

Challenging Authority

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Korach* (Num. 16:1 – 17:15)

By Alan I. Friedman

“Vayikach Korach ... vayakumu lifnei Moshe....”
“Korach took the initiative ... to rise up against Moses....”

Only five Torah portions — *Noach*, *Yitro*, *Korach*, *Balak*, and *Pinchas* — are named for individuals. (A sixth, *Chayei Sarah*, includes Sarah's name but is actually about her death.) All of these parashiot have interesting messages, but only *Parashat Korach* provides us with a unique opportunity to examine the concept of challenging authority.

In *Parashat Korach*, Dathan, Abiram and 250 leaders of the community join with Korach to confront Moses and Aaron and challenge their leadership and authority. “You have gone too far,” they accuse God's chosen leaders, “for all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Adonai's congregation?”¹

When the matter is ultimately resolved, God has made clear the divine sanction of Moses and Aaron and the spiritual supremacy of the Kohanim: The earth has opened up and swallowed Dathan, Abiram, Korach, and all of their households;² fire has consumed the 250 supporters of Korach;³ and 14,700 additional Israelites who either did not disassociate themselves from the rebellion or were unhappy with Korach's punishment have died of a plague.⁴

What was wrong with Korach's challenge to Moses and Aaron? Aren't dissent and challenge part of the political process? Dissent, *per se*, is not troublesome. In fact Jewish tradition encourages dissent, but only when it serves a holy purpose, such as that between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. The dissent of Korach and his minions, however, is self-serving and, therefore, does not advance holiness. Korach's rebellion was so dangerous, in fact, that it jeopardized the very existence of the entire Israelite community.

Nehama Leibowitz, in her *Studies in Bamidbar*, writes that Korach and his followers “were simply a band of malcontents, each harboring his own personal grievances against authority, animated by individual pride and

¹ Numbers 16:3.

² Numbers 16: 31-33.

³ Numbers 16:35.

⁴ Numbers 17:11-14.

ambition[. They] united to overthrow Moses and Aaron ... hoping thereby to attain their individual desires.”⁵

If Korach is a model of a destructive voice, a rebel with an unholy cause, challenging authority for no reason other than his own personal gain, what can we learn from such a negative role model? One message of this parashah is that if we are to challenge authority, we must do so with a higher purpose, a noble motivation. Otherwise, we are merely sowing seeds of dissent and destruction.

Challenges to authority have their place, but before deciding if they deserve our support, we must first assess the motive that animates them. Only then will we understand if the path they are leading us down is one that enhances holiness or destroys it.

Korach’s rebellion is regarded as the most dangerous episode of the Israelite’s journey through the wilderness. Why is it accorded such singular importance? First, because Korach was a man of the people, he was able to speak for the people and gain the popular support that Moses could not rally. And second, according to midrash, he was able to make effective use of rhetoric to ridicule Moses and Torah and thereby move the people away from their spiritual connections to God.

Did the punishment fit the crimes? Did Korach, Dathan, Abiram, and their band of 250 deserve to die for their actions? And what about the thousands of Israelite “innocents”? Wasn’t death by plague too severe, too extreme?

Rabbi Moses Ben Nachman (Ramban) says that the grave error that precipitated the rebellion was Korach’s outrageous assumption that Moses, on his own, appointed himself as leader of the people and then chose his brother Aaron as high priest.⁶ Despite Moses’ humility and despite the trust that God placed in Moses, Korach and his supporters accused Moses of establishing policies based on his own preferences. Blinded by their thirst for prestige, their desire to perform divine services not assigned to them, and their denial of Aaron’s right to be High Priest, Korach and his followers made the ridiculous claim that God’s heavenly fire would have descended for *anyone* chosen to do divine service. They asserted that it was only Moses’ “unauthorized selection” of Aaron as High Priest that had caused the heavenly fire of selection to consume Aaron’s sacrifice. This, says the Ramban, was the distorted attitude that prevailed among the insurgents.⁷

⁵ *Studies in Bamidbar*, By Nehama Leibowitz; Translated by Aryeh Newman; The World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem; 1982.

⁶ *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 821.

⁷ Commentary on *Parashat Korach* by Rabbi Moshe Heigh; Regional Institute for Torah and Secular Studies (RITSS) High School for Girls; Cincinnati, Ohio.

The premeditated and extreme behavior of arrogance, selfishness, deceit, and betrayal demanded extreme retribution. The punishment of the rebels is a reminder that, in God's eyes, humility and integrity carry far greater weight than the pursuit of selfish interests, power, and recognition.

Now, if we accept that God's punishment of the rebels was justified, what possible explanation could there be for God's punishment of the "innocent" Israelites by plague? After all, the Torah makes it clear that the Israelites played no part in the confrontation. They didn't support Korach; neither did they oppose him. They were merely standing by as witnesses.

The Biblical commentator, Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel, known as Malbim, says that it was this very act of "merely standing by" that accounted for their severe punishment. Even though they saw their community threatened, they didn't want to get involved. Theirs was the sin of fence straddling, the sin of indifference. And it was for *not* taking a stand against evil that God wanted to destroy them.⁸

It's an enduring message: Evil flourishes when good people do nothing. Silence condones. If we stand by and allow evil to go unchallenged, we share responsibility with the perpetrators. To prevent our world from falling prey to evil propositions, we must stand firm against evil in both word and deed.

Now, here's a conundrum. We read in the Torah of the punishment accorded to Korach and his family: "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korach's people and all their possessions ... the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation."⁹ And yet, eleven of the 150 psalms are ascribed to the sons of Korach. How can this be? Were the sons of Korach destroyed, or weren't they?

The explanation comes from *Parashat Pinchas*: "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korach ... and they became an example. The sons of Korach, however, did not die."¹⁰ According to tradition, they were spared because they repented, and a special place was set aside for them in Sheol, where they were able to sit and sing praises to God. What a remarkable commentary on the power of repentance!

⁸ "The Sin of Indifference and Neutrality," A Commentary on *Parashat Korach* by Rabbi Avi Weiss; Hebrew Institute of Riverdale; Bronx, New York; 2003.

⁹ Numbers 17:32-33.

¹⁰ Numbers 26:10-11.