Angel for Shabbat: Parashat Korah

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Years ago, I was interviewed by a newspaper reporter who entered my office wearing a kippah. After the interview, I asked him about himself. He told me that he had been raised in a secular Jewish home but had become Orthodox during his college years. He took a course on Bible as Literature and that changed his life.

While researching a term paper for that course, he came across an article written by someone who had the same name as his mother's father, a grandfather who had died long ago and who he never met. When he mentioned the "coincidence" to his mother, she told him that the article was in fact written by her father who had been an Orthodox Jew and a Bible scholar. She explained that she had moved away from Orthodoxy in her teens.

He was stunned to learn that his grandfather was a learned Orthodox Jew…so he found other articles written by him and developed a closeness to his memory. Gradually, he was drawn to reconnect with the Orthodoxy of his grandfather.

I remember telling the reporter: Your deceased grandfather reached out and pulled you back to Torah.

He nodded assent. His long-dead grandfather had brought him back to Torah.

This story highlights the underlying optimism of Judaism. Even if children and grandchildren move far away from tradition, their pious ancestors may draw them back. A moment of reflection may come that reconnects an alienated soul to his/her religious roots.

This week's Torah reading begins with reference to Korah, an arch rebel and trouble maker. Korah fomented an uprising against Moses that ultimately resulted in the deaths of his followers.

And yet, when the Torah recounts the fate of Korah and his followers, it informs us that "the sons of Korah did not die" (Bemidbar 26:11). Rabbinic tradition teaches that Korah's sons repented; they realized that their father was guilty of treasonous and divisive behavior and they disassociated themselves from him. Thus, they were spared from the devastation that befell Korah and his associates.

How did the sons of Korah have the strength to avoid following the path of their own father?

Perhaps we can find an answer in the way the Torah identifies Korah in the opening verse of the Parasha. Korah was the "son of Yitshar, son of Kehat, son of Levi." It is highly unusual for the Torah to provide a person's genealogy going back three generations.

Maybe this unusual listing of ancestry is pointing to a deeper lesson: ancestors matter! Even if Korah was a flawed and problematic person, Korah's ancestors were upstanding, pious people. Those ancestors provided a spiritual basis for Korah's sons to remain loyal to Moses and to the Torah. In a sense, they reached beyond the grave to bring Korah's sons back.

A well-known Jewish aphorism is "*zekher tsaddik livrakha*" (Proverbs 10:7), the memory of a righteous person is a source of blessing. This is not just figuratively true, but in many cases it is factually true. A righteous life can continue to impact on descendants for generations to come.

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