

Bending the Arc Toward Justice

Just imagine the story of *Korah* on the big screen. Charlton Heston as Moses, of course; and maybe, Christopher Plummer as *Korah* (but we can come back to that.)



There's a rebellion and then a massive earthquake that shuts down the revolt.

It really has all the makings of a great Hollywood Blockbuster.

Now, you might say some of the special effects of being swallowed up alive have been used before: there was that cool scene in the *The Empire Strikes Back* [when the giant worm almost ate the Millenium Falcon](#), but this is different.

I was actually surprised that when I Googled it, I could find only a short Christian version on Youtube and a cool Jewish one by [Bimbam](#), but at four minutes long, it probably would not capture the bigger audiences I was thinking of.

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But perhaps the reason this narrative hasn't been made into a movie is that it is a troubling story. Should we not make room for dissent?

In fact, Judaism has been at the forefront of creating a culture where legal dissents are preserved so that we can learn from them – something we take for granted since it is now part of our Supreme Court practice.



But that still leaves me with the question of how to make sense of this challenging *parashah*.

For some, the approach may be to see it as explaining a natural phenomenon – perhaps there was an earthquake and the editors of the Torah wove together this narrative to explain why some were killed.

But this begs the question – what does the Torah want to teach us by recounting this episode and how can we find meaning for ourselves in this *parashah* today?

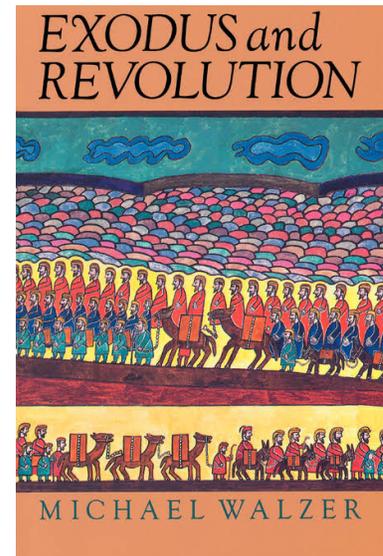
The political theorist, Michael Walzer in his brilliant book, *Exodus and Revolution*, offers us a direction.

He sees a pattern of behavior in the books of Exodus and Numbers, where the story of *Korah* is recorded.

He sees the Israelites as engaged in a fairly constant stream of complaining. “According to one count (Num. 14:22), there were ten of these occasions on which the people complained, perhaps rebelled, against Moses.”

Often these rebellions began with the words: “*Va’yilonu Ha-Am al Moshe* – and the people grumbled against Moses!” (Ex. 15:24)

Sometimes they are thirsty, sometimes they are hungry, sometimes they are impatient, but it is striking to see how often they focus on smaller frustrations of travel than on of the larger purpose of their journey.



Now, it is understandable that a people that suffered in slavery would be concerned about basic needs such as food and water, but the reality is that people have always been consumed by irritations and annoyances rather than the big picture.

They complain, they blame, and they scapegoat. It is simply human nature, and even the Israelites who witnessed the awesome events of the Exodus and the overwhelming experience of Sinai are not immune to this restlessness.

In *Parashat Korah*, some of the Israelites merely latch onto a demagogue, someone who is able to capture their populist anger, turning it against the existing leadership. *Korah* leads a populist revolt against Moshe whom he portrays as elitist.

We have seen this many times in human history and it continues to this day.

People prefer quick fixes – we want to find the book, the program, the diet, the exercise regimen, the pill that will fix us and make everything alright instead of the hard work and commitment required for change.

In fact, science tells us that it takes at least 21 days of consistent effort for a new habit to take hold.

The hope is that revolutions would be fast and easy and that hope has always been part of human and Jewish history.

Walzer points out how this type of thinking impacted Zionist thinkers of just a century ago, writing:

“The Exodus parallel was not lost on the most impressive Zionist thinkers, [like] Ahad Ha-Am (“One of the People,” *nom de plume* of Arthur Ginzberg), who published an essay on Moses in 1904. This is a powerful piece, describing a leader who imagined at first that liberation would be immediate and complete but who learned in the wilderness that it would be a long and hard struggle. Ahad Ha-Am repeats Maimonides: “A people trained for generations in the house of bondage cannot cast off in an instant the effects of that training and become truly free...” And (he) [Ahad Ha-Am] has Moses draw the conclusion that he himself drew with regard to his own contemporaries.

(He) [Moses] no longer believes in a sudden revolution; he knows that signs and wonders and visions of God can arouse a momentary enthusiasm, but cannot create a new heart, cannot uproot and implant feelings and inclinations with any stability or

permanence. So he summoned all his patience to the task of bearing the troublesome burden of his people and training it by slow steps till it is fit for its mission.” (Exodus and Revolution, pps. 12-13)

And so it is to this day; many people get caught up in large movements, promises of rapid change, but that is not how real change works.

People change slowly, as do institutions and societies. Revolutions and societal upheavals are slow processes, which is why the Torah takes us on such a long journey for 40 years through the wilderness.

And the reality is, even after the people enter the Land, they are unable to create a just society – it is more like a step forward and then a step back.

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I would argue that the rabbis' choice of a *haftarah* for this week's portion reinforces this notion. Samuel's appointing Israel's first king, King Saul, is actually a warning echoing the book of Deuteronomy, which cautions the Israelites against allowing a king to accumulate too much wealth or to be above the law.

The king must keep a copy of the law next to him on the throne, so, as the Torah states:

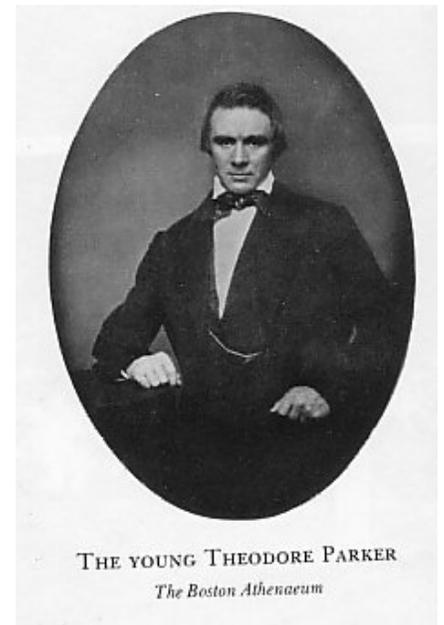
וְהִיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל-יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשׁוֹמֵר אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי
הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:

“Let (it) [the Torah scroll] remain with (him) [the King] and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere Adonai his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws.” (DT 17:19)

The allure of a messianic persona, of someone who can bring sweeping change, has been part of the history of humanity. Russia or Germany in the 20th century are salient examples, but not unique. The danger is evident.

The two clear messages I glean from *Korah* are to be wary of demagogues and that the pace of real change, especially change towards the good, is slow.

The early 19th century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, born right here in Lexington, MA, saw the unjust institution of slavery and wrote: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the



experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

Parker was right, but his observation should not allow us to remain complacent. Almost 2,000 years ago, our own Jewish sage, Rabbi Tarfon taught: “*Lo aleikha hamelakhah ligmor, v’lo ata ben horin lehebatel meemeina* – it is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.” (Avot 2:21)

The Torah reminds us that while it is a slow process, we should not give up in our quest. Just don't look for shortcuts or *Korahs* along the way.

Let us each do our share in helping to bend the arc of history toward justice – not one of us is free to desist from this most sacred task.