

The Top 50 Rabbis in the Desert, originally published in the Jewish Week, now at jta.org.

A rabbi friend recently joked about the list of the “Top 50 Rabbis in America.” He said he figures he is somewhere around number 1367. He did the math. Rabbi #1364, he says, speaks about three times as well as he does, and Rabbi #1368 has visited fewer sick people than he has, so he figures he must be right in between them. He’s hoping that next year, he’ll move up to the 1350’s, but who knows? As long as he’s in the Top 2000, he says, he should be fine.

When thinking about it rationally, the rankings seem to make little sense. And it is hardly just rabbis who struggle with this issue. In our culture today, we have become obsessed with rankings: the best grade, the highest status, the most money. As we learn from Korach in this week’s parasha, there is nothing more painful than wanting more. Craving the top post, poor Korach was never happy with his own position. As he said to Moses and Aaron, “*Rav Lachem! Ki kol ha’edah kulam kedoshim u’vetochem Adonai, Umadua Titnas’u al kehal Yisrael?*” You have too much! All of the congregation is holy and God is in the midst of all of them. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” (Numbers 16:3)

Sadly, Korach didn’t even realize that he was competing against people who would have happily given up their spots at #1 and #2. Moses and Aaron didn’t need to be at the top. Only two weeks ago, Moses expressed his own comfort with Eldad and Meidad prophesying in the camp. “If only all of God’s people were prophets!” (Numbers 11:29) Moses, the humblest man on earth, would have been happy to share the number one spot. And yet, the name of our parasha goes to Korach, because it is his lesson that we must learn.

It is easy to relate to Korach. Even with his family’s important role—the Kehati were responsible for carrying the Ark through the wilderness-- Korach looked hungrily upon the roles of Moses and Aaron. And can we blame him? There is hardly a more human emotion than desire. Each of us wants to feel essential, and we may look at what others have achieved with a sense of loss or envy. No wonder he and his people got swallowed up by the earth! Living with envy and desire can make it hard to feel the ground stable beneath our feet. Having such uncomfortable feelings can make it feel like we are being swallowed alive. Couldn’t each of us be Korach ourselves?

The Torah reflects no compassion for him. According to our story, Korach and his company are “*resha’im*”—evil. And God’s plan is to “finish them off.” How can we understand this harsh judgment for an emotion that so many of us feel?

Perhaps Korach’s sin was in his behavior, rather than in the feelings which may have caused it. According to the Biblical translator Onkelos, “*Va’itpaleg Korach*,” Korach split off from the people. Or, as Rashi explains, he took himself off to the side to complain. Korach’s real sin was not that he felt the envy, but that he *acted* upon it. Attacking Moses and Aaron, he tried to take them down when they had done nothing wrong. “Why do you raise yourselves,” he asked them, cutting down their leadership instead of building up his own. Instead of asking God for a more substantial role among the people, or looking to Moses and Aaron as models for his own leadership, Korach went after those whom he saw as the biggest threats to his own status.

It is human to feel desire or envy, to want what we may see in others. But to condemn others who may have what we want is to be like Korach. It is wrong, and perhaps worse, it doesn’t work to move us to where we are trying to go. As the rabbis in Mishnah Avot say about the argument of Korach and his clan, “*ein sofah lehitkayem*.” (Avot 5:17) It can come to no good end. It just doesn’t work.

Reflecting on Korach's sin, the Izhbitzer Rebbe quotes a midrash from the Talmud in Masechet Taanit. "In the days to come, the Holy One Blessed Be He will make a dance for the righteous." (Taanit 31a) A dance, the Izhbitzer explains, happens in a circle, where no one is closer than any other. Korach, he writes, forgot this lesson and tried to rise above his peers.

But Korach, we know, did not live in a redeemed world. Sure, in the next world, we may all be equal. Until then, however, we live in a real world, with rankings and status updates that may challenge even the most spiritually adept among us. In this world, the story of Korach and his punishment can remind us of how important it is to keep our own desires from bringing others down. May we be lifted up by the models around us, and may we learn to use our desires for the greatest good. Shabbat Shalom.