

The Widow Oppressed by the Torah
Parashat Korah -
Beth Shalom, Cambridge
28 June 2008

First it was the complaining about the monotonous menu with manna every day, the craving for meat, the nostalgic longing for the fresh vegetables they used to eat in Egypt (*Be-Ha'alotekha*, Num. 11:4-6). Then it was the bitter lament following the report of the ten scouts, wishing they had died back in Egypt, actually suggesting that they find a leader who will bring them back (*She-lah Lekha*, Num. 14:1-4). Now this week we have an open revolt, a blatant challenge to the leadership of Moses and Aaron, led by a smooth-talking Levite named Korah. Where will it end?

In most of the rabbinic literature and throughout the Jewish tradition, Korah is presented as one of the arch-villains of the Bible, fomenting a major row, a bitter *broiges*, that was not sincere, not 'for the sake of Heaven'. Many preachers used him as a paradigm of those who arise not from the outside but, more dangerously, from within the Jewish people to challenge the accepted leadership and question traditional teachings. But there is a counter-stream in the literature that seems to appreciate the subtlety of Korah's argument and perhaps even the sincerity of his claims.

I would like to share with you what I consider to be one of the most provocative passages in the rabbinic literature. It appears in the first chapter of the Midrash on Psalms. Its purpose is to relate the Psalms to material in the Torah, and in our case it takes the first verse of Psalm 1—*Happy is the one who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners, or joined the company of the insolent* (Ps. 1:1)—and applied it to the uprising led by Korah who, in the rabbinic reading, “spoke insolently against Moses and Aaron. What did Korah do? He assembled all the congregation against Moses and Aaron”—up to here the Midrash is merely following the Torah text—“and in their presence he began to speak words of scorn. This is what he said.” At this point, the Torah text in our parashah is entirely abandoned, and a new speech is crafted and placed in Korah's mouth. It is this speech that I find so extraordinary, and I will cite it in full.

‘In my neighbourhood there was a widow, and with her were her two fatherless daughters. The widow had only one field, and when she was about to plough, Moses said unto her, *Thou shalt not plough with an ox and an ass together* (Deut. 22:10). When she was about to sow, Moses said to her, “Thou shalt not sow thy field with two kinds of seed” (Lev. 19:19).’

So far, it is just making life a bit more difficult for the widow by restricting the range of her activities. But it gets worse.

‘When she was about to reap the harvest and to stack the sheaves, Moses said to her: “Thou shalt not harvest the gleanings, the overlooked sheaves, and the corners of the field” (based on Lev. 19:9 and Deut. 24:19)’ [these were, of course, to be left for the poor]. ‘When she was about to bring the remaining harvest into the granary, Moses said to her, “Give me the heave-offering, the first tithe, and the second tithe.” She submitted to God’s decree and gave them to him.

‘What did the poor woman do then? She sold the field and bought two sheep, so that she might clothe herself in the wool shorn from them, and so that she might profit out of the lambs. As soon as the sheep brought forth their young, Aaron came and said to the widow, “Give me the firstling males, for this is what the Holy One, blessed be He, said to me, *All the firstling males that are born of thy herd and of thy flock thou shalt sanctify unto the Lord thy God*” (Deut. 15:19). Again she submitted to God’s decree, and gave the young of her sheep to Aaron.

‘When the time for shearing arrived, she sheared her two sheep. Then Aaron came again and said to the widow, “Give me the first portion of the shearing.” She said, “There is no strength in me to withstand this man. I will slaughter the sheep and eat them. After she slaughtered them, Aaron came again and said to her, “Give me the shoulder, the jaws, and the maw” (cf. Lev. 7:32).

‘The widow said, “Though I have slaughtered my sheep, I am still not free of your demands; behold, I devoted my sheep to the uses of the Temple.” But Aaron said to her, “If the sheep are to be devoted to the uses of the Temple, they belong entirely to me, for it was said to me, *Everything devoted in Israel shall be thine* (Num. 18:14). Thereupon Aaron lifted up the sheep, went on his way, and left her weeping with her daughters.’

That is the end of the story that Korah tells the assembled Israelites, according to the Midrashic imagination. All that is left is a rhetorical flourish at the end, placed into Korah’s mouth: ‘Is such a thing right? Oh, the despoiled woman! The hapless woman! Moses and Aaron have done all these things to her, but hang the blame on the Holy One, blessed be He!’¹

What are we to make of this passage? Some unknown rabbinic author has fabricated a supposedly villainous speech by a would-be demagogue that can hardly avoid evoking sympathy for the widow and for the man who stands up in her defence.

I believe that three serious issues are raised by this speech. The first comes at the very end: “Moses and Aaron have done all these things to her, but hang the blame on God.” In other words, the Korah of the rabbinic imagination is asserting that the religious claim that God is the source of all these laws is a fraud. Religious rules, including the commandments of the Torah, are invented by human beings for their own self-interest. The extensive laws relating to the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus include a substantial percentage said to be owed to the Priests and the Levites, to be consumed only by them. It can be seen as a kind of tax system for the benefit of an elite, hereditary in-group that uses the taxes for its own self-perpetuation—represented by Aaron claiming a portion of the slaughtered sheep, and eventually seizing the entire animal. In this analysis, God is cynically invoked in order to justify the self-aggrandizement of the privileged. The long chapters in the book of Leviticus outlining what was due to the priests were actually written not by God, but by a group of priests.

A lighter moment on the issue of the divine source of the *mitzvot*. God is revealing the commandments of the Torah to

Moses on Mt. Sinai. He comes to the commandment, לא תבשל גדי בחלב אמו, *You shall not seethe a kid in its mother's milk* (Exod. 23:19, 34: 26). Moses responds, “Hang on a moment, God; does that mean no Veal Parmigiana?” God responds, more slowly, לא תבשל גדי בחלב אמו. Moses asks again, “Does that mean we have to wait for an hour after milkhics before we can eat meat, and for three hours, or even six hours, after fleishiks?” God responds, with increased emphasis, לא תבשל גדי בחלב אמו. Moses: “But does that mean we have to have separate dishes, separate cutlery, separate sinks and even separate dishwashers?” God pauses for a moment, and then says, “All right—have it your way.”

How many of the commandments come from God, how many from human beings, who may conceive of them with their own interest either in the front or the back of their minds? Cynical secularists from Machiavelli to Marx to Dawkins would say that they are all of this nature; Orthodox Jews would recoil from the thought. Most of us Progressive Jews would say that they are the products of human beings engaged in a sincere effort to understand what God wants of us in order to create a sacred and just society. But those human beings were products of their own time and culture, political position and social status, all of which may well have affected their own understanding of what God wants. The Midrashic story of Korah warns us that we must not take any human authority as self-evident, that we must always probe for our own insight into what God demands.

A second serious claim is that the losers in this system is the poor. That is represented by the widow, driven to distraction by the laws that regulate her behaviour, impinge upon her attempts to eke out a livelihood for herself and her daughters, and ultimately leave her with nothing, in despair. The claim that this is all God's commandment, God's will, is intended to make the poor acquiesce in a system that is unjust and unfair.

I sometimes think of this in the context of the second day of the holidays added on by rabbinic tradition to the days mandated in the Torah: a second day for Rosh Hashanah, a second day at the beginning and at the end of the Sukkot week, a second day at the beginning and the end of Pesach, a second day of Pesach. This fits in the first category of human beings enacting regulations and claiming that they come from God—and this de-

spite the explicit commandment, *לא תוסיפו על הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם* (Deut. 4:2). *You shall not add to what I command you* (Deut. 4:2).

But there is a socio-economic dimension to this as well. Some of us are on monthly salaries, some of us even work for Jewish organizations, and receive the same salary whether we observe one day of a holiday or two. Others, however, own small stores, or are artisans dependent on what they are able to produce with their own hands. If they don't work for an extra day, they have no income. To be told that when, let's say, the autumn holidays come out in mid-week, in addition to the four week days of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simhat Torah, there are three additional weekdays, all in the same month, when they may not work, involves a considerable sacrifice in income—similar to what we saw in the story of the widow.

Yet the decision is made by religious leaders in the first category, who sacrifice nothing by observing the extra day. There is a wonderful rabbinic statement, *חס הקב"ה על ממונו של ישראל*, God has compassion on the livelihoods of Jews. But religious leaders do not always have such compassion. The Midrashic story reminds us that we need to think of how our policies and practices and rules and regulations affect those Jews near the bottom of the economic ladder.

The third claim is expressed by the widow's statement of exasperation: "There is no strength in me to withstand this man" (Aaron). This suggests that the commandments of the Torah are an oppressive system that cannot be fulfilled even by those who—like the widow—seem sincerely committed to trying. No matter how sincere they are, no matter how much they try, the religious leaders will never be satisfied.

This was, indeed, the critique of Judaism articulated by the Apostle Paul in his Epistles to various Christian communities: The Torah is too demanding, human beings will never be able to fulfil all of its demands, it is impossible to be sanctified in God's sight through the acts we perform as we will always fall short, therefore God provides an alternative way: justification through what we *believe* rather than how we *behave*. Of course the Torah itself states in *parashat Nitzavim* that God's commandment is not too baffling or too remote from us; rather, *it is very close to you*,

in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it (Deut. 30:14). But that is not the perception of many Jews, let alone those outside the Jewish community.

Here too, the Progressive approach to Judaism strikes me as relevant and helpful. The Orthodox system is essentially all or nothing. Every one of the commandments, every detail of the rabbinic interpretation and expansion of the commandments, is an integral part of God's literal revelation and therefore binding on every Jew. Many years ago, a young Chabad Hasid said to me, "If you eat beef from a non-kosher butcher (today, he probably would have said, from a non-glatt kosher butcher), that's exactly the same as eating ham or pork. *Treif is treif.*"

I suspect we all prefer the approach that, instead of making each infraction, each failure to observe, a sin that requires atonement, makes each *observance* into a positive, re-enforcing affirmation of one's Jewish identity. Contrary to the Hasid's approach, keeping some of the dietary laws is better than keeping none; keeping Shabbat incompletely from a halakhic perspective is far preferable to ignoring it completely. It may indeed be the case, as the story of the widow suggests, that *schwer tzu sein a Yid*. But no Jew should feel that the obligations upon him or her are an impossible task.

Though in jarring counterpoint to what the biblical narrative originally intended, the issues raised by the rabbinic re-telling the story of his challenge are also issues we need to take seriously:

- to remember that our understanding of God's demands upon us is imperfect and that we must therefore be wary of imposing it on others;
- to appreciate the special difficulties faced by those near the bottom of the economic ladder in meeting the obligations we accept for ourselves;
- to ensure that our tradition is experienced not as an oppressive burden, but rather as a set of life-affirming options.

Korah's widow may be a product of the rabbinic imagination, but she embodies the pain of many real people. Her voice deserves to be heard.

¹ *The Midrash on Psalms*, translated by William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 20-21.