



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Korach 5773

June 8, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parashat Korach opens with a scene of intense political drama in which a coalition of disgruntled Israelites challenges Moses and Aaron's leadership. An analysis of this rebellion and the motivations of its leaders provides an opportunity to explore questions of politics, power and leadership—our associations with them, why they are important and how we might be able to utilize them to achieve the justice that we seek for our communities and the world.

The Torah describes the opening of the showdown between Korach's coalition and Moses and Aaron, as follows:

Numbers 16:1-4, 8-11

Now Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohat son of Levi, took, along with Datan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Pelet—descendants of Reuben—to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Adonai's congregation?" When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.

... Moses said further to Korach, "Hear me, sons of Levi. 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 God, to perform the duties of Adonai's Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that God has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too? Truly, it is against Adonai that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?"

במדבר טז: א-ד, ח-יא

וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח, בֶּן-יִצְחָר בֶּן-קֹהֵת בֶּן-לֵוִי; וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיָּאָב, וְאוֹן בֶּן-פִּלֵּת--בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן. וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה, וְאֲנָשִׁים מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתָּים, נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרִיאִי מוֹעֵד, אֲנָשֵׁי-שָׁם. וַיִּקְהֻלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם--כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קְדוֹשִׁים, וּבְתוֹכְכֶם ה'; וּמִדּוֹעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ, עַל-קֹהֵל ה'. וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו.

... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-קֹרַח שְׂמַעוּנָא בְנֵי לֵוִי: הַמְעַט מִכֶּם כִּי-הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת-עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן ה', וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשֹׁרְתָם: וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְךָ וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲחֵיךָ בְּנֵי-לֵוִי אֶתְךָ וּבִקְשָׁתֶם גַּם-כֹּהֲנָה: לָכֵן אֶתְּהָ וְכָל-עֲדֹתֶךָ הַנֹּעְדִים עֲלֶיהָ וְאַהֲרֹן מֵהָיוּא כִּי תִלְוּנוּ עֲלֵינוּ:

Guiding Questions:

- In the first set of verses, what do Korach and his coalition claim is their complaint? Whose interests do they claim to represent?

- In the second set of verses, when Moses responds to Korach and his coalition, whose interests does Moses assume they represent? What does Moses think Korach and his coalition are actually seeking?
- What do you think is motivating Korach and his coalition to stage their rebellion? What evidence can you find in these verses that they represent the people's interests? What evidence can you find that they are seeking more power for themselves?

Although Korach's coalition ostensibly seeks a more democratic, equal distribution of power in the Israelite community, many commentators understand its members to have ulterior motives of claiming power for themselves. Certainly the fact that God causes the members of the coalition to be either swallowed by the earth or consumed by fire¹ shortly after this scene indicates that their cause was not as just as they claimed.

Similarly today in the United States, while many leaders and politicians claim to represent the interests of their constituents, many Americans think that government is "all a game of who wins rather than what's best for the people."² This distrust of politicians has led to disillusionment with politics and a belief, at least among Americans under the age of 30, that "the politics of today are not able to meet the challenges our country is facing."³

A lack of belief in the ability of politics to solve social problems is occurring not only in America but also in the field of global development. According to an article in *The New York Times*, social entrepreneurs who are seeking innovative solutions to social problems in the United States and abroad are largely ignoring the role of politics in social change:

Anand Giridharadas, Real Change Requires Politics⁴

Social entrepreneurs tend to believe that problems can be solved to the benefit of all. In their ideal world, money makers make their money, the poor are rescued from poverty, elites find meaning, and governments are circumvented.

...

What earnest social enterprise can sometimes ignore is power, predation and good old-fashioned politics.

... in poorer countries like India, social entrepreneurs address real needs — bringing solar lamps to villages, teaching women to weave shawls and connecting them to big-city markets. But the elites attracted to such projects are often less interested in combating the underlying structural problems. The villages need solar lamps because the government fails to bring electricity. The women must weave from home because their husbands forbid them to leave.

These problems are not inefficiencies in need of smoothing. They are fights in need of picking. But picking fights is rarely the social entrepreneur's way.

...

The avoidance of politics by many social entrepreneurs would not matter if politics abounded in people as bright, sincere and intelligent as they. But it does not.

Politics needs their verve and their drive, whether they serve in government itself or pick fights from the outside. It needs their spreadsheets, but it also demands their sense of battle. There is a case to be made for the importance of not being earnest.

¹ Numbers 16:31-35.

² Jeff Zeleny and Megan Thee-Brenan, "New Poll Find a Deep Distrust of Government," *The New York Times*, 25 October 2011. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/us/politics/poll-finds-anxiety-on-the-economy-fuels-volatility-in-the-2012-race.html?_r=0.

³ Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service: 23rd Edition, Institute of Politics, Harvard University, 30 April 2013, page 19. Available at http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/spring_poll_13_Exec_Summary.pdf.

⁴ Anand Giridharadas, "Real Change Requires Politics," *The New York Times*, 15 July 2011. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/16/us/16iht-currents16.html?_r=2&.



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Guiding Questions:

- According to this article, why do social entrepreneurs seek solutions to poverty that circumvent politics? What are the problems with this avoidance of politics? Do you agree or disagree with this analysis? Why?
- How do *you* usually seek to address social problems? Through *tzedakah*, service, political advocacy or other means? Why do you choose the approaches that you do?
- If you avoid participating in political advocacy, why? What might help you overcome the obstacles to your participation?

Conclusion

We may avoid participating in the political system for a number of reasons, including distrust of politicians, who, like Korach, are focused more on building their own power than on addressing the needs of their constituents. And yet, not all leaders are like Korach. In fact, Moses offers a powerful counter-example of a leader who is wholly invested in his people's needs, demonstrating this later in the *parashah* when God strikes the people with a plague. God commands Moses to separate himself from the people so that he may be saved, but instead, Moses stays and risks his life to protect the nation, instructing Aaron to perform an atonement ritual on their behalf.⁵

We should seek out and support leaders—both in our own country and in developing countries—who share Moses's leadership traits, inspire our confidence in the political system's ability to fix social problems and motivate us to participate in that system. And through our participation, we will fulfill the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love." In this way, we can use our government and its systems as they were intended: not to increase the power of a few, but to promote liberty and justice for all.

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⁵ Numbers 17:8-15.