

What are the conditions that led to the Korah rebellion? After all, the Israelites had just seen the results of rejecting God's plan when they demanded a return to Egypt under new leadership (Numbers 14:4), and those results weren't good. They've been consigned to decades of wandering in the wilderness, the only aim of which is to buy time for an entire generation to die. What good could possibly come from another attempted coup?

For centuries, commentators have tried to explain the opening verses of Parshat Korah. "*Vayikah Korah*—Korah took." But the Torah includes no object; what exactly did Korah take? Some modern translations say he "betook himself," that is to say, he gave himself undeserved status. That may be the best possible translation, but it still doesn't explain the timing.

As I taught one evening earlier this week, the rabbis imagined Korah challenging Moshe as lawgiver. He used logic to suggest that Moshe's rules about tzitzit—the passage that comes right before the Korah story—were foolish. "You weren't commanded about these things; you made them up yourself" (Bemidbar Rabbah 18.3). Korah, in this reading, sure has an agile mind. That's not his crime. The problem is that he has too much time on his hands to use it properly.

Nearly 50 years ago, the Israeli Rabbi Benzion Firer wrote an essay on Korah called *HaSakanah SheBeHoser Maas*, "The Danger of Doing Nothing." Now that the Israelites know that they are going nowhere slowly, Korah seized on the opportunity to sow discontent. Hey, he had nothing to lose! Rabbi Firer wrote:

"When a nation is busy planning the capture of its homeland, it has no time for arguments and divisions. The overriding goal unites all sectors of the population and prevents them from becoming involved with trifling matters or abandoning the main idea. Even if one person becomes obsessed by insignificant details of misplaced honor or other personal issues, he will find that he has no followers. However, after the sin of the spies, the Children of Israel are not busy with anything and they have time to waste. A person with too much spare time must find something to do with himself. When you have nothing to look forward to, you begin to make trouble."

Basic observation of the world around us shows that Rabbi Firer is on to something. Young children are more likely to get on each other's nerves and even fight when they're bored. Adults aren't all that much better. Surely one of the greatest concerns we have had throughout these 100-plus days of physical distancing is that we might run out of things to do. One look around the house is all it should take to realize that there is plenty to do, but it doesn't always feel that way. One might have hundreds of TV channels, yet feel there is nothing on. Or a shelf full of books to read, and nothing of interest. Or countless new recipes to try out, but the wrong ingredients. Or dozens of relatives and friends to call, but no motivation.

That's why our online learning offerings will continue through the summer. Ordinarily, we would be on vacation from lunch and learn and Yiddish class, and we certainly have never launched a new adult ed curriculum in June! But launch we have, using the Hartman Institute's new course, "Together and Apart," about the challenges to Jewish Peoplehood and new ways to imagine worldwide Jewry's relationship. I suppose the title of the course captures more than just the nature of Peoplehood; it's a mantra for the way we both affirm and fight our current COVID reality. We may be physically apart, but our shul is doing everything it can to keep us together.

But as one mom of young children told me this week, the summer is going to be screen-free. “We’re so over Zoom,” she said. There’s a limit to how much online engagement a person can tolerate, and she and her family have crossed the threshold. Summer vacations can’t and won’t be what we are used to; I know this personally. I was supposed to be leaving for Spain next week, followed by two weeks in Israel, studying at Hartman. Instead, we’ll take one week away, and though Hartman is offering four weeks of rich webinars, I’m sure I’ll only log on to a percentage of what I signed up to take. I understand. If you need a break from your screen, just make sure to use sunscreen.

Korah and his followers had too much time on their hands, but more importantly, they had too little hope. They were destined to die without accomplishing the national mission of entering and settling the Promised Land. We may have similar challenges, and even too much time with too little to do. But we need not abandon hope. COVID-19 will not last forever. One day, we will be able to pray and study and just congregate together, in person, in safety. One day, we will feel the warmth of a handshake, the love of a hug with friends. One day, we will have the opposite challenge—too much to do, with so little time. Hold tight to these hopes, my friends. We will get there.

Shabbat Shalom!