Does Anyone Hear?: Thoughts for Parashat Korah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Korah

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some years ago, I officiated at a wedding in a very upscale venue. Before the ceremony, I asked the wedding planner to check that the microphone was on. After being assured that everything was in good order, the wedding procession began.

It was a large wedding with many hundreds of guests. The bride and groom and their parents stood under the Huppa with me, and family members sat in the first few rows. I chanted the blessings, delivered an address to the bride and groom, and continued the ceremony until the breaking of the glass. Everything went very well.

Almost everything.

It turned out that the microphone wasn't on after all. Thus, no one other than those under the Huppa and the first row or two of guests heard any of the blessings or my wedding speech.

I was understandably annoyed. I had done my best to do a nice wedding but very few even heard my words.

But then I had a flash of insight! This was a parable of a rabbi's life!!. We work hard to find the right words, to convey the right message…but only those closest to us even hear us. Most don't hear, don't listen, and don't really care. The "microphone" isn't on, the words don't reach them no matter how hard we try.

But then I realized that the problem doesn't only face rabbis; it faces everyone who has a positive message to convey. It confronts all who speak for righteousness against evil; for truth against falsehood; for Israel against its enemies. Those nearby hear the message but so many beyond our immediate audience don't hear what we are saying.

It can be frustrating. It can cause one to lose heart.

In pondering this dilemma, we can find room for optimism in this week's Torah portion. Parashat Korah actually can be a depressing read: rebellion against Moses and Aaron; discontent among the masses of Israelites; deaths and plagues. Moses must have felt as though he was speaking without a "microphone." Most of the people did not seem to hear his message and did not internalize his teachings.

But remarkably, the Torah notes that the sons of Korah did not perish along with their father and his fellow rebels. Rabbinic tradition has it that the sons repented; they actually listened to Moses' words and realized the truth of his message.

The Talmud teaches that the words of those who have fear of Heaven will ultimately be heard. Kohelet concludes: "In the end, when all is heard, fear the Lord…" This is interpreted to mean that even though one's words are not "heard" now, they will be heard in the end…if not by this generation, then by future generations. Righteous words do not die. They take effect even if we don't see results immediately. Although Korah wickedly defied the words of Moses, Korah's sons listened to Moses.

So this is the message: good words ultimately prevail even if so many people don't hear them right now. Truth overcomes falsehood. Love overcomes hatred. Righteousness defeats evil. We may not see immediate results, but we can hope that our words will eventually take root.

Sometimes (often!) we speak but the microphone isn't on. Most people don't hear our words. But we trust that ultimately the words will be transmitted into the back rows, little by little, until they take root in the hearts, minds and souls of the people.

Sof davar hakol nishma…In the end, the true message of love, peace and faith will be heard.