

## Rabbi Chai Levy Parashat Korach 6/20/15

I dedicate these words of Torah to the Reverend Clementa Pinckney and to those eight others who were murdered in the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston by an evil act of hatred. May their memories be a blessing and may the sacred study and prayers of the last moments of their lives reach the Holy One and reach our hearts today.

Noe offered us an important teaching from the story of Korach:

What was so terrible about Korach's rebellion?

Didn't Korach have a good point, after all – that we're all equal?

Isn't equality the message that we should draw from this parasha, especially in a week marked by a terrorist act of racism?

Certainly we could find that message –

There's a rabbinic debate in the Talmud about the great principle of the whole Torah:

Rabbi Akiva says: it's love your neighbor as yourself

Ben Azzai says: it's that the human being was created in the image of God, that is EVERY human being.

Whichever is right, they're both good – I'll take either one.

But our tradition learns a different but equally important message from this Torah portion: as Noe explained, Korach was power-hungry and jealous, While Moses' leadership was about serving the people – he was chosen to help his people get to the promised land.

I want to explore this idea further with you, and see how this message about Korach applies not only to those in positions of leadership but to all of us.

Look at the language –

The portion opens with Numbers 16:1 "*Vayikach Korach* - Korach took"

Took what? There's no direct object. He just took.

On the other end of the story is Numbers 18:7:

"I make your priesthood *Avodat Matanah*, a service of giving"

The story of Korach is surrounded by bookends –

*Vayikach Korach* – taking - *Avodat Matana* – giving;

On one end: Korach *took*; on the other end:

the Levites' service is meant to be a service of *giving* (Korach was a Levite)

the key to understanding this story is to look at the issue of taking and giving.

Confirms what Noe taught us –  
Korach's leadership was about taking:  
taking for himself, for his own power and ego.  
Whereas Moses' leadership was about giving, *avodat matanah*,  
a service of giving. Giving the people what they needed.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler\*, the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century eastern European spiritual counselor and teacher of Mussar, the Jewish ethical tradition, taught:  
every human being has the choice to be a Giver or a Taker.

For most of us, however, we're in the middle, it's not so simple.  
We suspect there's something a little unhealthy about just giving, giving, giving  
without ever receiving, don't we?  
And it's confusing for us - we live in a secular culture, which in many ways is all  
about taking: What can we get? What can we buy? What can we accomplish?  
How can we succeed?

And it's not so simple in the Torah portion either -  
The Levites are meant to be givers (*avodat matanah*)  
But see Numbers 18:26,28 – but the portion ends with Levites *taking*.  
The Hebrew *lakach*, is the same words as “Korach took.”  
They receive tithes from the Israelites –  
because they own no property, they live on the gifts of the people.  
The English translation says “receive” which is helpful, but the Hebrew word,  
*lakach*, is the same.

[Question for congregational discussion:]  
what's the difference between taking and receiving?  
[Answers from the congregation were generally: *receiving* means someone is  
giving you something to receive, whereas *taking* comes from one's own volition]

Receiving conveys something very different than “taking”-  
The difference between “taking” and “receiving” is that when you receive,  
it's with the sense of gratitude and the desire to then give back,  
whereas taking is just for yourself and your own selfish greed.

What Noe taught us about Korach  
And the difference between taking – for selfishness, for power  
And giving – or receiving a special role in order to give -  
is important not only for leaders,

but truly it's a teaching for all of us about how we orient ourselves in life.  
A great sage put it like this: "you're gonna have to serve somebody"  
Who do we serve? Ourselves? Our desires? Our egos?  
Or God? Others? Humanity? The world?  
You're gonna have to serve somebody.

My colleague Rabbi Shai Held\* who is a scholar of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel puts it like this in conveying Heschel's teachings:

The whole point of religion is for us humans to go beyond serving ourselves, to transcend ourselves through our experience of wonder and mystery, To respond to the sense that we have received something and so "something is asked of us"

It's orienting ourselves to what Heschel calls "the way of wonder" rather than "the way of expediency"

The way of expediency is the orientation of:

how we can dominate, acquire, get what we want? It's the way of *taking*

The way of wonder is: how from that place of awe and connectedness, are we called to appreciate, to respond, to *give*?

That's the difference between *Vayikach Korach/Korach took*

And what is meant to be the work of the Levites:

*Avodat Matanah, service of giving.*

And given that "we're all gonna have to serve somebody,"

Korach invites us to ask ourselves: who do we serve?

Not just Levites and leaders, but each of us –

It's not a question about what our job is –

You can be in "service work" and still be self-serving – after all,

Korach is there to be a warning about that very thing.

It's about our orientation in life:

The Way of Expediency or the Way of Wonder – of receiving and responding,

The Way of Taking or the Way of Giving.

We have a choice to be a Giver or a Taker.

That choice was amplified loudly in a week in which givers were murdered in hatred by a taker.

Rev. Clementa Pinckney, public servant from a young age and pastor in a historic civil rights church - Giver.

Tywanza Sanders, who tried to shield his elderly aunt from the shooter and who tried to talk the gunman into laying down his weapon.

Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, speech therapist and girls track coach.

Cynthia Hurd, a librarian.

DePayne Middleton-Doctor, a minister.

Ethel Lee Lance, sexton at the church.

Susie Jackson, 87 years old, longtime Emanuel churchgoer.

Myra Thompson, wife of a pastor from another church.

Rev. Daniel Lee Simmons, a retired pastor.

All Givers.

And a racist who committed terrible violence against innocent people engaged in prayer and sacred study who welcomed him in – a taker.

In honor and memory of the Givers, let us be inspired by their example to consider how we can be more Givers and make our world one of more giving.

And let us consider how we can bring some healing to our broken country.

I invite us to join the Marin interfaith community tomorrow morning at 9:00am at the Cornerstone Church, 626 Drake Avenue in Marin City to pray together and show our solidarity, love, and friendship with the people of Charleston and with the Emanuel AME Church.

Shabbat Shalom.

\*Thanks and credit to Rabbi Shai Held whose d'var Torah on Korach pointed me to these texts on taking and giving. See also his book, Abraham Joshua Heschel: the Call of Transcendence, pp. 37-40.