

Devar Torah For Parashat Korach 2017/5777

“The Opportunity to Serve”

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Translations herein are my own.

Is it so insignificant to you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the Israelite community to draw you close to Him to perform the Tabernacle service and to stand before the community to serve them?

הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן ה' וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּה לְשִׁרְתָּם?

(Numbers 16:9) במדבר פרק טז פסוק ט

With these words, Moses challenges Korach and his rebellion of Levites. The message seems clear. You shouldn't be so disappointed that you were not appointed as Priests. As Levites, you are already very important and respected figures. In trying to talk the Levites down from their quarrel, it seems sensible that Moses would want to puff up the Levites as much as possible. Tell them how great and special they are. Tell them how honored they will be. Look at what a great gift God gave you by appointing you to positions of dignity and respect. How could you ask for more.

In fact, hiding in plain sight in this verse, I think, is a very different message. In the JPS Torah Commentary, Dr. Jacob Milgrom points out something very interesting about Moses' choice of words. Moses tells Korach that he should recognize his fortune in being appointed *to stand before the community to serve them*. Milgrom writes that “*amad lifnei* (stand before) is language of subordination.” He points us, for instance, the usage of the idiom in 1 Samuel 16:22 to describe King Saul's summoning a young David to play music for him to soothe his mental disturbance¹ and in 1 Kings 1:2 to describe the suggestion of hiring a young woman to warm the aged King David.² So, in fact, Moses is not saying to Korach that he has the great honor of being in a position high class and dignity. Instead, Moses, who later in the chapter declares that he had taken no personal gain from his position (Numbers 16:15), is reminding Korach that the true fortune of God's appointment is not the opportunity for glory, but the opportunity to serve.

I think it is interesting to think of this message in light of God's aspiration for the Jewish people as a whole before the giving of the Ten Commandments:

And you shall be for me a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation. וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמֻלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ

(Exodus 19:6) שמות פרק יט: ו

¹ *And Saul sent to Jesse saying, “Let David stand before me for he has found favor in my eyes.”*

וַיִּשְׁלַח שָׂאוּל אֶל יֵשׁוּעַ לֵאמֹר יַעֲמֵד נָא דָוִד לִפְנֵי כִּי מָצָא חֵן בְּעֵינָי

² *And [David]'s servants said to him, let a young virgin woman be sought for my master to stand before the King and be a caregiver for him and lie in your bosom to and warm my master.*

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ עֲבָדָיו וַיִּקְשׁוּ לְאֹדְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ נַעֲרָה בְּתוּלָה וְעַמְדָה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְתֵהִי לוֹ סִכְנֵת וְשִׁכְבָה בְּחִיקָה וְחָם לְאֹדְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ:

This is a message that was reinforced immediately before the story of Korach's rebellion, in the commandment for the people to wear *tsitsit*. As Dr. Milgrom discusses in Excurses 38 at the back of the JPS commentary on Numbers, one of the main messages of the *tsitsit* comes from the fact that, as indicated in rabbinic tradition, *tsitzit* could, and perhaps preferably would, be made of *shatnez*, a combination of wool and linen that was considered holy and otherwise reserved for the vestments of the *Kohanim* (Priests). Milgrom writes:

The *tsitsit*, then, are an exception to the Torah's general injunction against wearing garments of mixed seed. But, in actuality, inhering in this paradox is its ultimate purpose. The resemblance to the High Priest's turban and other priestly clothing can be no accident. It is a conscious attempt to encourage all Israel to aspire to a degree of holiness comparable to that of the priests. Indeed, holiness itself is enjoined upon Israel: “You shall be holy for I, the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2, cf 11:24, 20:26).

The idea of Israel as a nation of priests is often, quite correctly, seen as an indication of biblical aspirations for democracy. But I think we too often think of this ideal in terms of an aspiration to our own dignity and privilege. But the very essence of Judaism is not an aspiration to privilege and dignity, but to personal responsibility. And hence, we are told to wear *tsitsit*, not so we achieve a rank of Priest, but *למען תזכרו וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֵת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֹא-לְהִיבְכֶם* so that you remember and fulfill all my commandments and be holy to your God (Numbers 15:40). And this is why, in turn, Moses tells Korach to recognize the great privilege he has, not of dignity and honor, but in the opportunity *לְעֹמַד לְפָנַי הָעֵדָה לְשָׂרְתָם* to stand before the community to serve them. Moses tells Korach that the great honor he has received is the opportunity to minister to others. Similarly, God teaches us that each of us should aspire to priesthood and holiness, which means for us to strive to serve.

I think that modern times presents us with a tremendous challenge and opportunity to live out Moses's message. We live in a world of relative plenty, and many of us have been born in to lives that afforded us relatively many opportunities for financial success and independence. At the same time, this world often pushes us to seek personal success and greater wealth, sometimes at the expense of pursuing greater ideals. I think it is important, as we look at our blessings, to think of ourselves as the recipients of the same great gift that Korach squandered. We have a great opportunity *לְעֹמַד לְפָנַי הָעֵדָה לְשָׂרְתָם* to stand before the community to serve. Our opportunity to serve may come in different forms: the opportunity to provide financial support to those in need, the opportunity to minister to the psychological and spiritual needs of others, and the opportunity to shape our community and future generations in ways that will amplify our spirit of service. We need to recognize our many fortunes for what they are – the opportunity not to build up our personal fortune, but to serve the greater good.

In the upcoming *Musaf Amidah*, as in all *Amidot* on Shabbat, we will ask God, *וְטָהַר לְבָבוֹ לְעַבְדְּךָ* and purify our hearts to serve you faithfully. May we have the privilege in partnering with God in the continuing effort to purify our hearts toward divine service. May we find for ourselves the great fortune to serve God by tending to the needs of those around us, friend and stranger alike. In building a community dedicated not to our personal fortunes but to our privilege of service, may we live out God's greatest aspiration for us, *וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מִמְּלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קְדוֹשׁ* And you shall be for me a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.