

## ***Korach 2017***

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/24/17

Twenty-four years ago, when I was looking for a job, I applied to a congregation in another state - I won't say which one. It was a nice congregation, smaller than this one. I never spoke to the Rabbi who was leaving the shul when I interviewed there, but they had a very helpful search committee. The chair told me that this was a unique opportunity for me because in the congregation there were a number of retired Rabbis and professors, all of whom came to shul every Shabbat and sat together in the back. He said, "We call them the B'nai Korach." Immediately, images of a row of Rabbis and academics critiquing every word I said from the pulpit. Well, needless to say, that was all I had to hear to book an earlier flight back home to Montgomery.

Korach, of course, was the man who gives this week's Torah portion his name. He leads a rebellion, a mutiny, against Moses; he opens up a mouth, and in turn the earth swallows him up. His followers are called the "B'nai Korach." I guess the head of the search committee thought it was compliment; to me it was a Red Flag. Exit, Stage Left! But, the truth is that the phrase "B'nai Korach," actually has two meanings: The first comes from this week's portion, and it refers to the *"two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute,"* as the parsha says. They are all swallowed up by the earth. But later on in this Book of Numbers, in Parshat Pinchas (p.921), when a census is taken, the Torah simply, and most surprisingly, states: **"Oo-Vnay Korah Lo May-too" - "The sons of Korach, however did not die."**

This is not a contradiction or editorial mistake. Here it literally means that the children Korach fathered did not perish along with him. And what makes this more interesting is that THESE B'nai Korah then go on to have a fine reputation as song leaders and musicians in the Temple. They wrote and performed some half a dozen of the Psalms in the Bible, a fact that I find fascinating. More interesting still is where and when these particular Psalms, the ones ascribed to the B'nai Korah, are read. They are not obscure; in fact they are recited at two very critical times in Jewish life. You have likely seen them many times and never noticed but before I tell you where they appear let me remind you of just remind you again just how loaded a term "B'nai Korah" really is. It would be like opening a session of Congress, or starting off July 4<sup>th</sup> Celebrations with, "OK, let's now sing a song of BENEDICT ARNOLD!" That's a pretty fair parallel to Korach in terms of infamy...

So what are the two times the Sons of Korach's songs are sung? One is right before we blow the Shofar on Rosh Ha-Shannah! Psalm 47 is recited just before the blowing of the shofar, and in some communities it is even recited seven times. It's a wonderful placement. The shofar is the call to repentance, the signal of the start of a brand new year; a reminder that we can always begin again. The shofar is a reminder that we can indeed put the past behind us, just like Korah's descendants were able to do. It also says to me that, in spite of what the Torah seems to say, the sins of the parents do not necessarily need to be inherited by their children. Every generation gets a fresh start.

The second famous time that a song of the B'nai Korach is sung is in a house of mourning. I have taken to reading the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm together at the end of a shiva service, morning or night, because

it is familiar and many people find those words of King David comforting. I know I do. But, traditionally, it is the song of the B'nai Korach, Psalm 49, that is read at a house of mourning before the final Kaddish is said. It's a Psalm that reminds us that rich or poor you can't take it with you. Physical possessions, and power, are fleeting, but faith and good deeds are forever. And those words have especial power precisely because they are attributed to the Children of Korach. Their ancient ancestor thought otherwise; he made a grab for power and fame at the expense of his own life and many others. But his children learned from his mistakes and they are the ones who go on to remind others how futile it is to live simply for power and fame. Theirs is a prayer for peace that starts out by mentioning their ancestor who was infamous for fighting, bickering and back biting.

We sing the song of the B'nai Korach in a house of mourning to remind us what really matters most, and that's love and care and kindness, faith and hope and trust. Korach did not have that, but his children were able to reprioritize. They brought glory back to the family name. And it is a powerful reminder for those in a shiva house that we can, and should, carry our family's name to greater heights as well; that each individual and each generation begins a new journey forward. The Korach family name is a poignant reminder that every generation writes its own story, and that we are not only descendants of those who came before us, but the ancestors of generations yet to come.