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Korach in the Shadow

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It is America in 2017, and there is no escape from the daily surreality of the political moment. Cue the *parasha* of Korach, headlined by none other than a charismatic outsider who's got a bone to pick with the political establishment. My first instinct when sitting down to write this piece was to offer everyone a much-needed break from the news cycle by sidestepping any obvious parallels to the present day and focusing on something more pleasant and benign. But as I looked and thought deeper, it seemed to me that there is something here truly worth saying. So with apologies in advance:

Korach is a Levite, the leader of one of the noble families charged with the care and transportation of the portable shrine that formed the center of the Israelites' encampment in the wilderness. Moses, who is Israel's legislator, chief justice, and commander-in-chief all rolled into one, and his brother Aaron, high priest and progenitor of the kohanic line, jointly claim absolute power over Israel on the authority of Yahweh, and are too of Levite origin. Korach appears on the scene

accompanied by two hundred fifty “chieftains of Israel, chosen by the community, men of repute” (Num. 16:2) to deliver the following message to Moses and Aaron:

(3) You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Yahweh is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above the Yahweh’s congregation?

Korach, it would seem, has harnessed and given voice to the resentment of the Israelite populace, whom, after countless travails along the interminable route to the promised land, feel abandoned by an oligarchic power structure that seems mainly interested in preserving its own privilege. Despite having succeeded in mobilizing a formidable political movement behind him, however, Korach’s ride is over before it begins. Few biblical characters who oppose the will of Yahweh live to tell the tale, and Korach’s story ends swiftly and tragically for him, his family, and his followers.

Yet prior to his sensational, supernatural demise (which I will describe in more detail below), as if anticipating the sympathetic quality Korach’s gripe might hold for readers in a distant political future, the biblical author uses Moses’ public response to Korach and his followers to “reveal” an insidious self-interest underlying Korach’s apparently democratic challenge to the leadership.

(9) Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to him, to perform the duties of the Lord’s tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? (10) Now that he has advanced you and your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?

Moses delivers the bald accusation that Korach has raised the banner of populism merely to advance his own covert agenda of stealing the priesthood and its attendant wealth and honor from the family of Aaron. The rhetorical function of this move is to infect the listener/reader’s impression of Korach with the most basic form of political cynicism: the suspicion that all who aspire to lead are moved by

selfish interests. In reality, there is no obvious basis for Moses' claim to be found in the preceding narrative, apart from the fact that Korach is indeed already a high-ranking Levite. To the extent that Korach is given voice at all, he speaks for the whole congregation of Israel. Thus the attack on Korach's integrity and moral character, though not demonstrably false, appears to arise, as it were, out of nowhere.

Or perhaps not. In the manner of contemporary psychoanalytic *darshan* Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, let us presume that the Torah possesses an unconscious, a register of knowing and meaning that discloses its veiled presence through lacunae in the flow of the biblical voice – the gaps, the silences, the erasures. It is in the universe of Jungian analytical psychology that we may begin to discern an inner logic to Moses' seemingly ungrounded character assassination of Korach.

Jung conceives of the unconscious as the realm of the archetypes, a set of primordial images or psychic essences that give shape and meaning to everyday experience. One of the most universally important of these archetypes is known as the Shadow.

"Modern man," Jung writes in a 1964 essay called 'Approaching the Unconscious,' "protects himself against seeing his own split state by a system of compartments. Certain areas of outer life and of his own behavior are kept, as it were, in separate drawers and are never confronted one with another...we neither see nor want to understand what we ourselves are doing, under the cover of good manners." The Shadow is the repository of all that we prefer not see about ourselves, that which we do and think and feel which contradicts our individual sense of ourselves as essentially good people. Typically, in an absence of reflective self-awareness, the unwanted pieces of the psyche collected in the Shadow are projected onto (and into) other people. This allows us to feel secure in the knowledge that what we find bad and unacceptable exists "out there" and not "in here," thus permitting to ourselves an ongoing sense of innate goodness and moral superiority.

The concept of the Shadow becomes especially intriguing in light of the Torah's depiction of Moses in Numbers 12:3 as "very humble; more humble than any other person on earth." We can recall in this regard Moses' early and repeated

reluctance to become the emissary of the god of the Israelites; his forgiving support of his sister Miriam after she publicly humiliates him; and so on. A superlatively humble person is one perpetually engaged in strenuous efforts to avoid feelings or demonstrations of superiority over others. The personality of Moses thus apparently contains a deep-seated discomfort with the feeling of self-importance (this being perhaps, if we may continue to speculate psychoanalytically, a manifestation of profound unconscious guilt for having enjoyed the comforts of royalty for years while his kin suffered under the whip).

Now along comes Korach, forcefully calling attention to what is really an incontestable fact: that Moses exists in a class of power and privilege all unto himself among the entire nation of Israel. Whatever his true intention, Korach's pronouncement puts Moses painfully in touch with what he would rather not know or see or acknowledge about his own identity - his Shadow side. It is a fact that his life is considered more important than the lives of his fellows. It is a fact that he holds the power of life and death over each one of them. It is a fact that he has sometimes raged at their stubbornness and cursed his lot in life as their shepherd. Thus for Moses, the shame and guilt he will be forced to feel when publicly confronted with his own fearsome power prompts the deployment of an unconscious defense, a simple act of projection in the name of psychological self-preservation. Suddenly, Korach's "true" motivations are crystal clear in Moses' conscious mind: It is HE who desires unquestioned authority, HE who has grown too comfortable with privilege; HE is the bad one, not I, and not Aaron, who have always faithfully served the people at the behest of the divine. In the bizarre and unforgettable way that Korach and his followers are destroyed – by being swallowed alive into the earth, into the darkness of *she'ol*, the biblical underworld – we can hear the biblical unconscious speaking in metaphors about the Shadow role that Korach plays in Moses' psychic drama.

Jung insists that the success of ethical maturation initially hinges on the reclamation and integration of the Shadow parts, a sort of psychological "ingathering of the exiles." I don't want to say much more, only this: Amid the pervasive angst of our political situation, I have observed in myself a near-constant impulse to interpret the actions of my political adversaries in the most cynical light possible. I will take from this meditation on the Korach story the opportunity to

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redouble my intention to pause and reflect whenever I feel so certain that others are driven by folly and evil, to see what exiled parts of myself need to be taken back in, understood, and owned.

Shabbat Shalom.

Continue the conversation. Send Binny your thoughts: bkagedan@gmail.com.

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