



When What You Have Is Not Enough • Parshat Korah

“You’re not the boss of me!”

This was a regular part of our sibling banter as kids, and now, I have the great fortune of hearing my grandchildren say it to each other. It’s a way that children indicate independence and control, especially in their absence, as if to say, I don’t need to listen to you. I can determine my own direction. Thank you very much. Leave me alone.

In Tanakh, we also have a “you’re-not-the-boss-of-me” moment. It occurs in the beginning of this week’s Torah reading, Korah. Korah, a Levite, gathered together a number of elders and 250 leaders to challenge Moses and Aaron’s leadership. It was a dramatic, high-stakes rebellion with a very painful and shocking denouement. They accused the brothers of aggregating too much power and not sufficiently democratizing the governance of the Israelites: “They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far (*rav lakhem*)! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” (Num. 16:3).

There are many serious charges in this one verse. The rebels suggested that Moses and Aaron appointed themselves, abused their authority, and regarded themselves as superior to everyone else when the entire the community was holy. This is

the way that Rashi on 16:3 interprets the events: “Much more than is proper have you taken for yourselves in the way of high office.” They also hinted, with their generalized complaint, at some greater sedition that was left unnamed.

Their claim – summed up in the two words *rav lakhem*, you have gone too far or have taken too much – was matched when Moses used the same criticism of them. He threw their words back at them: “You have *gone too far*, sons of Levi!” (Num. 16:7). We do not have access to the murmurings that precipitated this confrontation, but it is clear that this ground-swell mutiny was the result of accumulated tension. They were not happy with the authority vested in their office; they wanted power. In *The Great Partnership*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers us a warning about such desire: “Power is a fundamental assault on human dignity. When I exercise power over you, I deny your freedom, and that is dangerous for both of us.”

Moses made his charge first and then his case: “Hear me, sons of Levi. Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you direct access to perform the duties of God’s Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that [God] has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?” (Num. 16:8-10). All those who approached Moses

and Aaron had titles and status already. But it was not enough. Ironically, for Moses, it was too much. He never wanted the position in the first place and protested his appointment several times. A few chapters earlier, Moses wanted to quit. He did not want more. He wanted less.

There are two times when Moses was told it was too much. The first occurred early in the wilderness, when Moses was solely adjudicating cases of Jewish law, and Yitro, his father-in-law, advised him to appoint other judges: “Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people, while the people stood about Moses from morning until evening. But when Moses’ father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?” (Ex. 18:13-14). In his failure to delegate, Moses had taken too much upon himself and this burdened the people, who had to wait all day to speak with him.

The second time Moses was told he overstepped was in his last plea to cross the Jordan River into Canaan. In his review or revision of the journey, Moses told the people that it was their fault he could not cross over. “But God was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. God said to me, ‘Enough! (*rav lakh*). Never speak to Me of this matter again!’” (Deut. 3:26). A decree is a decree. A punishment is a punishment. Enough protest, God said to Moses. It was time for Moses to accept his fate fully and acknowledge that a leadership transition was soon to take place.

In their article, “To Be a Better Leader, Give Up Authority” (*Harvard Business Review*, Dec. 2009), A.D. Amar, Carsten Hentrich, and Vlatka Hlupic claim that leaders, especially in times of crisis, “strive for greater efficiency by tightening control.” This inevitably fails in the long-term because without independence, people lose their intrinsic

motivation. “...the truth is that relinquishing authority and giving employees considerable autonomy can boost innovation and success at knowledge firms, even during crises.” They call this type of shared governance, “mutualism.” Employees are evaluated not by revenue or other numbers but “against qualitative values such as trust, responsibility, and innovation. And it implies that leaders don’t dictate vision or strategy; instead, they enable employees to create a common vision.”

But for this to work, these experts claim that individuals must be self-driven and committed to a common vision of shared success: “If abdication of authority is to yield value for the corporation, however, individuals must be self-motivated.” Such a theory would never have worked for Korach and his followers because they wanted to grab power, not share it. Moses tried to show them the authority they already had; it was a holy authority rooted in service to God and to their followers. Yet it was not enough.

Every Passover, we sing the song Dayenu – it is enough. With each successive stanza, we confirm that had only this event or development happened, it would have been enough, even though we needed all of it to happen in the process of redemption. Leaders need the perspective to sometimes say, “I have enough. I am enough.”

The poet David Whyte, in his poem “Enough,” makes the sentiment even more granular:

“Enough. These few words are enough.

If not these words, this breath.”

What do you have enough of in your leadership and what would you like more of?