

D'var Torah – Temple Sinai Annual Meeting
Sunday, June 6, 2010
Parashat Korach

The mission statement of the Jewish people has often been summarized in one short verse from the Torah which we read on Yom Kippur: “*K’doshim t’hiyu*: You shall all be holy, for I Adonai your God am holy.” (Lev. 19:2).

So it comes as somewhat of a surprise when, in this week’s Torah portion, Moses rival, Korach and his band of merry men, 250 of them, are punished by challenging Moses with a similar-sounding theme. Korach says to Moses, “You have gone too far... We are all, the whole community, holy! So why do you raise yourself above everyone else!?” (Num. 16:3)

Why then was Korach later punished for his rebellion – the earth literally swallows him and his followers up? It seems that the only reason can be that he was an ego-maniac, obviously, trying to wrest control of Moses’ power for himself and his followers. True. And we can be grateful that here at Temple Sinai, we have been blessed with the absence of such characters – we are a very healthy community where such personalities generally don’t exist. To be sure, there is vigorous debate among us sometimes (and correspondence by e-mail always exaggerates every dispute, and should definitely be avoided in such circumstances), but it is well known that debate here is never conducted in a personal way, and is always conducted by individuals who honestly and truly have the community’s best interests in mind. Our tradition (Pirke Avot 5:17) teaches:

“Every controversy that is conducted for the Sake of Heaven will endure, but any controversy conducted not for the Sake of Heaven will not endure. What is an example of the latter? The dispute of Korach and his followers. What are examples of controversies conducted for the Sake of Heaven? Those between Hillel and Shammai.”

And I would add: What are examples of controversies conducted for the Sake of Heaven? Those which the men and women who make up our leadership discuss thoughtfully, respectfully, and with the greater good of all our members and all our community in mind; and when they do have differences, we do so as a respectful community.

So what was the controversy put forth by Korach? He heard the call of Leviticus: “You shall be holy!” and misinterpreted its meaning. He thought they were already holy – and that they didn’t have to do anything more. He thought holiness was inherent in just being Jewish, in just having stood once at Mount Sinai. Just listen again to his words. He said to Moses: “We are, all of us, the whole community, holy!” But the Israeli philosopher and iconoclast, Yishayahu Leibowitz, in one of his radio addresses, pointed out that what Korach didn’t understand is that Judaism tells us that we must always be striving to become holy; “that [for Jews] holiness is not a fact, but rather a goal.” that only God is truly holy, that humans are earthly, of this world, we live in the material and the mundane; that we are not God, but that the job of the Jew is to strive always for holiness in everything that we do. Korach’s mistake was that he was self-satisfied, complacent – he thought the community had already arrived, that they had no more work to do. But Leviticus tells us: “You shall become holy.”

I see Judaism as a continual spiritual challenge to us – to strive to rise above our human state through acts that elevate our spirits and our lives. At this moment, at the end of one program year, one school year, we can be proud of our many accomplishments as a community at

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Temple Sinai. But the challenge to continue to rise higher –to care more, to welcome others more, to be more intentional in our prayers, to pursue justice with more passion, to learn more of our tradition, to live more ethical lives – that challenge persists, always.

As Harvey Cotton completes his term as president of Temple Sinai, we say thank you to an individual who has embodied this continual striving for holiness. With tremendous leadership over these past three years, Harvey has truly taken hold of the challenge of this week's Torah portion: he has worked to bring us higher and higher, always embracing new challenges. Harvey has provided vision for the future, and brought people together to realize it; and he has done so with patience and calm, wisdom and insight, reflection and care, and then, with action, and always with respect for every other person in our community, continually striving to help Temple Sinai fulfill our potential. Harvey, there are many impressive and important accomplishments you can point to during these past three years, but you have also embraced Leviticus' command to be aware of the process of striving toward holiness. We are deeply grateful for your service to us over the past three years. Thank you so much.

And I also want to wish Michael Klau mazel tov on his new role as the next president of Temple Sinai – Michael, may you also bring people together to allow us achieve our collective vision for what we can become.

K'doshim t'hiyu: "You shall all strive to become holy." This is our task as a community. We have had another wonderful year together, and it is my great privilege to serve as your rabbi. The summer will be a little quieter, although our staff and I are all around for the summer, but the spiritual challenge continues: we strive to become a holy community.

- Rabbi Andy Vogel