

**Shabbat Shalom  
from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time  
Fri. Evening 7:58 pm

Services Sat. June 20 9:30 AM

Here is my message for this week.

**PARSHAT KORACH  
A LIFE FORCE**

“The next day Moses entered the Tent of Meeting, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted, it brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and bore almonds.” (Numbers 17:23)

I grew up in Los Angeles, CA and each year when I read this portion, it brings back memories of home. It is not simply the moment at the beginning of the portion when the ground opens, swallowing Korach and his fellow rebels. Certainly, earthquakes were an ongoing reality during my formative years, although I was out of town for the worst – the 1971 San Fernando and 1994 Northridge quakes. But it is a scene from later in the portion that brings some vivid memories of my hometown.

Later in the Torah portion, Moses wants to prove to the rebellious Israelites who God has chosen for religious leadership. The head of each of the tribes gives Moses a staff, simply a stick of wood, and Aaron of the tribe of Levi also gives his staff. Moses leaves the staffs overnight in the Tent of Meeting. The next morning Aaron’s staff sprouts almond blossoms. Dead wood brings forth life. It seems to be a miracle when something dead brings forth life again. That is my memory of California.

Part of the reality of life in Southern California is the memory of horrible fires, often destroying entire neighborhoods. These fires seem to be getting worse today, a result of climate change. Last summer I drove through the expensive neighborhood of Pacific Palisades, badly destroyed the previous January. Seeing what were once expensive homes reduced to their foundations was heartbreaking. But the fires of my youth were also terrible. I recall the 1961 Bel-Air fire, where the sky blackened over the city and hundreds of the most expensive homes in the L.A. area were destroyed. After the fire,

everything seemed to be desolate. It was like looking at a moonscape. But then a miracle happened. Green began to appear. Plants began to sprout again. Like Aaron's staff, the ground brought forth life. Within a year it was as if the fire never happened. Life had overtaken death.

That seems to be the way our world works. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) used the phrase *Élan Vital* – literally “vital force” or “life force.” It was the force that drives the creative evolution of life on earth. Scientists deny that such a life-force exists, claiming that the world is a purely material place working by the laws of physics. But I saw firsthand that life force working in the burnt-out mountains near my home. I am convinced that Bergson was on to something. A life force seems to be at work in the world. Left to its own devices, nature has a tendency for life to flourish. The proof is all around us, in a world brimming with life of all kinds.

We mention this force of life in our daily prayers. “Every day God renews the works of creation.” During the Enlightenment there was a popular philosophy called deism. Voltaire and Jefferson were both deists. Deism teaches that God created the world, set the laws in physics in motion, but then ignores the world. God is totally passive. It is a belief that fit the scientific age of the early Enlightenment. But it ignores the force of life I saw growing up in Los Angeles.

Judaism has always identified God with this life force at work in the world. That is why we repeat multiple times in our High Holiday liturgy, “Remember us to life, King Who loves life, and write us in the book of life, for your sake O God of life.” God equals life. In the Torah we are told, “Choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). We should identify with that same life force, that *Élan Vital*, at work in Aaron's staff, in the burnt-out hills of Los Angeles, and in the world as a whole.