**Parshat Korach – Shmita 5782**

Shabbat Shalom

This week’s this week’s Torah portion is Korach, and we are reading it in 5782, a Shmita year. I am here to speak with you this morning in honor of today’s special Shmita Shabbat which we are holding to celebrate the Shmita year, which is also known as the Seventh year, the Sabbath of the land, the year of rest and release.

The practice of Shmita is part of the system of agricultural laws found in Torah, laws which are often introduced with the phrase, “When you enter the land that the Lord is giving you…”

This week’s Torah portion, about the rebellion of Korach, is often held up as a commentary about leadership or about conflict; but I find that this portion speaks deeply to us about our **often complicated** relationship with the land.

On the surface, the story of Korach is about mutiny and rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron. It follows and is intimately connected with last week’s Parsha, Shelach, in which the people mutinied against God, who had commanded them to begin preparations for **entering the Holy Land** with a scouting mission. Both of these stories can be seen to be “about” the very real challenge of “entering the land.”

And so much depends upon our ability to “enter the land.”

While the plain text of Shelach indicates that the scouts panicked out of fear of confronting the very large inhabitants of the land, and from undervaluing their own capacities as well as the power of having God on their side, I am particularly intrigued by an interpretation of the story offered in the Chassidic literature, which extends to this week’s portion.

This interpretation looks beneath the pashat, and perceives a ***spiritual battle***taking place beneath the surface of the story. Originating with the Sfat Emet, it holds that the spies’ sin was in rebelling against ***the very idea*** of bringing the Torah down to earth, and assuming responsibility for the mitzvot involved with living in Eretz Ysrael. They had become **accustomed** to eating bread which fell from Heaven, and considered the “real world” to be less holy – literally, *mundane* – a word which combines the idea of “earthly” with the idea of “commonplace and ordinary.” They doubted or did not understand the sense in which **entering the land** presented a set of challenges that were **even more suited** than the wilderness to enabling Israel to climb the rungs of **spiritual holiness**, and thereby to “ascend.” While the spies said, “We will be unable to ascend,” [ ] Caleb reassured Moses and the Israelites, promising, “***We will surely ascend***.” [ ]

The awful punishment for the faithlessness of that generation was to perish in the desert, leaving their youth to wait another 40 years in the wilderness for **their** chance to ascend.

Parshat Korach, like Shelach, is also a story rooted in rebellion, this time against the authority of Moses and Aaron. It is not difficult to imagine that a community that had just been shaken to the core by devastating news delivered in the previous Parsha might fall to bitter accusations, back biting and disarray, and this is exactly what happened.

Datan and Aviram blamed **Moses** for bringing them out of **Egypt,** which they described as “a land flowing with milk and honey,” [ ] Abravanel interprets the expression they use in retorting to Moses’s request for a conversation, “We will not go up” [ ] as meaning:

“By no means will we go up to Eretz Ysrael as you would have us do. Until today, you have not fulfilled your promise to us! You have not given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Henceforth we will not believe you, and we have abandoned interest in conquering the land!”

Korach himself, meanwhile, in Rabbinic midrash, mocks (among other commandments) the detailed agricultural laws which the people had been given (but not yet had the opportunity to live with) with the following fable:

A poor widow had a field. When she came to plough it, Moses forbade her to plough it with an ox and an ass together; when she began to sow, Moses forbade her to sow it with mingled seeds. At the time of the harvest, Moses ordered her to leave un-reaped the corners of the field and not to gather up the gleanings, but to leave them for the poor. He furthermore demanded the heave-offerings for the priests, and the tithe for the Levites. The woman sold her field and purchased ewes, in the hope that she might live undisturbed. However, when the firstling of the sheep was born, Aaron appeared and demanded it as his due. At shearing-time Aaron reappeared and demanded “the first of the fleece of the sheep,” which, according to Moses’s Law, was his. He reappeared again and again with new demands till the long-suffering woman slaughtered the sheep, and in her anger consecrated it to the sanctuary. Thereupon it all fell to Aaron.” “Such men, Korach concluded, “are Moses and Aaron!” [Soncino p 638]

It all sounds so familiar!

But let’s talk about these agricultural laws that the midrashic Korach mocks and rails against, because they are the bedrock of the society that Torah envisions.

The Torah’s agricultural laws, which include Shmita, are rooted in generosity and relationship to place, to this teeming bubble of life that was lovingly prepared for us during the six days of Creation, this place whose magnificent richness in beauty, information, intricacy, and completeness, still transcends our capacity for comprehension.

*Mah gadlu maasecha Yah, m'od amku machsh'votecha!*

*How great are your works, O LORD, how surpassingly deep are your thoughts!*

The agricultural laws found in Torah govern our communal relationship with Creation itself. What do they say?

* We don’t own the land; Land cannot be bought or sold, we are guests of the Lord
* Our cities should be surrounded by a commons of wildland
* In the springtime, we **celebrate** our ripening grains and fruits and offer ***gifts of gratitude*** to the Divine
* We do not strip farm fields for profit; we leave parts unharvested, and even in the rest, we leave some behind for the poor and the wildlife
* We separate from everything we bring into our homes a portion for those who do not have, and a portion for the support of our sacred community
* Every seven years, the land rests; agricultural lands are left unplowed and are declared ownerless. Everyone has equal access to food

These laws are the means by which God ensures that we don’t, in our limited sense of self-interest, choke off the means by which God provides for all life. They are essential components of a Torah-based society. The earth ***is*** the open hand of God that we envision when say,

“Poteach et yadecha, u masbiach l’chol chai ratzon.”

You give openhandedly, feeding every creature to its heart’s content. [Psalm 145]

Obviously, all of this conversation is deeply resonant with the conflict we are engaged with at this moment around the crisis of human-caused environmental destruction and climate change and our struggle as a community to overcome the cynicism self interest that prevent our ascent into a new way of living on the land.

There are many who are desire to “ascend” from our current state of conflict and contention against the earth and enter into a state of harmonious reciprocity with the ***Holy Land,*** as the Torah instructs us. But there are also demagogues like Korach, and Datan and Aviram, who arouse fear about how difficult it will be, and instead paint a picture of how rosy life is for us in this Egypt that we must leave behind.

How wonderfully these disturbing texts mirror our current predicament! High gas prices are real and painful, our disposable lifestyle is convenient and familiar, and it is easy to panic at this **critical** moment and want to turn back, rather than press forward and make a wholesale shift to a different way of living. And like in these stories, there are powerful people who mock and seek to undermine the authority of those who, like prophets, are warning us of the dire future we and our children will face if we continue on our current path, and call us to a future bound by new laws and communal obligations that will transform our relationship with the land.

It is indeed fascinating that we are reminded of the events in this week’s parsha when we read in Deuteronomy Chapter 11:

Take thought … what God did to Dathan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, son of Reuben, when the earth opened and swallowed them… from the midst of all Israel (D11:6) Keep, therefore, all the instruction that I enjoin upon you today ***so that you may have the strength*** to enter and take possession of the land that you are about to cross into and possess; (8) and that you may long endure upon the soil that the Lord swore to your fathers to assign to them and their heirs, a land flowing with milk and honey (9).

It is not easy, but it is necessary, to our physical well-being, but also to our spiritual ascent, that we enter into relationship with the land rooted in our love for God; only in so doing can we fully embody Torah.

Shmita Project Northwest is based here at Beth Shalom and is a partnership with the multi-faith environmental organization, Washington Interfaith Power & Light/Earth Ministry. This little project takes our need for ascent seriously, and aims to bring forth a Shmita-culture here in the Pacific Northwest, and eventually across the planet.

This is a very grand aspiration. Imagine if the weekly Sabbath were just a story in Torah, and had not been practiced for thousands of years. Who would have the audacity to try to bring a “day of rest” into a restless world? This is the level of challenge that the Shmita Project Northwest aspires to.

Our first work has been building out a community that embraces the ideas and values found in Shmita. To that end, we welcomed the Shmita year by holding a Zoom-based speaker series featuring voices of national prominence, such as Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, and Rabbi Shai Held, among many others, teaching various aspects of Shmita and Jewish environmental values.

We continued raising awareness of Shmita in the wider community by teaching at the Big Bold Jewish Climate Festival, at Limmud, and at the NewCAJE summer program for Jewish educators, and in several Jewish and even non-Jewish congregations and multi-faith organizations.

Next, we reached out to regional synagogues, and have built active, working relationships with more than a dozen congregations and organizations from Oregon to Spokane. We hold weekly steering committee meetings and monthly partner meetings, and are publishing our second newsletter in the first half of July. We will be hosting a hopefully wonderful and exciting Hakhel – a community gathering and festival of Torah learning - during Sukkot in the fall.

Here at Beth Shalom, we taught middle schoolers about Shmita during Prozdor; and with the encouragement of Rabbi Borodin and the skills and handiwork of Alan Rodan, we built a Little Free Food Pantry to help our neighbors out by providing free food, clothing and hygiene items.

Rabbi Rose wrote a beautiful series of Shmita-focused teachings for this year’s Food and Friends program; and we became an official Greening Congregation, partnering with Washington Interfaith Power & Light to join faith communities across our state in engaging in a meaningful way with our obligations to care for our common home. Tamar Libicki is now leading an energetic Ahavat v’Avodat HaAdamah, our community’s Green Team.

Brianna Caplan Sayers created the Shmita Basket ritual as part of the Shmita Prizes program initiated by Hazon, and Brianna and Sam Perlin have been leading observance of this ritual regularly at Beth Shalom. We will all have the opportunity to take part in the Shmita Basket ritual today during our special Kiddush Lunch today (instructions are on the tables), which features local, in-season produce, grains and lentils! We are particularly grateful for the incredibly generous donation of eggs by Phil Levin and Elizabeth Braverman, from the chickens and ducks on their farm in Vashon.

Shmita Project Northwest is continuously working to expand the imagination and vision behind the work we do.

The Maximalist Vision, as I like to call it, is that one day, everyone in the world will be aware of what year of the Shmita cycle we are living in, in the same way we know what day of the week it is. Shmita years will be distinguished from regular years: there will be more rest, and there will be preparation, such as thoughtfully giving positive and nurturing care toward the earth itself, and the enactment of a year of rest for the earth, in a multitude of ways across the world. Debt will be thoroughly re-examined at the societal level in every country and internationally, and predatory aspects will be reformed.

Between where we stand today and the Maximalist Vision there are, naturally, stages. The first stage is now: here we are, in the middle of a Shmita year. What meaningful but small and do-able actions can each of us take to “feel” Shmita? Maybe there is an ecological restoration project we can undertake? Maybe we can offer produce from our garden to friends or neighbors passing by? Maybe we will choose to repair something (and enhance its beauty in doing so) rather than buy something new, to reduce environmental impact and let the earth rest in that way?

But between those very simple, individual actions and the Maximalist Vision – is the space in which Shmita Project Northwest hopes to be most impactful. What can be accomplished in the upcoming six years, when we dream and plan and stretch our imagination in a community that crosses boundaries, but shares a vision?

Please join us after lunch for an open-ended conversation about exactly this question. We would love to engage with you in how to thoughtfully complete this Shmita year at Beth Shalom, and then take up the question of how to make of the upcoming six years of the Shmita cycle a meaningful foundation on which to build for the next Shmita year, which will take place in 5789, all the while keeping the Maximalist Vision in mind!

Surprisingly and not surprisingly, the earth gets the last word in this week’s Torah Portion: it swallows Korach and his quarrelsome band alive. Kedushat Levi asserts that Korach did not believe that the Torah was able to offer guidance in the real world, the world of action, *olam ha’asiyah*; he thought Torah was just a way of speaking, a book of ideas, that it was not a realistic way for human beings to live, and that therefore it was a just rebuke that the earth itself opened its mouth and swallowed him!

The final image from this parsha, of Aaron’s blooming staff, stands as an offering of hope that even things that seem lifeless may in fact be full of a living energy, and can even bear fruit in the hands of the right leadership. Indeed, if in the end this story ***is*** fundamentally about leadership, then it is telling that in the end, the true leader is the one whose branch is blooming; look at it and you will see buds, and flowers, even ripe fruit – it brings forth life.

May we always recognize that true leadership will be characterized by its ability and desire to protect and nurture all life, and that it will hold the living Earth as a Divine gift: I imagine the hand of leadership overlapping and in harmony with the fruitful and open and life-giving hand of God.

Poteach et yadecha.

Ken yehi ratzon.

To complete this beautiful image, Torah tells us that Aaron’s blooming staff even right now is resting in the Arc of the Covenant, along with the tablets of the law and a jar of manna, still fresh and beautiful and alive, an eternal reminder of what is possible when human leadership and God’s love for all Creation coincide.

In the words of Y. Nachshoni, in his review of the Chassidic literature around these parshiot:

There is a need for enormous spiritual ascent if we are to withstand the challenge of making life holy.

My friends, this ascent is our task, and we will surely go up!

Shabbat Shalom