

“God, Give Me Patience – Now!”
A Sermon for Parashat Korach

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For years, my father told us about the time our family planned to take a few days of vacation. Now, they were experimenting – testing, so to speak – to see if my parents and brother (six years my senior) could endure a few hours in the car with me. I was five or six years old, and my parents had talked to me and prepared me for the longest car ride ever.

My father put the suitcases in the trunk; we loaded the back seat with snacks, thermoses, games, books, and all manner of diversions (in the Dark Ages before Gameboys and portable MP3 players); and we got in the car. We drove about six blocks before I opened my mouth and asked, “Are we almost there?” I’m told the three of them had a lovely vacation at the Luray Caverns of Virginia, but I wouldn’t really know. I spent those days at my grandparents’ house, far out of earshot from my parents and brother.

Just who was more impatient – my father, or me? I still wonder about that. People say patience is the capacity for calm endurance. As Shakespeare said in *Othello*:

How poor are they that have not patience!
What wound did ever heal but by degrees?

Another guy defined patience as “the ability to let your light shine after your fuse has blown.”

Someone else noted that eternity is: keeping a smile on your face until the camera clicks; waiting for the tow-truck to show up; listening to the sound of a key in the lock at 2:00 a.m.; 20 minutes of aerobic exercise; listening to a six-year-old relay the plot of a children’s film; looking for an expressway exit when you’re headed in the wrong direction; that second hour of Monopoly; and waiting for the light to turn green when you’ve spotted an empty parking space across the intersection.

Yes, patience is a virtue that comes hard for many of us. It’s a quality we admire in the driver behind us, but can’t stand in the driver in front of us.

Poor Moses! Korach really got to him. Korach leveled a hurtful personal challenge at Moses.

The Midrashic Sages offer us an insight: they say that Korach and his mutinous accomplices sinned not only by criticizing Moses and Aaron, but also by their tone. They leveled those charges with scornful contempt.

In short, Korach’s criticism was destructive, and his excessive ambition and power-lust sparked it. In this parashah, we see quite literally what happens to the ignoble rebel when Korach’s zeal swallows him. But, that’s not before he really tries Moses’ patience!

In the 21st century, everything thus far esteems immediacy, doesn't it? We don't go to the one-hour photo place anymore, because we develop our pictures at home! Our eyeglasses are ready in one hour or less because we get the examination while we wait. The medication assures us instant relief, while our cars go to Jiffy Lube. The mail isn't just faxed, but e-mailed and Fed-Ex'd overnight. Dinner's ready in a microwave minute and we know the pregnancy test results almost before having intercourse.

Is it any wonder that we expect instant relief when problems confront us? Professional therapists often remark how we take 10 or 20 years of selfish, stubborn, clueless blundering to undo our marriages and our relationships with our parents or children, but we expect a counselor to fix us in a single 45-minute session.

As a preacher, I am well-acquainted with the palpable impatience of the Jew in the pew. People ask me, "Rabbi, would you care to offer a brief prayer?" The groom insists, "Make it short, Rabbi. Just give us the essentials." They call the Temple office, demanding to know just how long the service will be. If you did read the Magillah tonight, what time would you be through? And, often as official judges at an Olympic track meet, they set their watches with the sermon's very first word. In an age of outpatient cataract and hernia repairs, why not "instant religion"?

The Modern Hebrew word for patience is Savlanut. And everywhere one goes in Israel, we hear the shopkeepers, the clerks, the travel agents, the waiters, and the bus drivers imploring their fellow Jews "B'vakasha, Savlanut! Have some patience, please!" No one is more impatient than Israelis, at least according to my observations, but then again, we waited 20 troubled and bloody centuries to return to our ancient homeland.

By nature, we Jews demand a lot – from displays in the checkout lines at Zabars on New York's Westside to complaints about the water's bitterness or the Manna that was late in arriving in the Biblical Wilderness. Ask either Mr. Bloomberg or Moses Rabbenu, and I'll bet neither would list patience as a strong Jewish suit.

Even Moses had an end to his patience. Early on, he slew the Egyptian taskmaster whom he saw beating a Hebrew slave! Catching his people in the act of idolatry before that golden calf, Moses threw down and smashed the Tablets of the Law. And, as we'll read next Shabbat, he impatiently struck the rock when his people were, true to form, bitterly k'vetching about their thirst. And for that impatience, God saw to it that Moses lost his privilege to enter the Promised Land.

I. God

Interestingly, however, God is described as being "Erech Apayim – slow to anger." You see, Judaism understands God as divinely patient – the deity who affords human beings ample time to get it together. That's the nature of God as we Jews teach it. God was the One who waited to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, patiently accommodating each one of Abraham's entreaties to spare the cities if not 50, but just 10 righteous souls could be found. Yes, God must become a pattern for our own patience.

II. You and Me

So, because God is patient with us, we need to be patient with our fellow human beings. And that's not always easy, is it? Many of the people we must deal with and sometimes even live with, can be obstinate, frustrating, selfish, inconsiderate, and absolutely impossible to please. They say and do the wrong things at the wrong time. Sometimes, they absolutely unnerve us. And do you know what? We're like that sometimes, too.

What gets me are these folks who drive down Prytania or St. Charles Avenue at a sick snail's pace engendering my impatient, limitless wrath – I honk my horn, flash my high beams, or follow in an intimidating tailgate procession. I confess, there are some times when my impatience with such people aggravates me so much that I've considered driving alongside their slow-moving vehicles and threatening them with citizen's arrest. On a recent Ethical Edge on MSNBC, we spoke of the dangers of "road rage" on this holiday weekend, when tempers will flare as traffic slows.

I remember how on one such occasion, as I flashed the lights and all but rode the guy's back bumper, I was chastened upon reading a little sign in the car's rear window that read, "I'm pedaling as fast as I can!" We're all interdependent, aren't we? We all make mistakes. We are all weak at times, and once in a while, we all need help and extra patience!

Understanding begets kindness and patience flows from understanding. We are too quick to judge, and we are too prone to treat our fellows harshly. They too have troubles – bills to pay, sick children, spouses to please, bosses to impress, and headaches to bear. Number one, God is patient and long-suffering. Number two, you and me – we need to give one another a break.

III. Patience with Ourselves

That, of course, brings us to our most personal realization: You and I need to be patient with ourselves. Sooner or later, more than anything or anyone else, we are going to be our own problem! There are days when each one of us literally loathes the kind of person we think and fear we have become. And, it is not usually a big deal, because such days serve to keep us humble. But enough's enough with such self-loathing. We mustn't ever give up on ourselves. Certainly, we try and fail and fall, but patiently, we can try it all over again.

Says the Psalmist:

I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

Sometimes, you see, we just have to learn to wait. Things will get better.

Remember how Kazantzakis, in his fine work, *Zorba the Greek*, tells this tender tale of wistful remorse and longing. It centers around a child and his impatience to witness the birth of a beautiful Monarch butterfly as it emerged from the chrysalis. As it struggled to free its wings from the confining cocoon, the boy's warm breath attempted to help along the creature. But alas, the boy's impatience proved fatal to the efforts of the Monarch as its scaly wings were overly warmed by the boy's breath and they refused now to open at all. And the noble insect died an anguished death.

Patience! Waiting! Nature teaches us that it's a part of life. Never cut down a tree in the winter! Patience and waiting are a part of God's strategy for us. Learning to wait must surely be one of those lost skills that we need to recapture because it sets the rudder of our lives and largely determines what happens next.

Says the Prophet Isaiah,

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.

And isn't that, my dear friends, worth waiting for?

Amen