

Walk through the Parsha by Rabbi David Walk

Anatomy of a Villian

Villains are fascinating. Great villains of print and screen are often more complex and compelling than their virtuous counterparts. Growing up, the first villain to capture my imagination and terror was Captain Hook. Initially, it was the Disney cartoon version (1953), voiced magnificently by Hans Conried, but later it was the fabulous Cyril Ritchard (1960) of the Mary Martin TV version. This villain was reprised marvelously by Danny Kaye (1976) and then, in the movie Hook, by Dustin Hoffman (1991). It was chilling when he told the little girl, 'Lie? Me? Never! The truth is far too much fun.' Later, the prototypical villain was Ernst Stavro Blofeld who almost takes over the world in 7 James Bond films. Of course, for many, the great media villain must be Darth Vader. Marvel has given us a new complicated villain in Thanos, who is far more interesting than the plethora of good guys he faces. And I didn't even mention Professor Moriarty, Lex Luthor, Hannibal Lecter, The Joker or Lord Voldemort. Man, I'm not going to sleep tonight. But in the Torah the archvillain must be Korach!

In this week's Torah reading, this scion of the Levi clan tries to wrest leadership from the hands of Moshe and Aharon. In the best villain tradition, Korach presents himself as the good guy looking out for the interests of the

average Israelite against the over-reaching authority of Moshe. His credentials are impeccable. He descends from the oldest son of Levi. What is his claim? 'You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's assembly?' (Bamidbar 16:4) Moshe and Aharon are presented as grasping autocrats. Really? Especially for Moshe this description is ludicrous. He didn't everything in his power to avoid leadership, and was very happy to share power whenever possible. In any case, this is a good opportunity to discuss leadership, because it is a major issue throughout the book of Bamidbar.

The book begins with a list of tribal leaders, and then describes them in an enigmatic way. The verse (1:16) calls them KRU'EI HA'EIDA, called upon or summoned by the community. That's how we read the words, but they are written KRI'EI HA'EIDA or those who call upon the community. These 12 men listed are true leaders because the community wanted them as their chiefs and these individuals also communicate meaningfully with the members of the tribes. There's an interesting idea in a PsychologyToday.com article entitled Leadership 101. The writer, Dr. Miki Kashtan, explains that there is a difference between power and leadership. The former is about influence; the latter is about concern for the group. The two may reside together, but often don't. I believe that



our verse is describing this positive combination of power and leadership. They had power invested in them by the community and displayed leadership by consulting with their tribe and sharing responsibility within it.

This combination was found in Moshe and I discussed this at length two weeks ago in my article on B'ha'alot'cha. Moshe had those two amazing character traits of ANAVA (humility) and TZNIUT (modesty). The ANAVA meant that he only wielded power when he was impressed upon to do so (by God, no less); the TZNIUT was displayed by his willingness to share leadership and credit with others, both family and otherwise. These are the ingredients of great leadership. What is the recipe for the Making of a Villain?

The answer, I think, is in Pirkei Avot, but not where you thought to look. There is a mishna which specifically mentions the controversy with Korach: Any dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will have enduring relevance; one that is not ... will not ... Which is a dispute that is not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach (5:17). This means that the dispute initiated by Korach has no long-term impact on the world. His arguments don't advance Torah knowledge or spiritual growth. But the Sfat Emet (1874 & 1880) led me to another mishna: Envy (KIN'A), lust (TA'AVA) and the pursuit of honor (KAVOD) drive a person out of the world (4:21). Ahh, those are the building blocks for a dastardly career.

KIN'A is the opposite of Moshe's ANAVA; KAVOD is the antithesis of Moshe's TZNIUT. Jealousy and envy cause me to grasp for things to which I'm not entitled and the need for honor makes me draw attention to myself to seek credit for anything accomplished in my general vicinity. Together they drive a person to behavior patterns which are hard to control, and therefore, to appetite and lust. This person has lost the concepts of cooperation, compassion and control.

How does a possessor of these traits get driven out of the world? In Mishlei, we're informed, 'Jealousy rots the bones' (14:30). It's safe to assume that's a metaphor. We're not talking about a calcium deficient diet. I think that it means that someone who is only concerned for themselves will be forgotten immediately upon burial. It's as if they never lived and leave no discernable trace. I refer you to the Oscar winning animated film Coco. Reb Simcha Bunim from the unpronounceable town of Pshischa (or Przysucha, it makes you want to buy a vowel) noted that the word for 'rot' (U'REKAV) has the same numerical value as Korach. Korach's fate of being swallowed by the earth, represents his total lack of future significance.

The best word to describe the villainy of Korach is selfish. He represents total self-absorption. I guess that means that Moshe was selfless. These two protagonists powerfully contrast the difference between great leaders and demagogues. Not everyone can be the



supreme leader, but we can all have positive influence upon our communities by displaying virtuous character traits. That's leadership, too. So, let's all abandon the ways of selfishness and jump on the leadership. All aboard! 🚢