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# The Guilty and the Innocent



**Korach 5766**  
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Torah Reading Numbers 16:1 - 18:32	Haftarah Reading I Samuel 11:14 - 12:22
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The suffering of innocents raises one of the most painful and intractable moral dilemmas for people of faith: If there is a good God, then how can that God allow the innocent to suffer. A good God should be able to construct a just world, one in which people pay for their own evil, but don't suffer as a consequence of wicked decisions or hateful actions that they did not formulate themselves. What a world that would be!

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penalty for someone else's malice. Children born to absentee fathers, or to drug addicts pay the penalty for their parent's self-indulgence. All Israelis pay a constant penalty for the venal politics of Middle Eastern despots, terrorists, and sheiks, and the civilians of Darfur and elsewhere are paying with their own bodies for the avarice and greed of ethnic strife.

The sad reality of life as it is lived is that the blameless often suffer at the hands of the guilty, and the upright bears the consequences of the wicked. Discrimination, it seems, is built into the structure of the universe as it exists in reality.

Today's Torah portion refers to that sad reality with typical candor: After Korah and his band rebel against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, God announces that their legitimacy will be revealed through the death of Korah and his followers in a miraculous way. Not limiting wrathful retribution just to Korah, however, God commands Moses and Aaron to "Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!"

Is it possible for the Creator of the Universe, the source of life and Torah, to obliterate the innocent along with the guilty?

The answer, both in daily life and in the honest literature of the Torah, is a firm "yes!" As the *Mekhilta* recognizes, "Once permission has been given to the destroyer to do injury, it no longer discriminates between the innocent and the guilty."

Why do the innocent suffer along with the guilty (or, to translate back into biblical language, why would God condemn the entire community along with Korah)?

At its base, Judaism affirms that our identity is formed not in "splendid isolation" but in relationship with others. From our earliest moments as a baby, we learn who we are by interacting with someone else. We learn our own borders as we grow to recognize that we are not our mothers or fathers, but we also take their responses and intuitions on as our own. That interactive and dynamic creation of a self continues throughout our lives. Who we are is molded and guided by our families, friends, teachers, religion, and community. Each of us is inextricably linked to the other, and therefore, each of us shares some responsibility for what happens in our communities, even when we don't directly have a hand in those actions. Particularly those of us who live in a democracy or whose religion is one of voluntary association share responsibility for its actions and its future.

Not only are we all interconnected, and therefore responsible, but there is one other reason why the innocent often suffer with the guilty. One of the consequences of free choice, of the human ability to determine our own actions, is that other people can impose their wills on us. If my neighbor decides to punch me in the nose (and I hope he doesn't!), then my nose will get punched as a result of his choice.

Perhaps that is precisely what the *Mekhilta* is alluding to: Our freedom curtails the freedom of other people, since our choices or lack of choices will have direct implications in their lives.

Is there any resolution at hand? Notice that the response of Moses and Aaron is not to accept God's inability to separate the innocent and the guilty. Instead, they act, knowing that there is no substitute for decisive human intervention: "They fell on their faces and said, "O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?" As a result of their intervention, God urges the innocent to distance themselves from the sinners and from their sin.

The lessons of this story, then, are two-fold:

- First, that we owe ourselves and each other our active intervention against bigotry, violence, and injustice. All that it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. We cannot afford to sit life out.
- Second, that our spiritual health requires us to distance ourselves from sin, and from those people who cause others to suffer. By associating with those who take the lofty values and sacred deeds of our tradition to heart, we will strengthen our own resolve as Jews, and create a climate in which our interdependent self will be shaped toward the good.

What better time to start than this Shabbat? And what better place to start than your nearest synagogue?

Shabbat shalom.



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