Patriarch Abraham was born under the name Abram in the city of Ur in Babylonia circa 1800 BCE). He was the son of Terach, an idol merchant, but from his early childhood, he questioned the polytheistic faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator.

Abram tried to convince his father Terach of the folly of idol worship. One day, when Abram was left alone to mind the shop, he took a hammer and smashed all of the idols, except the largest one. He then placed the hammer in the hand of the largest idol. When his father returned and asked what happened, Abram said, “The idols got into a fight, and the big one smashed all the other ones.” His father said, “Don’t be ridiculous. These idols have no life or power. They can’t do anything.” Abram replied, “Then why do you worship them?” So, Abram took this as very telling about the folly of idol worship and pagan gods. **We humanists could find this very telling about the question of a supernatural realm altogether. Note that even Abram’s father the believer said that even the biggest idol - the greatest god — was simply an inanimate object.**

1. Now, to the question I have been avoiding! The Torah portion for this week:

The Rebellion of Korach.

This is a tough Torah portion. It's the story of Korach, the man who led a revolt against Moses while in the wilderness. Korach gathers 250 of the most important leaders and challenges Moses:

“You take too much upon yourself, Moses. [It is] not just you, but all the congregation is holy, every one of us. Why do you raise yourself up above the congregation?” (Numbers 16:2-3).

Well, the upshot for Korach is that the earth opens and Korach and his 250 followers - community leaders — are swallowed up. Moses remains ruler, and his brother Aaron, the High Priest.

It seems on the face of it that one lesson of this portion is the time-honored one that religious authorities have always wanted people to get: i.e., **Really terrible** things will happen to people who question religious doctrine and challenge religious authority.

Here is what Reform Rabbi Laura Geller says about this: “What makes this portion so problematic is that it seems that Korach could be in the right! [Indeed.] After all, what is he asking for? Democracy? Equality? Empowerment? What could be wrong with that?” (Sounds like our kind of question doesn't it?)....

Geller goes on: “But seriously, what's the message here? Is it that authority can never be challenged? Given the reality of politics in our world, this is a dangerous and not very Jewish position. Is it instead that dissent in a religious community should be smashed? Also not a good lesson, particularly at this moment in history when we see so much abuse of power by religious leaders.

“The question is even more problematic when you see how our tradition embellished the story. In the rabbinic tradition, Korach is an even more dangerous figure than he seems to be in the biblical story. The *midrash* tells us that not only did Korach challenge Moses, he also challenged Torah by criticizing laws that seem to be arbitrary and **illogical** [**an** interesting word for Humanists!]; e.g., Why is it that a four-cornered blue cloth without tzitzit is not kosher but with four cords of blue it is? And why is chicken considered meat, and eggs considered pareve? The *midrash* views Korach mocking religious authority and, worse, accusing Moses and Aaron of using their authority to impoverish poor people by requiring that they offer sacrifices and tzedakah. If this is the rabbis' vision of Korach, no wonder he is considered the epitome of a threat!”

Why then did the rabbis create these stories about Korach? Rabbi Janet Marder suggests that what the rabbis are doing here is projecting onto Korach all of their own doubts about the religious system that governs their lives. Actually, if we recall the idea of Torah/biblical texts having broad references, I think it is much broader than that: It is a tale about Doubt and questioning within a community; i.e., instead of seeing Moses and Korach as separate individuals fighting over power, what would happen if we see them as two sides of a communal debate, as well as two sides of ourselves - the believing side and the doubting side?

Geller adds this: "Think about it. Each of us is both Moses and Korach. The Moses in us is wise, visionary and trusting [**or, from the questioning side of the debate**, authoritarian, power-hungry, dictatorial!!]. Moses [from the viewpoint of Believers] represents our best self [and is the guy who is right]. And the Korach inside us [from the point of view of religious faith] is our cynical, dark, negative voice Korach is that dark side, the part of ourselves that undermines us and stands in our way of being the person we really want to become."

But HOLD ON!! - from the other, rational, critical, side of the argument, Korach is also simply questioning religious and political authority, perceiving hypocrisy, arguing that some religious texts and beliefs are illogical, and arguing that power is corrupting. ... Dare I say that Korach is more the hero for a humanist than Moses? Note that Korach supposedly said that some laws were illogical. This sounds like he was guilty of using reason.

Rabbi Marder goes on to suggest that maybe the story isn't about religious leadership at all. Maybe it is a spiritual challenge to each one of us to bury the Korach inside of us, the judgmental self (her term) that so often paralyzes us. She adds that maybe we have to bury that part of ourselves so that the Moses in us can be free to continue the journey toward the Promised Land. This is an appealing view, but I read the preceding as saying that we need to bury our inquiring, questioning side. This is a non-starter in a Post-Enlightenment world and certainly so to Humanists who believe in the tools of reason, science, and debate. It also seems jarringly out of keeping with the views we often hear from rabbis about the importance of debating the meaning of texts.

So, early Jews had doubts and questions which are personified in the allegory of Korach: So, not only debate, but the questioning of fundamentals and asking whether they make logical sense goes back a long way. The story of Korach

represents the polar opposites of a timeless debate, an allegory about the Jewish tradition of debate between the perennial two sides, in this case obedience vs. doubt. It is also about the power and timelessness of doubt and questioning, and subjecting texts to the test of reason.

And note a vitally important thing: The two sides portrayed here are *not* the two sides we usually hear about. It is not the monotheists versus the pagans worshipping the Golden Calf as we usually hear about from the bible/Torah. It is rather believers versus questioners. In sum, people like we humanists ARE REPRESENTED IN THE TORAH!! And not necessarily in such a bad light, depending on how you look at it.