



Parashat Korach
A Revolution With Boundaries

by Rebecca Weiner on Friday June 30, 2006

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Looking back on my childhood, I often feel like I emerged out of two totally different worlds. I grew up in the “free to be you and me,” question-authority, communal-living, people’s republic of Berkeley in the late 1970’s. At the same time, my sister had become *bal teshuvah* (a non-Orthodox Jew who adopts Orthodox standards of observance) after a rather powerful trip to Israel at the age of eighteen. So while my nine-year-old cohorts spent their weekends running around Berkeley’s Telegraph Avenue with their hippie parents, I spent every *Shabbat* at the local Chabad synagogue (an international Orthodox/Hasidic outreach organization), living a “normal” Berkeley liberal Jewish life during the week, but becoming an observant girl over *Shabbat*.

What stood out for me at the time about the people I met through Chabad was their dedication to the rules and regulations of living an observant Jewish life, and the love they had for *halacha*, or Jewish law. I had not yet developed a questioning mind and as I studied and mimicked all the *mitzvot*, I was struck by the practice of the rituals and the devotion these people had to Hashem.

Later on in my life, as I developed into the lesbian feminist that I am, I struggled as I questioned my relationship to *halacha*. The rules surrounding who could and could not be included in certain Jewish rites and practices saddened me. I questioned a God that would allow a man to throw a chair at my girlfriend as she attempted to pray with the Torah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. What God would allow such punitive action? What God doesn’t want all the people Israel to participate in everything that makes Jewish life vibrant and meaningful?

In this week’s Torah portion, Korach asks similarly challenging questions, and in doing so creates a minor revolution with dire consequences. He wants to know why Moses and Aaron are holier than the rest of the community. In response, Moses tells Korach and his followers to prepare a fire pan and present it before God so that God may determine who is the most holy. Well...we know from *Parashat Shemini* that there is not such a good track record in the presenting of “strange fire,” and once again, we see the punitive God who destroys those who



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aren't worthy. We also see Moses struggling to be a leader, and learn how the sacrifices made in order to distinguish between the holy and the profane can create profound loss.

Often when I read through the texts of our tradition, I question who I would be in the narrative. So many of the *shandas* (Yiddish for "scandals") for which the Jews have been punished by God remind me of just another average day in my queer existence. For example, the dancing around the Golden Calf? Saw it on a pride parade float one year. The Naked Olympics in front of the Holy Temple? Pretty much a typical experience any day of the week at Gold's gym in San Francisco. I imagine that, like Korach, I might be the person to challenge the authority and ask: Why?

Perhaps because of the slow waxing of the hubris of my youth, I've been able to see two important lessons in this week's portion. One is that you have to pick your battles. As queer Jews living our lives we cannot fight every battle. I don't have to break down every door, shatter every glass ceiling and have every freedom. I have also learned that it is no easy task being a leader. This is especially true of our LGBT leaders, many of whom walk a complicated line of representing their constituencies while cultivating the influence needed to make change.

I am still troubled by the notion of punitive lessons. The little girl running around in 1978 in her tie-dyed tee shirt yearns for a more compassionate God. But as I remember back to my childhood and those Shabbats spent with Chabad, I am struck by the deeper lesson of how order can create holiness and holiness can create faith. Like the ancient Israelites, who continued to follow Moses as they wound their way to the Promised Land, I have had to learn that it is hard to build a tradition without order, without distinctions. Perhaps what our ancestors learned wandering in the desert was that their holiness was not determined just by their roles. In a world full of homophobia, racism, sexism and classism, a world that will often exclude us just because of who we are, how do we learn to carry that holiness inside us? There is a lesson I learned even at that tender age, and it continues to be a teaching that serves me in my work as a radical queer Jew: *It is not my revolution unless it has some boundaries*. I continue to believe, as our wandering ancestors must have, that even within the dualities of punishment and freedom, leaders and those who are led, great miracles and great sacrifices, that eventually our struggle will continue to lead us back to the promise of our faith.



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