

Shabbat Korach 5779

On Safety and Security

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[MAL] This week's parsha is *Korach*—the story of a rebellion gone wrong. Korach challenges Moshe and Aaron's authority as leaders of the Israelite people. "Who appointed you to lord over us?" he demands. It doesn't go well. Perhaps it is because Korach and his followers lacked a strategy, a good organizing campaign, or didn't have clear goals... But God is unimpressed. Korach and his crew are swallowed by the earth. It's not exactly an exalted story for a congregation of people who believe in speaking truth to power.

[BDM] We also think of Amalek. You remember Amalek, a descendent of Esau? As the Israelites fled Egyptian slavery, Amalek and his warriors attacked the back of the caravan—they brutalized and murdered the weak, the sick, the elderly, those with disabilities. Amalek and his descendants, who include Purim's Haman, are truly those who seek to destroy the Jewish people.

Korach and Amalek aren't equivalent. Amalek killed Jews; Korach questioned leadership.

[MAL] As we stand before you, we take this *parsha* seriously and we note that Amalek's threats are with us today. On the subject of our safety and security we commit to you that we will act like neither Korach nor like God—you can and should ask tough questions. This is because we are in a covenantal relationship with you (and you with us), we are sensitive to the fact that we're both men, and, if we're honest, it is also because neither of us wants to be swallowed up by the earth.

[BDM] As president and rabbi, we tread gently.

We are a congregation whose central narrative and core Jewish value is *hachnasat orchim*—welcoming. Radical welcoming. Welcoming people who have been marginalized by the mainstream Jewish community. We have built our synagogue upon this foundational value of Abraham and Sarah—the first Jews—whose ancient tent flaps were opened wide on all sides, who welcomed strangers with a generous feast.

Yes, this is our core commitment as a congregation: to welcome the wandering and the wondering and together, to build an animated Jewish life, where our lives, our families, our souls are celebrated and called to higher service, to heal our broken world.

[MAL] We are living in a complicated, agonizing, challenging moment. Anti-semitism is on the rise and more attacks against Jews are reported than at any point in our lifetimes. Despite the incredible advances we have made for GLBTQ equality, homophobia and, especially, transphobia are rising as well. And we know you know about ongoing and escalating attacks against people of color and native people, particularly native women.

We understand that we are in a shakey place. Radical Hospitality worked out well for Abraham and Sarah and has much to teach us. But Abraham and Sarah weren't at risk of confronting someone with an AR15.

[BDM] It was not part of our strategic plan as a Board...

[MAL] It was not part of the arc of my moral teaching as a rabbi...

[BDM] ...to devote so much of our time and our dollars to security concerns. We did not seek out this rise in American anti-semitism. And while it may seem relatively new for some, we know that for members of our community who are women, who are queer, who are trans, who are Jews of Color, this threat of violence has been ever present. As Jewish African American activist Yavila McCoy reiterated what many members of Shir Tikvah have said a few weeks ago when she was here in town, there are lots of folks, including people here tonight, who have been living with this violence, for years. And the violence against houses of worship is not new and not just Jewish, as we mourn bombed black churches, violence in Charleston and Louisiana and Virginia Beach. Nor is it strictly American, as we know the brutality experienced in New Zealand and Sri Lanka.

[MAL] It sure would be nice if God would take care of those who terrorize congregants who have gathered in pursuit of the best of humanity, if God were to silence the white nationalists—or at least, soften their hearts, open their minds, and have the earth swallow up their weapons of war.

This week's *parsha* would be a different story had God said to Moshe, "Sit down with Korach and take his concerns seriously." That isn't how the story played out.

But it will be that way with us, both because we do not smite and because we lead differently.

Many members of Shir Tikvah have shared your concerns about security in the days following the shooting at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh last October and at the Chabad congregation of Poway this past spring. Your phone calls and emails and letters and personal conversations have been respectful, aching, heart breaking. We have heard many voices. One told us of a reluctance to attend services without some type of visible security, another decided to forego the last weeks of Sunday school. Some have identified visible and perhaps armed guards as a source of comfort, others have identified that exact same thing as a source of disturbance and fear. Holding this painful tension, knowing that any measures we take will for some be an unwelcome compromise, is one of the hardest tasks of leadership—and among the most important.

[BDM] The conversation about safety and security has several facets.

We are grateful for the lay leadership of Jeremy Kalin, Joel Zimmerman, Lyonel Norris and those who are taking the training to become *shomrim* (literally, "guardians"). We are grateful for our staff lead Forrest Yesnes and our security consultant Yoni Bundt. We are grateful for

committee members including Julie Jacobs, Darla Kashian, Neal Gosman, Tom Cytron-Hysom, and Katie Miller.

This past week, after extensive discussion, the Board committed to new and different security procedures for the High Holy Days, which will be held at St Joan of Arc in South Minneapolis. As we always have, we will welcome all who wish to worship with us (up to the seating capacity of the building, which is larger than First Universalist's existing sanctuary). As we always have, we will aim to deliver a spiritual experience that both comforts and challenges, that teaches as much as it asks, that is mostly familiar but which draws on elements of our tradition that may be new to some.

And we need to spend many thousands of dollars more than we ever have on securing the premises. We are committed to security personnel who are well trained and who understand who we are and what we are trying to do and who share our commitment to racial justice, GLBTQ equality, and human dignity..

[MAL] What are our commitments that frame this holy work?

1. *Sh'ma Yisrael*: We Listen. We are vulnerable. We listen to each other. We take each others' fears and concerns seriously, even if we are not able to address them all with equal satisfaction.
2. We recognize that safety and security look different to different people.
3. Our commitment to radical hospitality is, in part, about removing barriers to participation in Jewish life. Because our community is-as Rabbi Lekach-Rosenberg calls us, "gorgeously queer" and seeks to be accountable to our members of color, this process is designed to seek the wisdom and insight of those most often profiled and policed. This is one of the central reasons why we're building a team reflective of our congregation.
4. We are in relationship and in communication with people who are doing this work—such as JCRC, JCA, law enforcement, and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice—and ensuring safety and security is possible along with holding all our other values.
5. We recognize, as Lyonel Norris states so eloquently: it is a difficult task knowing that no one will be satisfied with all the manifestations and outcomes of this work, that each of us is tasked with holding some discomfort.

[BDM] Those are our commitments, and we've not disclosed all of the manifestations of those commitments and values put into practice. There are two reasons for that. First, Jeremy, Joel, Lyonel, Forrest, and the Safety and Security Committee are hard at work (meeting most recently yesterday) and have yet to finalize the plans they will present to the Board. Second, while we expect that if you look closely you will see new things, much of what makes security effective is most effective when not widely known. We do know that the volunteer energy—what we need from you as partners in this covenantal community— that energy to run our services, to feel safe in our building, is going to need to be greater than it has been before. Please get involved in this effort by donating your time to meet our collective needs. Jeremy and Joel are here tonight and are happy to speak with you.

[MAL] Shir Tikvah was founded by brave people—courageous souls who stepped forward to create the Jewish community they wanted to be part of—and they created it because it didn't not yet exist. We are a brave community. This is hard work. We honor all the people stepping forward to do it.

We Jews have been through this before.

[Bruce]: Rabbi, is there a blessing for the tsar?

[Michael]: A blessing for the tsar? [[pause]] Of course. “May God bless and keep the tsar—far away from us.”

[MAL] We are still here. To be a Jew in the world is to rise for equality and human dignity, to love thy neighbor, to welcome the stranger, the immigrant, the poor, the vulnerable, to rise with God to collapse the space between the world as the way it is with the stench of callousness and cruelty to the way God dreams our world: overflowing with compassion and love for each other.

To live is to embrace the vulnerability, the fragility of human existence. To be a Jew is to face the world in all of its brokenness and all of its beauty with deep respect for human life, to be humane even—especially—when others fail to do so.

[BDM] The kindest interpretation of Korach's story is that he said to Moses and God to do better. Do better at leading the people. Do better at communication. Do better at trusting the people.

We at Shir Tikvah are strong because we've always sought to do better. To do better at caring for ourselves. To do better at caring for the world. To do better at creating a community of *shleymut*—wholeness and dignity.

[MAL] We are reminded of the wise words of the great prophet, Senator Paul Wellstone (z'l), “We all do better when we all do better.”

Keyn Y'hi Ratzon