

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Korach
June 12, 2021 *** Tamuz 2, 2021

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Korach in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2958/jewish/Korach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Korach incites a mutiny challenging Moses' leadership and the granting of the kehunah (priesthood) to Aaron. He is accompanied by Moses' inveterate foes, Dathan and Abiram. Joining them are 250 distinguished members of the community, who offer the sacrosanct ketoret (incense) to prove their worthiness for the priesthood. The earth opens up and swallows the mutineers, and a fire consumes the ketoret-offerers.

A subsequent plague is stopped by Aaron's offering of ketoret. Aaron's staff miraculously blossoms and brings forth almonds, to prove that his designation as high priest is divinely ordained.

G-d commands that a terumah ("uplifting") from each crop of grain, wine and oil, as well as all firstborn sheep and cattle, and other specified gifts, be given to the kohanim (priests).

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1229167/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The prophet Samuel (a descendant of Korach, the protagonist of this week's Torah portion) gathers the Jews to firmly install Saul as king of Israel. During the course of his address to the Jews he called out, "Here I am; bear witness against me before G-d and before His anointed; whose ox did I take, or whose donkey did I take, or whom did I rob; or whom did I oppress, or from whose hand did I take a bribe..." This echoes Moses' statement in this week's Torah reading: "I have not taken a donkey from a single one of them, and I have not harmed a single one of them."

The nation gathers at Gilgal for a second coronation of King Saul—the first one having lacked a convincing consensus. They offer sacrifices and rejoice together. The prophet Samuel then delivers a talk: he asks the people to testify that he never committed crimes against the people, and they confirm. He discusses how G-d saved and aided them every step of the way and chastises them for wanting a flesh and blood king. He assures them that G-d will be with them if they follow in His ways, and of the consequences they will face if they do not follow G-d's word.

To underscore the seriousness of his words, Samuel asks G-d to send a thunderstorm, although it was not the rainy season. The Jewish people got the message and asked Samuel to intercede on their behalf and to have the thunderstorm cease.

The haftorah ends with a reassurance: "For G-d will not forsake His people for His great name's sake; for G-d has sworn to make you a people for Himself."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Servant Leadership (Korach 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/korach-5781/>

"You have gone too far! The whole community are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above God's congregation?" (Num. 16:3).

What exactly was wrong in what Korach and his motley band of fellow agitators said? We know that Korach was a demagogue, not a democrat. He wanted power for himself, not for the people. We know also that the protestors were disingenuous. Each had their own reasons to feel resentful toward Moses or Aaron or fate. Set these considerations aside for a moment and ask: was what they said true or false? They were surely right to say, "All the congregation are holy." That, after all, is what God asked the people to be: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, meaning, a kingdom all of whose members are (in some sense) priests, and a nation all of whose citizens are holy.[1]

They were equally right to say, "God is with them." That was the point of the making of the Tabernacle: "Have them make My Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8). Exodus ends with these words: "So the Cloud of the Lord was over the Tabernacle by day, and fire was in the Cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels" (Ex. 40:38). The Divine Presence was visibly with the people wherever they went.

What was wrong was their last remark: "Why then do you set yourselves above God's congregation?" This was not a small mistake. It was a fundamental one. Moses represents the birth of a new kind of leadership. That is what Korach and his followers did not understand. Many of us do not understand it still.

The most famous buildings in the ancient world were the Mesopotamian ziggurats and Egyptian pyramids. These were more than just buildings. They were statements in stone of a hierarchical social order. They were wide at the base and narrow at the top. At the top was the King or Pharaoh – at the point, so it was believed, where heaven and earth met. Beneath was a series of elites, and beneath them the labouring masses.

This was believed to be not just one way of organising a society but the only way. The very universe was organised on this principle, as was the rest of life. The sun ruled the heavens. The lion ruled the animal kingdom. The king ruled the nation. That is how it was in nature. That is how it must always be. Some are born to rule, others to be ruled.[2]

Judaism is a protest against this kind of hierarchy. Every human being, not just the king, is in the image and likeness of God. Therefore no one is entitled to rule over any other without their assent. There is still a need for leadership, because without a conductor an orchestra would lapse into discord. Without a captain a team might have brilliant players and yet not be a team. Without generals, an army would be a mob. Without government, a nation would lapse into anarchy. "In those days there was no King in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 17:6, 21:25).

In a social order in which everyone has equal dignity in the eyes of Heaven, a leader does not stand above the people. They serve the people, and they serve God. The great symbol of biblical Israel, the menorah, is an inverted pyramid or ziggurat, broad at the top, narrow at the base. The greatest leader is therefore the most humble. "Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).

The name given to this is servant leadership,[3] and its origin is in the Torah. The highest accolade given to Moses is that he was "the servant of the Lord" (Deut. 34:5). Moses is given this title eighteen times in Tanach. Only one other leader merits the same description: Joshua, who is described this way twice.

No less fascinating is the fact that only one person in the Torah is commanded to be humble, namely the King:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical Priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites. (Deut. 17:18-20)

This is how Maimonides describes the proper conduct of a King:

Just as the Torah has granted him the great honour and obligated everyone to revere him, so too it has commanded him to be lowly and empty at heart, as it says: 'My heart is a void within me' (Pa. 109:22). Nor should he treat Israel with overbearing haughtiness, as it says, 'he should not consider himself better than his fellows' (Deut. 17:20).

He should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honour of even the humblest of people.

When he speaks to the people as a community, he should speak gently, as in 'Listen my brothers and my people...' (King David's words in I Chronicles 28:2). Similarly, I Kings 12:7 states, 'If today you will be a servant to these people...'

He should always conduct himself with great humility. There is none greater than Moses, our teacher. Yet, he said: ‘What are we? Your complaints are not against us’ (Ex. 16:8). He should bear the nation’s difficulties, burdens, complaints and anger as a nurse carries an infant.[4]

The same applies to all positions of leadership. Maimonides lists among those who have no share in the world to come, someone who “imposes a rule of fear on the community, not for the sake of Heaven.” Such a person “rules over a community by force, so that people are greatly afraid and terrified of him,” doing so “for his own glory and personal interests.” Maimonides adds to this last phrase: “like heathen kings.”[5] The polemical intent is clear. It is not that no one behaves this way. It is that this is not a Jewish way to behave.

When Rabban Gamliel acted in what his colleagues saw as a high-handed manner, he was deposed as Nasi, head of the community, until he acknowledged his fault and apologised.[6] Rabban Gamliel learned the lesson. He later said to two people who declined his offer to accept positions of leadership: ‘Do you think I am giving you a position of honour [serarah]? I am giving you the chance to serve [avdut].’[7] As Martin Luther King once said “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve.”[8]

C. S. Lewis rightly defined humility not as thinking less of yourself but as thinking of yourself less. The great leaders respect others. They honour them, lift them, inspire them to reach heights they might never have done otherwise. They are motivated by ideals, not by personal ambition. They do not succumb to the arrogance of power.

Sometimes the worst mistakes we make are when we project our feelings onto others. Korach was an ambitious man, so he saw Moses and Aaron as two people driven by ambition, “setting themselves above God’s congregation.” He did not understand that in Judaism to lead is to serve. **Those who serve do not lift themselves high. They lift other people high.** [1] Some suggest that their mistake was to say, “all the congregation are holy” (kulam kedoshim), instead of “all the congregation is holy” (kula kedoshah). The holiness of the congregation is collective rather than individual. Others say that they should have said, “is called on to be holy” rather than “is holy”. Holiness is a vocation, not a state.

[2] Aristotle, Politics, Book 1, 1254a21-24. [3] The well-known text on this theme is Robert K Greenleaf, Servant leadership: a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness, New York, Paulist Press, 1977. Greenleaf does not, however, locate this idea in Torah. Hence it is important to see that it was born here, with Moses. [4] Hilchot Melachim 2:6. [5] Hilchot Teshuvah 3:13.

[6] [Brachot 27b](#) [7] Horayot 10a-b. [8] Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (Oslo, Norway, December 10, 1964).

[6] [Brachot 27b](#) [7] Horayot 10a-b. [8] Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (Oslo, Norway, December 10, 1964).

The Truth About Power and Divine Service: What Korach Didn't Understand by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatKorach5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=132403248&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-9HTb14-xdKKp7j37Y5KJcOyNC-EtLga4UeQq7Z3rEUIkEc9-ixw-C_rgWKhaw1-fJd-YhoGm3dRm3GOzBw_BY2gLWjSw&utm_content=132403248&utm_source=hs_email

Believe it or not, a large number of Israelites did not get what Moses and Aaron's leadership was all about. It is hard to imagine hitting a lower point than last *parashah's* spy mission disaster, the decree that the Exodus generation will die in the desert, and followed by a trouncing by local tribes in the abortive invasion of Canaan. Yet for Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher, this *parashah's* Korah rebellion hits a personal low, precisely because the rebels degrade and trivialize what Moses has been doing. Our *parashah* tells the story that dramatizes Moses and Aaron versus Korah and his company as a core conflict about the nature of divine service.

Korah claims that it is all about the power and prestige of standing before God in the tabernacle. Everyone is holy and addressed by God so anyone could be serving in the tabernacle (Numbers 16:3). All Moses is doing is taking the glory for himself. Anyone can offer incense before God; therefore, in handing this task over to Aaron, Moses is just exercising nepotism, keeping the official standing and the income from priestly emoluments in the family. Not to put too fine a point on it, Dathan and Abiram, Korah's allies, say that Moses swindled the people, falsely promising to take them to a land of milk and honey (16:12-14). The whole system that he set up is corrupt. Moses' indignant denial that he ever took anything from people—not even the use of a donkey—is dismissed by them (16:15). They insist that he is a leader on the take.

Moses tries to persuade Korah that prophetic and priestly service is not about public display or social standing, nor is the incense offering a show gesture carrying social prestige and status (16:9). The leadership role is about connecting to God, while protecting the people lest the divine energy overflow and hurt or even kill them.¹ The incense offering too is a shield which makes encounter with the presence of the invisible God possible.² Thus, the increase in life, which makes the tabernacle a zone of holiness, is upheld.³

Korah and his allies mock this explanation, and insist that all 250 of them can do the incense offering just as well as Aaron and the priests. So a "competition" is set up for the morning (16:6-7). The 250 and Korah will set up their incense firepans, alongside Aaron and the priests. The outcome will show that anyone can offer incense—or not. Korah and his allies gather a huge crowd around them and corner Moses and Aaron (16:19).⁴ The crowd insists that it is all a matter of power. Moses and Aaron should give up the monopoly and the power should be shared equally by everyone. God appears threatening to wipe out the whole crowd (16:21). Moses

pleads to God to spare them (16:22). The crowd is just following Korah and his allies out of despair and inability to adjust to the decree of doom. They have lost sight of their having undertaken the covenantal mission and forgotten Moses' role as Rabbeinu—as teacher, as moral educator, as protector. Deal with Korah and his allies and the clarity of the mission and the vision of acquiring a homeland will be restored. When Korah and his allies are rebuffed, the crowd will realize that it is not a matter of substituting one group of grifters for another.

Then Moses tells the people to step back (16:26). It is time to reclaim the broader vision and purpose that drives them. When Korah and his allies are rejected, they will realize that Moses is on a mission from God. They will regain the clarity of purpose that they are all struggling to live up to a higher cause, and that they still have a generational task before them, even if it is no longer to conquer the homeland.

There is a swift stunning denouement. A vast sinkhole opens and swallows up Korah and company (16:31-33). Then, a fire flashes back from the tabernacle and burns up all the incense fire makers (16:35).⁵ Tragically, heartbreakingly, Moses and Aaron are validated but at a cost of many lives.

The Israelites do finally grasp that Moses and Aaron are on the line not for pride or pomp, but to protect them and to channel the divine energy toward life. This is evidenced by Aaron's actions during the subsequent plague. He carries the burning incense and stands between the dying and the living and thus check the plague (17:12-13). The very incense burning which Korah saw as a demonstration of status actually stops the death-dealing plague in its tracks. The message is that religious leadership is not about rituals honoring God or about personal standing, but about protecting life. The incense fire pans used illegitimately are fused into a cover for the altar to serve as a permanent reminder of the special use of incense for enhancing life rituals and not for pomp (17:2-3).

One more demonstration is set up. All tribal chieftains are asked to give over their rods, placed in the tabernacle alongside Aaron's rod (17:17-20). The next day Aaron's rod blossoms, giving forth flowers and yielding almonds (17:23). This is the signal that he is chosen for divine services. The message again is that the holy is not some reified divinity or awe; the holy is the growth factor, the proliferations of life, the movement toward filling the world with life. The Israelites now understand that Aaron and the Levites are role models who are representing the people and protecting their lives. Holy ones do not lord it over anyone but work to honor the God of life and uplift the life of all people.

Now they all—Moses, Aaron and the people—can turn to the unfinished task of raising a generation capable of conquering a homeland, creating a covenantal society dedicated to life, realizing the dignities of all in a just and peaceful society.

¹ For these aspects of Moses' leadership, see my essay on Parashat Shelah, "Mediating Between the Divine and the Human: The Prophet's Other Central Role," available here: <http://hadar.org/torah->

resource/mediating-between-divine-and-human. 2 See Leviticus 16:3: “He (the high priest) will put the incense on the fire before God and the cloud of incense will cover the ark covering... and he will not die.” 3 See my earlier essays on Parashat Tetzaveh, “On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life,” available here: <http://hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>; and on Parashat Tazria-Metzora, “Purity-Impurity: A Code of Life and Death,” available here: <http://hadar.org/torah-resource/purity-impurity-code-life-and-death>. 4 Note the menacing “he (Korah) gathered all the community against them (Moses and Aaron).” 5 Even as Nadab and Abihu were consumed by the reciprocal fire that flashed against their foreign flames (Leviticus 10:1-3).

[Korah Had Options And So Do We by Stephanie Ruskay](https://www.jtsa.edu/korah-had-options-and-so-do-we)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/korah-had-options-and-so-do-we>

Korah is most famous for challenging Moses’s authority, framing rebellion in the guise of populism, and calling on Moses to share power and religious titles. The Rabbis understand Korah’s call for shared leadership and responsibility as a selfish desire to see himself awarded the role of the kohen gadol. He did not actually want “people” to have power; rather, he personally wanted authority and prestige and framed rebellion as something he was doing for the greater good.

Aren’t we all sometimes susceptible to wanting power and authority for selfish and ego-driven reasons? Isn’t it difficult to know if our ideas about how our communities, institutions, country, and world function are motivated by a commitment to justice or a desire to be the one leading?

The Rabbis are quick to recognize that ego and drive are not entirely bad. We learn in the Talmud (BT Yoma 69b and in Genesis Rabba 9:7) that without ego, drive, and the evil inclination, we would neither create nor advance. We would still be stuck in the Garden of Eden and procreation would cease.

There was, however, a quality to Korah’s drive that the rabbis refer to as jealousy and warn of as a liability. Rabbeinu Bahya on Bemidbar 16:1 describes Korah as “dressed” in jealousy. Rabbeinu Bahya explains that jealousy is a negative character trait for which there is no therapy. He asserts that when one makes choices motivated by insatiable jealousy, even if they achieve what they sought, they remain unhappy. They have accustomed themselves to act in a scheming fashion.

This has been a polarizing year for our society. Many of our systems are broken. Times such as these call on each of us to actively participate in building the kind of society in which we feel called to live. I have been inspired by the Mussar tradition as I consider how to react and I have also wondered how the Korah story might have ended differently, had he been a Mussar practitioner.

The Mussar tradition suggests that a regular practice of meditation and soul-refinement exercises can help us discern if our interest in reform or revolution is motivated by a desire to aggrandize ourselves or by a more grounded desire for

making the world whole.

Author David Jaffe in his book *Changing the World from the Inside Out* shares Mussar suggestions for regular discernment. The following are practices that in my imagination could have yielded different outcomes for Korah and his followers.

Hitbodedut is the practice of regularly speaking from the heart in one's own language directly to God. The act of pouring out one's soul can reduce the toxic emotions we carry around and allow us to feel and name what is most important to us—our true desire. If Korah had engaged in hitbodedut, he could have given voice to his envy and acknowledged his fervent desire for more power and prestige. He would then have opportunities for both inner and outer work. He could have identified a position of leadership that was not yet occupied. And he could have worked to confront his desire for attention. By articulating to God his jealousy of Aaron's role as the High Priest, he might have alleviated some of the sting and freed himself up for creative work.

Kibbush Hayetzer is conquering your inclination and transforming it through practice. Through this practice, we acknowledge the urges we have and then we choose not to act on them. Through hitbodedut Korah could have given voice to his desire to become the High Priest and his disappointment that Moses and Aaron had the highest honors. He then could have conquered this desire by choosing not to act upon that disappointment. By repeatedly engaging in kibbush hayetzer and choosing not to act on the impulse to lash out, he would improve his chances of minimizing his jealousy.

In Mussar we learn that everybody always has some sort of choice. Developing a behira (choice) practice allows you to keep spotting and making choices that bring you closer to God and closer to who you want to be in the world. The more frequently you recognize opportunities to choose, the more you shape your path and orient it toward service to God. Korah had several choice points, however he mainly did not recognize them as choices. Identifying these moments as choices and then choosing different reactions could have led him to a different outcome that did not involve being swallowed up by the earth, along with his followers.

We learn in *Ethics of the Fathers* 2:4 that we should not separate ourselves from the community. Korah did separate himself and he took 250 leaders of the community with him. Instead of fomenting rebellion, he could have gathered those people and asked them what keeps them up at night. It is possible that as he heard people's troubles he would have reconsidered whether his own trouble—that he was not the kohen gadol—was a cause worthy of rebellion. He was envious, but was that real trouble? Instead of separating himself and privileging his own needs, he could have strived to gain a fuller perspective of the community's needs and acted for the greater good.

Moses also offers us an opportunity for Mussar learning in this parashah. When

Korah challenges him for taking too much power for himself, Moses's first reaction is to fall upon his face humbly. Later in the parashah he does not act quite as nobly, urging God to punish Korah and his supporters in a public and deadly spectacle. Moses's choice to urge God to act that way was likely driven by his ego. According to the Mussar tradition, well-cultivated humility means knowing when and how to make oneself small, and when and how to act boldly. Korah seems to lack humility entirely in the story as we know it. Moses has it, but it is a practice, and in this story, we see him model it both well and poorly.

We are living at a time with numerous threats and challenges and each of us must be involved in repairing the world. Informed by Korah and his followers and Moses, I invite us to ask ourselves the following questions daily:

- What is really in my heart? Have I communicated it in conversation with God, laying my heart bare and honestly speaking my yearnings into being? Hopefully, this naming of feelings and motivations will take away some of the power of the hardest ones. It will also reveal the feelings on which we need to work because they do not represent our best selves. Finally, it will clarify what is in our hearts at the core, on which we can act.
- Did I regularly make choices today that advance my connection to God?
- How am I managing humility?

May the Mussar lessons we learn from Korah and his followers, as well as Moses, help us to know ourselves and summon our best intentions and skills to create a just world. *(Stephanie Rsukay is Associate Dean at the Rabbinical School, JTS)*

[Reigniting the Spark of Community by Rabbi Alex Kress](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/reigniting-spark-community)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/reigniting-spark-community>

Before the pandemic, I took so much for granted: hugging friends, visiting family, singing at concerts, eating at restaurants, going anywhere I desired. The virus flipped our world upside down and forced us apart from the people and spaces that fill our lives with love, sustenance, purpose, and energy. I am grateful to live in a time with technology that allows us to stay hyper-connected, but screens have not replicated what I missed most – my Jewish community.

Zoom did not nearly replace the spiritual energy I receive when gathering in temple to worship, sing, learn, and eat bad oneg cookies together. I miss the laughter and handshakes and hugs. I miss the highs of lifting each other up on chairs in celebration and the lows of carrying each other through suffering. Fundamentally, I miss Jewish life.

This experience brought new meaning to the words of the first-century sage Hillel: “Do not separate yourself from the community” (Pirkei Avot 2:4). I always thought of this teaching as an obligation to sustain the community, not the self, but the pandemic has made me rethink that assumption

In Parashat Korach, we read of the dynamic between individuals and their

community. Korach leads a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, charging them with the crime of separating and elevating themselves from the community. “You have gone too far!” the rebels accuse. “For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the congregation of God?” (Numbers 16:3). Though God quashes Korach’s rebellion and the earth “swallows [the rebels] up,” his false accusations regarding the relationship between the individual and the community are not totally without merit. Every individual is holy, and God is found when we gather in community.

Speaking to this dynamic, the 20th-century commentator Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik asks: “

“Does the individual stand above the community which should serve its needs, or should the individual subordinate himself to the community's needs?”

To answer this question, Rabbi Soloveitchik uses the story of Moses as a paradigm. He notes that the sages compare the worth of Moses to the entirety of the Israelite men. Yet when the Israelites sinned by fashioning the Golden Calf, Moses is reduced to their sinful status. Rabbi Soloveitchik’s interpretation of this seeming contradiction is that it “seems that the community and the individual are placed in balance with each other and are interdependent” (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, pp. 114-115).

It is not simply the extremes of Moses’ righteousness compared with the sin of the Israelite community that highlight this relationship. I found it in the slow depletion of my spirituality in the absence of singing, gathering, and learning in community. I felt it while singing muted on Zoom instead of experiencing the cacophony of all the other holy (and often atonal) voices. I experienced it while crying on Zoom, thousands of miles away from friends, welcoming their newborns into the covenant. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and while that’s true, the absence of physical Jewish community weighed heavily on my emotional and spiritual wellbeing in a way I never previously understood.

After the earth swallows Korach and his rebels, a plague breaks out in the camp. The Torah tells us that Aaron “stood between the dead and the living until the plague was checked” (Numbers 17:13). After shouldering the weight of fear, rebellion, and plague, Aaron goes straight to the Tent of Meeting, the place where Israelites convened to worship. He returns to sacred space, full of ritual and connection. Aaron’s actions after the plague read like an instructive for us to return en masse to our Jewish communities once it is safe to do so.

We have all experienced and dealt with the massive trauma of COVID-19 in different ways, and no panacea could possibly mend our individual and communal brokenness. Yet, the Torah urges us to show up. Show up spiritually at services, even after an exhausting week. Show up righteously to seek justice, even when you just want to collapse on the couch. Show up socially, even when you don't want to see other people.

The 20th-century philosopher Martin Buber teaches that God is the electricity that surges between people who relate to each other humanly – and I think we could all use that spark. (*Rabbi Alex Kress is the incoming rabbi in Santa Monica, CA.*)

Korach's Challenge: The Balance Between Humility and Arrogance by Rabbi Lisa Grushcow

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/korachs-challenge-balance-between-humility-and-arrogance>

Korach is easily caricatured. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the 1st century CE, paints the picture well:

Korach, a Hebrew of principal account, both by his family and by his wealth; one that was also able to speak well; and one that could easily persuade the people by his speeches; saw that Moses was in an exceeding great dignity, and was uneasy at it, and envied him on that account. He of the same tribe with Moses, and of kin to him. He was particularly grieved because he thought he better deserved that honourable post, on account of his great riches; and not inferior to him in his birth. (Antiquities of the Jews, 4:2)

In the biblical text of Parashat Korach and in much of the Jewish interpretive tradition, Korach is a jealous demagogue, stirring up rebellion against Moses and Aaron in the desert. Having challenged Moses and Aaron's leadership, he agrees to the "Great Israelite Bake Off": Korach and his followers are to offer incense on fire pans, alongside Moses and Aaron — and God's acceptance will show the chosen leader. Not surprisingly, Moses and Aaron win; Korach and his followers (along with Dathan and Abiram and their followers — we seem to have two rebellion stories here) — are either consumed by fire or swallowed up by the earth. God strikes the people with a plague, Aaron bravely intervenes, and the people stop complaining — at least until the next parashah.

We could easily compare Korach to flawed would-be leaders of our own time, pretending to be speaking for the people while really grasping for power themselves. But Korach's rebellion is the most famous of the Book of Numbers, and perhaps the entire Torah. Moses and Aaron take this rebellion seriously, as does God. So much so, that the rebels' fire pans are hammered down to make a metal plating for the altar, integrated as a sign for all time (Numbers 17:3). What is the deeper nature of the challenge that Korach poses and what is it supposed to teach us?

An excursion into another field might shed some light. Many rabbis come from a long line of rabbis. I come from a line of engineers. My earliest memories include seeing a thin iron ring on my father's pinky finger, as a marker of his professional status; and to this day I feel a kinship with anyone I meet who wears one. These rings are particular to Canadian engineers. The institution goes back to 1922, following a Canadian bridge disaster in which 75 people died due to an error of design. Legend has it that the rings were made from the metal of that collapsed

bridge, and Rudyard Kipling was called upon to write an “Oath of Obligation,” to be said by new graduates when receiving their rings. In taking on this obligation, the engineers commit to avoiding, “Bad Workmanship or Faulty Material in aught that concerns my works before mankind as an Engineer, or in my dealings with my own Soul before my Maker.” There is also a commitment to “strive my utmost against jealousy or the belittling of my working-colleagues in any field of their labour.” Finally, the engineers ask forgiveness for any future failings, “praying that in the hour of my temptations, weakness and weariness, the memory of this my Obligation and of the company before whom it was entered into, may return to me to aid, comfort, and restrain.” The rings are meant to remind them of this obligation. I quote this at length because I think it speaks directly to the double challenge posed by Korach. First, Korach claims to have achieved perfection: “all the community are holy” (Numbers 16:3). The Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz¹ aptly notes that Korach confuses achievement with aspiration; he does not understand that holiness is a process, and perfection is perpetually around the corner and just beyond our grasp. Second, Korach is motivated by, and feeds into, jealousy of Moses and Aaron: “Why then do you raise yourselves above the Eternal’s congregation?” (Numbers 16:3). He sees leadership as a right rather than as a responsibility (though at this point in the narrative, it is hard to imagine anyone wanting Moses’ job). Korach is in dire need of the engineer’s iron ring, to remind him both of his own fallibility, and the need to resist jealousy.

In contrast, Moses and Aaron exhibit true leadership. When Korach accuses him, Moses falls on his face. According to Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi,² he does this, “to examine whether the accusations against him had any basis.” And Aaron, when facing a plague resulting from God’s anger at the uprising against him and his brother, takes his fire pan in hand once more, not to defend his authority but to defend his people.

It is easy to demonize Korach and valorize Moses and Aaron. But Rabbi Rachel Cowan³ suggests that each of us “live with an ongoing conflict between an ‘inner Moses’ and an ‘inner Korach’ — between humility and arrogance, between selflessness and selfishness.” It is for this reason that the fire pans are incorporated into the altar as a reminder: to keep us from the arrogance of assuming that we are immune to arrogance! As the poem that follows Cowan’s essay so evocatively reads:

Moses sure of God’s voice
and Korach sure of his own —
each trying to tell the difference
between arrogance
and righteous anger —
a line so thin
thin as a flame

in a fire pan.

(Laurie Patton, in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p.913)

My teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, writes:

The plating on the altar, then, is not simply a reminder of Korach's sin. It is even more a reminder of the sin that lurks in the heart of the pious within all of us, a perpetual warning that it is not at all clear who is the saint and who is the sinner, that each of us is both saint and sinner, and the line separating the two is very murky indeed. (Gillman, *Traces of God* [Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2006], p.24)

Or, as my father wisely put it when I asked him to share with me what he remembered about the engineer's ring: "The fact that I'm certain doesn't mean that I'm correct." A good lesson for Korach, and for us all.

1. Cited in Shai Held, *The Heart of Torah*, v.2 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press; Philadelphia: JPS, 2017), p.139 2. Aharon Yaakov Greenberg compiled, quoted from Tanya, in *Torah Gems* v.3 (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1998), p.84 3. Rabbi Rachel Cowan, in Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ed., Andrea L. Weiss, assoc. ed., *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (NY: WRJ and URJ Press, 2008), p. 911

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Yahrtzeits

Ilisia Kissner remembers her father Jack C. Snyder (Yaakov ben Kalman v'Leah) on Sunday June 13th (Tamuz 3).

Coming Up At Kol Rina

Brunch-and-Learn, Sunday, June 13, via Zoom

Please join us on Sunday morning, June 13 at 10:30, when Dr. Michael Cohen will speak on "The Jewish Experience in the American South: How and Why Jews Settled in the Antebellum South and What Kept Them There." Dr. Cohen is Chair of the Jewish Studies Department of Tulane University. Bring your own brunch, and be prepared to learn about a facet of American Jewish life that is much less familiar to most of us than the Jewish communities of the Northeast.

Use the following link to register for the program through Eventbrite:
<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/157618893353>

Monday evening minyan via Zoom, June 14

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place on Monday, June 14, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

Meeting ID: 976 6398 7468

Password: 080691

Annual Meeting, Wednesday, June 16*

All voting members of Kol Rina are urged to attend the Annual Meeting, which will take place via Zoom on Wednesday, June 16, beginning at 7:00 pm. As we will need a quorum in order to elect officers and Board members, and to enact amendments to the By-Laws, and to adopt a budget, your attendance is very important. Please plan on attending if at all possible.

Use the following zoom link to attend:

[https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86457774020?
pwd=Vnh4S0dBNUJnZjVPa0dwbFF1R2swZz09](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86457774020?pwd=Vnh4S0dBNUJnZjVPa0dwbFF1R2swZz09)

Meeting ID: 864 5777 4020

Passcode: 966410