

D'var Torah 07.05.2024

Korach – Num 16:1-18:32

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Imagine my surprise, when paging through copies of D'vars (I should say, D'varim) I've delivered in the past, to discover that last June I spoke on this very same portion. It is a measure of my current state of mind that I didn't remember having done that – I tell you, folks, nothing gets easier with the passage of time, including memory. Unless you're a super-ager, it's all downhill after 80. Still, at least after I read that earlier version, I did remember writing it. So maybe all is not yet lost. I can only hope.

I have to say that I was tempted to recycle last year's Korach comments. After all, if I didn't remember them, it's at least as likely that you didn't either. Through the years in churches, I heard stories from reliable sources of literal sermon recycling on the part of pastors deemed either too busy or too lazy to create something new, and I can understand how that might happen. But I've resisted that temptation for this reason: I should be able to read the same text, perhaps in the context of a new or different time frame, and discover something I didn't see before. I think in the field of literary studies this is called "reader-response theory." Alternatively, a writing (especially one with the staying power of Torah) can generate multiple meanings. I think this is called "textual multi-valence." Maybe they amount to the same thing. So I want to make the effort to see beyond what I saw in this parashah last summer. What might I see in it now?

Let's set the scene of this story. In the wilderness a serious rebellion is being mounted against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, a rebellion with both political and religious overtones. The rebellion is a composite of the Levites, led by Korach, and the Reubenites, led by the sons of Eliab. The one is seeking priestly privilege and the other is seeking political power. Needless to say, neither is successful and both Moses and Aaron are confirmed in their leadership roles. However, a claim of the Reubenite brothers Dathan and Abiram that I had previously overlooked caught my eye this time. Speaking to Moses, they posed the question, "Is it too little that you brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to put us to death in the wilderness?" The juxtaposition of Egypt as representing the promise of, well, the Promised Land, is at least jarring. Is it nostalgia for a time gone by? A longing for the good old days? Is

the past better than the present? In this story, are the brothers just trying to score political points: Make Israel Great Again?

These questions lead to the whole question of memory, how it functions and how it can mislead or confirm our picture of the past. Memory and its manifestations are something I live with every day, as you all know. However, we are probably not talking about the loss of much memory function that occurs in dementia. Rather, Rabbi Steven Kushner refers to this equating of Egypt with the Promised Land as “the perversion of memory.” Here, the memory of the past is being reshaped, reconfigured, and perverted in a mockery of Adonai’s promise. I wonder how many people in our country today are being influenced to believe such mockeries and perversions being spoken by some.

I noticed at the very end of last week’s portion that it is reported that God said to Moses the very words that are recited in every Shabbat service in the Veahavtah: “I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to become your God: I am Adonai your God.” Remembering right is baked into the service, from the blessing of the candles to the Mourner’s Kaddish. We remember the acts that created the universe, we remember the commandments, we remember those who have died, and so much else.

And here’s something else about memory: music and remembering go together in sometimes astonishing ways. So the chanting of so much of the service actually has a purpose of helping us recall not only the words, but the meaning within them. In another weekly setting, Karen and I go to Catholic Mass on Sunday mornings. She cannot remember what she had for breakfast that day, but she remembers all the parts of the service that the congregation sings, and she sings along and is happy. Music is a wonderful aid to remembering and a gift to those with failing memories.

Perhaps Dathan and Abiram needed a song to help jog their memories of what Egypt was really like. I’ve taken the liberty of writing some lyrics to accompany a melody that will likely be familiar to you. Nobody could sing this like Jerry Orbach of blessed memory, but I will do my best. It goes like this, so listen up, Reubenite boys:

Try to remember the kind of September
When you were toiling un-der Pharoah,
Try to remember when you were indentured
Making bricks without straw and in a hell-hole,

Don't you remember when life had no splendor,
No "milk and honey," just slavery and suffering,
So try to remember, and when you remember,
Then follow, follow Moses.
Follow, follow Ado-nai.

Thank you.