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Dvar Torah for Parshat Korach

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Are Our Children Special?

Reflections on Parashat Korach and the Paradox of Parenting

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld | BronfmanTorah | Korach 2016

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld is the dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, and has been a summer faculty member for BYFI since 1993.

A couple of years ago, a [You Tube sensation](#) emerged right around graduation season. It was the recording of a high school commencement address given by David McCullough, a beloved English teacher at a public high school in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Instead of the usual well-worn clichés, graduating seniors and their families heard these bracing words.

“Yes, you’ve been pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmeted, bubble-wrapped,” he told graduating seniors. “Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth, wiped your bottom, trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you, and encouraged you again . . . But do not get the idea you’re anything special. Because you’re not.”

Millions of viewers around the world were captivated by this individual teacher’s willingness to speak bluntly — and indeed beautifully — to privileged young people in one of the most affluent suburbs in the nation. “Resist the easy comforts of complacency, the specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction . . . Be worthy of your advantages.”

The message strikes a chord at a time when there is a lot of hand-wringing by parents and educators alike about whether we are over-praising and over-protecting our children. McCullough reminds us that we must not confuse a sense of entitlement with a sense of genuine self-esteem, that we cannot let easy accolades stand in for the satisfaction that comes from hard-earned achievement.

A related message — cast in religious terms — is underscored by an ancient power struggle that is recorded in this week’s Torah portion, [Parashat Korach](#).

The portion tells the story of a revolt — the most serious rebellion against Moses and Aaron as leaders of the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness. The uprising is led by a man named Korach, about whom we know very little (except that he, like Moses and Aaron, comes from the tribe of Levi). But the text describes the essence of his protest in the openings verses of the portion.

“Now, Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth - descendent of Reuben - to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” [Numbers 16:1-4]

The uprising is ultimately a failure, and Korach and his followers are destroyed in a dramatic display of divine vengeance. But the original protest is preserved. And, in fact, the rest of the story is unsettling precisely because Korach’s argument seems so reasonable, even compelling, to our democratic, egalitarian ears.

What, then, was wrong with Korach’s complaint? The Israeli scholar and social critic, [Yeshayahu Leibowitz](#), offers an interpretation that resonates strikingly with the anti-entitlement message of David McCullough’s “You’re Not Special” speech.

According to Leibowitz, the problem with Korach’s protest is that he treats holiness as a given rather than a goal, an assumption rather than an aspiration. “All the community are holy,” says Korach, speaking in the present tense. No, Leibowitz argues, the people are not holy. *Kedoshim tehiyu*. “You shall become holy.” The divine command to be holy is always addressed to us in the future tense. We are not there yet, and as soon as we think we are, we are in trouble.

For Leibowitz, Korach is dangerous because he offers a vision of religious life that is comforting, but ultimately leads to spiritual complacency and self-congratulation. Moses, in contrast, offers a vision of religious life that is arduous, but leads to spiritual responsibility and sacred aspiration. In Leibowitz’s words, “Man is not intrinsically holy; his holiness is not already existing and realized in him. It is rather incumbent upon him to achieve it. But the task is eternal. It can never be fulfilled except through a never-ending effort.”

I went back and listened to the words of David McCullough's "You're Not Special" speech last week, as we were preparing to celebrate my daughter's graduation from high school. Like Leibowitz's commentary on Korach's rebellion, it does indeed offer a compelling reminder that our children do not need our facile reassurance as much as they need us to nurture in them noble aspirations. McCullough's words also remind us how important it is for our children to cultivate the humility to know they will never fully reach those aspirations, and the stamina to keep on trying.

At the same time, I knew something significant was missing for me in McCullough's message. I didn't realize exactly what it was until I came across another commentary on this week's Torah portion by the Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, or the [Sefat Emet](#).

The Sefat Emet also sees a flaw in Korach's complaint against Moses, and it is similar to the one that Leibowitz identifies. According to the Sefat Emet, Korach made the mistake of thinking that once the Children of Israel experienced the revelation of Torah at Sinai, their spiritual journey was over. Like Leibowitz, the Sefat Emet hears a kind of religious complacency in Korach's claim. "He thought that there was no rung higher for Israel than that of receiving the Torah." But for the Sefat Emet, the spiritual journey does not end there. "You have to go on and do some new redemptive act in the world, for that is why human beings were sent here. Every person has a part in this ... even a simple person can arouse some act of redemption, something specific to that person, each in accordance with his own measure."

This teaching clarified for me what David McCullough got wrong. At one point in his speech, McCullough says: "Even if you're one in a million, on a planet of 6.8 billion that means there are 7,000 people just like you."

Funny, but false. Every child, every person, is indeed special — in fact, utterly unique. But, as the Sefat Emet emphasizes, this is not an assertion of entitlement or privilege. It is an affirmation of radical responsibility and redemptive possibility.

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Underlying the teaching of the Sefat Emet is the notion that we are each created in the image of God - utterly unique, mysterious, and equally precious. It is this truth that allows us to embrace the paradox that is at the heart of our work as parents and teachers. The fact that our children are created in the image of God means that they have absolute dignity and worth that is not contingent on any achievement or external measure of success. And the fact that our children are created in the image of God also means that they have the capacity and the obligation to bring something new and redemptive into this world that is unique to them.

Our children may not be holy, but it turns out they are special after all, and it is our sacred obligation to make sure they know it.

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