

Delivered by Rabbi Krupnick 6/20/15
Korach - Lessons in Leadership 2

This Shabbat I'd like to continue the talks I have been giving over the past couple of weeks in Lessons in Leadership. As you may remember from last week, some of Moshe's most powerful lessons in leadership come from the lowest points in his career as a leader. In this week's portion things go from bad to worse. First his leadership is challenged by Korah who asserts that everyone is holy - which is true - except that Korah does so to make sure that he can become the leader instead of Moshe. There is a showdown, as you likely know, and of course Korach and his 250 followers lose. They opened up a mouth to Moses and Gd "opens up a mouth in the soil" (that's literally what the text says) that swallows them up. But Moshe's tzuris as a leader does not end there. More people start to complain saying, "Look what you have done! You have killed Gd's People." Which is NOT true, Gd killed Gd's People, but Moses takes the blame.

At this point, Gd brings a plague to take down the new rebellion, and the plague does not stop until Aaron frantically runs around with an incense pan throughout the camp defending the very people who challenged his brother's leadership. The plague stops, but no good deed goes unpunished and now it is Aaron whose authority is questioned. So now you have the two leaders - the political and the religious leader (although their roles cannot be delineated quite that neatly) on the ropes.

Quite frankly, they are at a loss as to what to do. The people are in total disarray. They can't stand Moses, Aaron, or really even one another. And so Gd makes one more test - albeit of a very different nature. Gd tells Moshe to tell the People that each tribe's leader should bring a walking staff with his name carved into it - 12 walking sticks in all. Before the eyes of all the people, Moses is to take those sticks with the names on them and bundle them all together, place them next to the ark in the Mishkan, and wait and see what happens... And lo and behold, overnight, not only does the staff of Aaron begin to germinate and produce flowers; those flowers even make fresh almonds!

What a super powerful symbol that is! Here you have all the People in disarray with no common sense of purpose or group identity. So Moses is told to bring the sticks that symbolize the wide variety of tribes and their individual members bring them together and to see what happens. You can see that bundle of walking sticks in your mind's eye... Now part of the purpose of this story is to validate Aaron as the priestly leader. It is his staff that flowers and bears fruit so quickly... And, indeed, the next section of Torah talks about his responsibilities. But the image is far more powerful than simply showing that Aaron is still a leader. I think what makes this image so poignant is that it is by bringing together all of these disparate parts the gift of new life can come forth. It's the Torah's way of saying that when Jews join together, wonderful and often unanticipated things can happen.

Well, today we are celebrating the 10th reunion of the largest congregational Israel trip I have ever led. It was 10 years ago that Hazzan Pomerantz-Boro (who was relatively new to Beth El at the time) escorted 70 members and their families to Eretz Yisrael. This was a large and disparate group. Many did not know each other even though they'd been going to the same shul for many years. But over the course of our travels this group gelled and bonded and became fast friends. It

was as if, like Moses, we took all the staffs together, bound them together for a common mission, and voila - before too long out came the gift of new life... In Max Cwanger!

OK, it wasn't overnight, but seriously, Nicole Cwanger was, what 7 months pregnant with her first child. Still that did not stop her from trekking, and climbing endless stairs, and having a jolly old time with the group. And when Max was born, not too long after our return, the whole group celebrated. It was AWESOME! But that's what a trip to Israel can do. We take a group of individuals, each with their own history, personality and agenda, and bond them together as one; through their shared adventure they gain a common sense of purpose. I am so delighted to celebrate with all of you here today.

But it does not take a trip to Israel to make amazing things happen - for the gift of life to flourish in unexpected ways when Jews are brought together. I know that you, Rich and Jackie, could never have anticipated the way in which Perry has blossomed as a bar mitzvah. He's just one of a great many b'nai mitzvah in a large shul, but when you put him together with a great group of peers, when you as parents roll up your sleeves and get involved in the daily life of our congregation, when you raise him surrounded by your shul family, great and unexpected things can happen.

And this is a powerful lesson in leadership for all of us. Building new relationships brings new ideas, a renewed sense of purpose and new sources of strength. Bringing people together can yield amazing results, most of which can never truly be anticipated or understood in advance. In our parsha, the People squabbled and disagreed. They vied with one another for attention and power. But Moses showed them the strength that comes from working together, and he did it visually. To this day, I see the picture of the staffs in my own mind as a model of leadership - in our congregation - in our community- and in our country. Together we are far greater than the sum of our individual parts...