

Korach: Who Are Your Neighbors?

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The “Korach rebellion” arose from simmering unrest centered in the southern flank of the Jewish desert encampment. Korach's Levite contingent resided to the south, and this region became “ground zero” for political discontent. The disgruntlement travelled quickly and polluted the tribe of Reuven, who also dwelt to the south. The Korach debacle highlights the impact of “peer pressure” at a communal level. Toxic neighbors can yield deadly results. Chazal referred to this condition as “Oy la'Rasha oy l'shecheino” bemoaning the negative influence of morally objectionable neighbors. Ideal communities are distilled around common religious values and similar levels of religious practices.

Sadly, throughout our exile, our choices for communal structure and location were often curtailed by restrictive policies, which dictated to Jews where they could live. The ‘ghetto’ experience ordained who our neighbors would be, leaving us little choice or discretion.

Fortunately, the modern era of Enlightenment offered Jews unlimited residential opportunities, but also brought new challenges. The modern era of secularization reformulated the perennial question of building 'protected' communities. The modern world posed a very new challenge: how to protect our communities from the barrage of modern culture which is often discrepant with religious values. The peril is no longer limited to a particular ‘rasha’ but to an overwhelming and often alien cultural *force*. Our interest in integrating noble cultural values, only complicates the task: How to create ‘protected’ cultural encounters, but not accelerate religious erosion.

The post WWII era has witnessed several attempts at stark insularity for the sake of religious preservation: Rav Aharon Kotler, the founder of the Lakewood yeshiva, specifically chose a remote farmland in New Jersey to establish his “American Yeshiva”. Fearful of the cultural influences of metropolitan New York, he geographically distanced his nascent yeshiva from the urban influences. The Chassidic world – which was launched in the 18th century as an embracing movement meant to incorporate broad-spectrumed communities has, in many cases, retreated into more insular societies, barricading against the encroachment of modern culture.

Throughout history, Jews have always delicately calibrated the balance between insularity and inclusion. Yet whatever balance was struck, Jewish communities were always based upon a similar model: in the face of potentially destructive influences how can 'protected' space be carved out. Essentially, every community must build a wall; the only question is the height of the wall and how many windows are embedded.

Life in Israel dramatically alters this equation. If we aim to live in Israel as one family, we must live side-by-side with Jews who are different from ourselves, and whose religious experience is dissimilar to ours. In foreign settings it is clear that we live amongst the "other". Without vilifying the “other”, we realize that, alongside important shared values, there exist significant cultural and religious discrepancies. In Israel there is no “other“. At the core of “*family life*” is the notion of shared experiences and shared values. Furthermore, if religiously foreign values pervade Israeli society, they are clearly our "responsibility" and can't be simply dismissed as values of the "other".

The first 74 years have brought mixed results in this reimagined equation. So many of Orthodox Jews have been galvanized by the

settlement of the entire land of Israel— in particular the settlement of the Biblical corridor of Judea and Samaria which was liberated in 1967. Without question, the return to these lands has reinforced our redemptive conviction and our historical warrant. Yet, these achievements have carried a heavy price- our settlements (such as my own city of Alon Shevut) have become narrow religious *cantons* which, in most cases have attracted exclusively religious populations. The repercussions of this insularity have been suffered by both communities: the secular community hasn't benefitted from exposure to Religious Jews. Additionally, some in the Religious community – who haven't experienced sustained contact with the 'other'- have become dismissive or disinterested in "secular Israel".

Additionally, as is true with any insular model, the protective *shell* sometimes creates grave long-term vulnerability. Severing people from today's mass culture can oftentimes boomerang, when that culture inevitably seeps in through the cracks of "sealed" environments.

Over the past 30 years a more engaging approach has evolved, driven by awareness that life in Israel reconfigures classic communal models. Army life has provided an outstanding "communal structure" to showcase religion to the broader public.

Army life is a great *equalizer* as army culture is founded upon the equality of all soldiers. This baseline of equality creates "softer" and more easygoing interactions allowing religion to be better appreciated. Within general society, secular Israelis sometimes recoil at what is perceived as invasive and institutionalized religious coercion. Within the more friendly and egalitarian precincts of army experience, less politicized messages about religion are often more agreeable.

Furthermore, a project known as 'garin Torani' has dramatically revised the demography of Israel. Throughout the initial decades of the State of

Israel, religious people gradually clustered into predominantly religious cities such as Jerusalem, Rechovot, Petach Tikva and others. Major cities such as Haifa and Tel Aviv spiraled toward more secular conditions. More significantly, development towns on the Northern and Southern peripheries were not inhabited by large religious populations. It became more and more apparent that merely settling hilltops was insufficient, if we were did not “settle the *hearts*” of our extended family. Gradually, groups of young religious families relocated to less religious cities including development towns in the periphery. Religious “hubs” were formed with the goal of inspiring religion into these settings. Arguably, the first successful experiment occurred in 1968 when a contingent of students from the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem relocated to Kiryat Shemona in the North. This movement gathered momentum in the 80’s and 90’s, as many of the southern development towns were settled and dramatically remodeled by these “core groups” of religious families.

In Israel the classic model of creating “distance” from neighbors who are different from us, is slowly being replaced by the concept of “amcha” -one common people.

Furthermore, if we aspire to live as family, it is not enough to spread our own religious values. We aim to live side-by-side with family, role-modelling our own lifestyles, but also learning to appreciate and borrow the values of other “family” members. Oftentimes, traditional or masorati Jews excel at hospitality, family values, and honoring parents, in ways that Orthodox Jews have much to learn from. Secular Jews are often dedicated to social justice, respect for the dignity of Man, and an unqualified desire for peace which sometimes isn’t fully enunciated in religious circles.

Family life creates a more bi-lateral sense of shared experience. Walls which always provided shelter to our values, have now become potential barriers to our *national family* life. Life in Israel challenges us toward more nuanced and measured decisions about whom we choose as our neighbors.