

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Korach had a point. "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Num. 16: 3). At the heart of his challenge is the idea of equality. That surely is a Jewish idea. Was not Thomas Jefferson at his most biblical when he wrote, in the Declaration of Independence, that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"?

Of course, Korach does not mean what he says. He claims to be opposed to the very institution of leadership, and at the same time he wants to be the leader. "All are equal, but some are more equal than others" is the seventh command in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, his critique of Stalinist Russia. But what if Korach had meant it? If he had been sincere?

There is, on the face of it, compelling logic to what he says. Did God not call on Israel to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," meaning a kingdom each of whose members is a priest, a nation all of whose citizens are holy? Why then should there be a cadre of priests and one High Priest?

Did not the military hero Gideon say, in the era of the judges, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8: 23)?

Why then should there be a single life-appointed Moses-type leader rather than what happened in the days of the judges, namely charismatic figures who led the people through a particular crisis and then went back to their previous anonymity, as Caleb and Pinchas did during the lifetime of Moses? Surely the people needed no other leader than God Himself?

Did not Samuel warn the people of the dangers of appointing a king? "He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots ... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves ... When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day" (1 Sam. 8: 11-18). This is the biblical anticipation of Lord Acton's famous remark that all power tends to corrupt. Why then give individuals the power Moses and Aaron in their different ways seemed to have?

The Midrash Tanhuma, quoted by Rashi, contains a brilliant commentary on Korach's claim. It says that Korach gathered his co-conspirators and issued Moses a challenge in the form of a halakhic question:

He dressed them with cloaks made entirely of blue wool. They came and stood before Moses and asked him, "Does a cloak made entirely of blue wool require fringes [tzitzit], or is it exempt?" He replied, "It does require [fringes]." They began laughing at him [saying], "Is it possible that a cloak of another [colored] material, one string of blue wool exempts it [from the obligation of techeleth], and this one, which is made entirely of blue wool, should not exempt itself?" (Tanhuma, Korach 4; Rashi to Num. 16: 1)

What makes this comment brilliant is that it does two things. First it establishes a connection between the episode of Korach and the immediately preceding passage, the law of tzitzit at the end of last week's parsha. That is the superficial point. The deep one is that the Midrash deftly shows how Korach challenged the basis of Moses' and Aaron's leadership. The Israelites were "all holy; and God is among them." They were like a robe, every thread of which is royal blue. And just as a blue robe does not need an additional fringe to make it bluer still, so a holy people does not need extra holy people like Moses and Aaron to make it holier still. The idea of a leadership hierarchy in "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is a contradiction in terms. Everyone is like a priest. Everyone is holy. Everyone is equal in dignity before God. Hierarchy has no place in such a nation.

What then did Korach get wrong? The answer is contained in the second half of his challenge: "Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" Korach's mistake was to see leadership in terms of status. A leader is one higher than the rest: the alpha male, the top dog, the controller, director, dominator, the one before whom people prostrate themselves, the ruler, the commander, the superior, the one to whom others defer. That is what leaders are in hierarchical societies. That is what Korach implied by saying that Aaron and Moses were "setting themselves above" the people.

But that is not what leadership is in the Torah, and we have had many hints of it already. Of Moses it says that "he was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12: 3).

Of Aaron and the priests, in their capacity as those who blessed the people, it says "So they will put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them (Num. 6: 27). In other words the priests were mere vehicles through which the divine force flowed. Neither priest nor prophet had personal power or authority. They were transmitters of a word not their own. The prophet spoke the word of God for this time. The priest spoke the word of God for all time. But neither was author of the word. That is why humility was not an accident of their personalities but of the essence of their role.

Even the slightest hint that they were exercising their own authority, speaking their own word or doing their own deed, immediately invalidated them. That, in fact, is what sealed the fate of Moses and Aaron later, when the people complained and they said, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (Num. 20: 10). There are many interpretations of what went wrong on that occasion but one, undeniably, is that they attributed the action to themselves rather than God (see Hizkuni ad loc.).

Even a king in Jewish law - the office that comes closest to status - is commanded to be humble. He is to carry a Torah scroll with him and 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: 19-20; and see Maimonides, Laws of Kings, 2: 6).

In Judaism leadership is not a matter of status but of function. A leader is not one who holds himself higher than those he or she leads. That, in Judaism, is a moral failing not a mark of stature. The absence of hierarchy does not mean the absence of leadership. An orchestra still needs a conductor. A play still needs a director. A team still needs a captain.

A leader need not be a better instrumentalist, actor or player than those he leads. His role is different. He must co-ordinate, give structure and shape to the enterprise, make sure that everyone is following the same script, travelling in the same direction, acting as an ensemble rather than a group of prima donnas. He has to have a vision and communicate it. At times he has to impose discipline. Without leadership even the most glittering array of talents produces, not music but noise. That is not unknown in Jewish life, then and now. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17: 6, 21: 25). That is what happens when there is no leadership.

The Torah, and Tanakh as a whole, has a marvellous, memorable way of putting this. Moses' highest honour is that he is called *eved Hashem*, "the servant of God." He is called this, once on his death (Deut. 34: 5), and no less than eighteen times in Tanakh as a whole. The only other person given this title is Joshua, twice. In Judaism, a leader is a servant

and to lead is to serve. Anything else is not leadership as Judaism understands it.

Note that we are all God's servants. The Torah says so: "To Me the Israelites are servants; they are My servants whom I brought out of Egypt" (Lev 25: 55). So it is not that Moses was a different kind of being than we are all called on to be. It is that he epitomised it to the utmost degree. The less there is of self in one who serves God, the more there is of God. Moses was the supreme exemplar of Rabbi Johanan's principle, that "Where you find humility, there you find greatness."

It is one of the sadder features of Judaism we tend to forget that many of the great ideas appropriated by others are in fact ours. So it is with "servant leadership," the phrase and theory associated with Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990). Greenleaf himself derived it from a novel by Hermann Hesse with Buddhist undertones, and in fact the Jewish concept is different from his. Greenleaf held that the leader is the servant of those he leads. In Judaism a leader is the servant of God, not of the people; but neither is he their master. Only God is that. Nor is he above them: he and they are equal. He is simply their teacher, guide, advocate and defender. His task is to remind them endlessly of their vocation and inspire them to be true to it.

In Judaism leadership is not about popularity: "If a scholar is loved by the people of his town, it is not because he is gifted but because he fails to rebuke them in matters of heaven" (Ketubot 105b). Nor is a true leader eager for the job. Almost without exception the great leaders of Tanakh were reluctant to assume the mantle of leadership. Rabban Gamliel summed it up when he said to two sages he wanted to appoint to office: "Do you imagine I am offering you rulership? I am offering you *avdut*, the chance to serve" (Horayot 10a-b).

That, then, was Korach's mistake. He thought leaders were those who set themselves above the congregation. He was right to say that has no place in Judaism. We are all called on to be God's servants. Leadership is not about status but function. Without *tzitzit*, a blue robe is just a robe, not a holy garment. Without leadership, the Jewish people is just a people, an ethnic group, not a holy nation. And reminders that we are a holy nation, who then will we become, and why? *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“The entire congregation is holy.” (Numbers 16:3) Korach stages a rebellion against Moses; hence he is the adversary and antithesis to Moses, pictured by the subsequent sages and

commentaries as the personification of a unique evil in the world. But unlike the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Korach stands tall not only with two legs, but with a powerful and convincing argument as well: a position which echoes throughout history.

Korach says to Moses and Aaron, "You have gone too far. The entire congregation is holy, and has God in their midst. Why are you setting yourselves above God's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3). After all, on the surface his argument appears to be both logical and just.

Indeed, did not Moses himself command the nation, "You shall become holy" (Leviticus 19:2)? And the Korach Defense Committee would maintain that if, in fact, everyone is equally holy, leadership becomes a mere function of opportunity; affirmative action must become the order of the day. The era of the old guard rule (Moses' family) must come to an end; Korach's family must be given its chance to express its inherent holiness!

True, God revealed Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush, and spoke directly only to him; but perhaps, if Korach had been raised in the palace of the pharaohs, and if he had had the opportunity as a free man of princely background to slay the Egyptian taskmasters, undoubtedly God would be speaking to him as well. After all, we are all holy! It's just that some have received more special opportunities than others!

On the surface, Korach's words contain a glib truth. In reality, however, Korach and Moses represent two different ways of looking at the world, two different philosophies of life. When Moses brought down the Torah on Sinai, God did not declare everyone to be holy; after all, He created a world in which Cain had killed Abel and Pharaoh had enslaved an entire nation. What God did do was to place into the world the possibility of achieving holiness. "You shall become holy," he commanded – in future tense, in potential, and only by means of arduous commitment to a lifestyle of 613 commandments.

"All families of the earth shall be blessed by you" – but only if you live by My word and become a light unto the nations! "The formation of the heart of humanity is evil from its inception" – but since humanity is also created in the image of God, the evil can be overcome and holiness can reign supreme. However, this depends on how you live and how you act. "I have set before you this day life and death, good and evil. Choose life." Your deeds become the cardinal factor determining whether or not you've achieved holiness; meritocracy, not affirmative action, rules the day!

Now when Korach argued that everyone was holy, that he too could have achieved what Moses achieved had he only had the proper opportunity, was he defending holiness or uprooting holiness? After all, if everyone and everything is holy, then the word "holy" loses its meaning. By arguing for holiness in the way

that he did – holiness now – Korach was really arguing against holiness. We need not work for it, or strive to achieve it. We already are!

And perhaps this is why the Midrash pictures Korach as taunting Moses on the commandments of tzitzit (ritual fringes) and mezuzah, the two commandments dealing with the most basic human needs and expressions: clothing and shelter. Does a garment which is wholly tekhelet still require a thread of tekhelet in its ritual fringes? Does a house filled with Torah scrolls still require a mezuzah (which has only a small portion of a Torah scroll) on its doorpost? And when Moses replied in the affirmative, Korach laughed at the lack of logic in Moses' teaching!

But Korach missed the point. Moses was teaching that the human being must constantly strive to improve, to become more holy than he was before; humans must never dare rest on their laurels, because evil is always lying in wait to ensnare, even at the mouth of the grave. Hence even a house filled with Torah scrolls still requires a mezuzah at the front door, and even a garment which is wholly tekhelet still requires ritual fringes. Never be complacent, always remain on guard and strive to add another dose of sanctity.

The twentieth century had more than its share of "we are holy" philosophies, letting it all hang out, sanctifying every instinct and thought. It doesn't matter if it was Norman O. Brown or Herbert Marcuse of the Living Theater, the rage in the Western world has been to free the id from the prison of the superego, and if the id is holy, then everything must be holy. But behind such views of an "anything-goes" holiness, nothing goes. If everything is special, nothing is special.

Fundamentally, Korach was saying that "as is" is holy – because nothing can change, grow, or develop. And that is the meaning of Korach's name. The Hebrew root k-r-ch can either mean bald – and no hair grows on a bald head – or ice, and no vegetation developed during the Ice Age.

"As is his name, so is he." Korach rejected the command to become holy, the command of meritocracy, because he was cynically scornful of one's ability to grow and develop and change and inspire.

But Moses' (and God's) approach is different. When Moses announced to the rebels the means by which God would determine who was holy to Him, he had Korach and his men bring fire in the fire pans and offer incense. Fire symbolizes the possibility of change, but only after a specific process takes place: by means of heat, the hardest materials can be made to bend and melt, can be transformed from solid to liquid and to many states in between. Incense changes the environment; its sweet-smelling fragrance can remove the rancid odor of death and decay, can transform the slaughtered carcasses of the animal sacrifices into an experience of commitment to God which can perfect –

and perfume – the world. Moses' vision was one of optimistic faith, the rising flames which bring out the fragrance of the incense and soar heavenward to the divine. Material objects, humanity, the very world can be changed, elevated, sanctified – but it depends on merit, on commitment, on achievement!

Korach's punishment and death fit his crime and philosophy. Korach and his cohorts were swallowed alive by the earth. From the perspective of the earth and the grave, all who enter its bowels are equal. The earth makes no distinctions, remains oblivious to titles or accomplishments. The earth is the ultimate "equal-opportunity employer." After one is buried underground, there is no longer any possibility of change or growth.

The parsha's final proof that Aaron was the one chosen by God – and the symbolism which serves as the crowning proof of our thesis – involves the command to write the names of each of the tribes' leaders on twelve staffs, to be placed in the Tent of Communion before the Ark of Testimony. The next day Aaron's staff, representing the house of Levi, had blossomed, giving forth leaves and almonds, as if it were a tree. And a tree is the most basic symbol of that which grows and develops. After this, God said to Moses that no one should ever again deny the authority of Aaron's priesthood. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar. © 2025 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) is of the general opinion that events, as recorded in the Torah, occurred in a linear timeline. This is in spite of the maxim that there is no late or early in the Torah. He limits that rule to certain halachic instances as they appear in the Talmud. Thus the story of Korach and his contest against Moshe that forms the central part of this week's parsha occurred after the tragedy of the spies and their negative report about the Land of Israel.

As I have commented before, the negative report of the spies was motivated, according to rabbinic opinion, by personal interests having no objective value as to the issue of the Land of Israel itself. So too, this uprising against Moshe led by Korach is also not an issue of justice or objective benefit to the people, but rather it is motivated purely by the personal issues and jealousies of Korach and his followers.

Both Korach and the spies masked their own personal drives for power and position with high-sounding principles of public good, social justice and

great concern for the future of the people of Israel. The very shrillness of their concern for the good of society itself calls attention to their true motives – they protested too much!

Pious disclaimers of any self-interest seem to always accompany those that clamor for social betterment and a more just society. But it is often personal ambition and the drive to acquire power over others that is the true face of these movements and individuals. All of the dictators of the past and present centuries promised great improvements for their peoples and countries and yet all, without exception, eventually only pursued their own personal gain and power. Always beware of those who speak in the name of the people. Most of the time they are only imitations of Korach.

This is perhaps an insight as to why Moshe took such a strong stand against Korach and demanded an exemplary punishment from Heaven. It is extremely difficult for humans to judge the true motives of others in their declarations and policies. Only Heaven, so to speak, can do so. Moshe's plea to Heaven is directed not only against the current Korach that he faces, but it is also against the constant recurrences of other Korachs throughout Jewish and world history.

Only a shocking miracle of the earth swallowing Korach and his followers and of a fire consuming those who dared to offer incense in place of Aharon, would impress the historical psyche of Israel, as to be wary of Korach's imitators through the ages.

There is an adage in Jewish life that one should always respect others but also be wary of their true motives. Only regarding Moshe does the Torah testify that as the true servant of God, he is above criticism and suspicion. But ordinary mortals have ordinary failings and self-interest is one of those failings. Moshe is true and his Torah is true. After that, no matter how fetching the slogan or how glorious the promise, caution and wariness about the person and cause being advocated are the proper attitudes to embrace. © 2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

From the time that Moses comes on the scene, he is under attack:

- When he breaks up a fight between Jews while still in Egypt, one turns to him and says, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us?" (Exodus 2:14).

- When it appears to the people that Moses descends from Sinai a bit late, they rebel and build the golden calf (Exodus 32:1).

- When Korach and his cohorts challenge Moses's

rule, the attacks culminate. In their words, "You take too much upon yourself" (Numbers 16:3).

Moses is brutally criticized despite all the good he does:

- In the Egypt incident, he is challenged a day after he raises a voice of moral conscience by courageously stopping the Egyptian who attacked a Jew.

- In the golden calf incident, he is challenged after becoming a leader of leaders by heroically taking his people out of Egypt and shepherding them to Sinai, where they hear the voice of God.

- In the Korach incident, he is challenged after the story of the spies, wherein he expressed unconditional love for his people by telling God that He must not destroy all of Israel for the sin of a relatively few rebels (Numbers 14:13–19). Moses makes a similar plea in the Korach episode (Numbers 16:20–22).

Other figures in Tanach were similarly challenged despite all they did for their people. King David, who defended the Jews against Goliath and the Philistines, and who liberated and united Jerusalem, suffers rebellion from within, first from his son Avshalom and then from Sheva ben Bichri (II Samuel 13, 20).

And after all Mordechai did to join Esther in saving his brethren, the Megillah concludes by telling us that Mordechai was ratzuy l'rov echav (favored by the majority of his brethren; Esther 10:3). In other words, a large minority opposed him.

Truthfully, strong leaders inevitably incur the wrath of some. A wise man taught me this lesson. On the day I left my first pulpit in St. Louis, he approached me and said, "Rabbi, I bless you that you should have many enemies." I looked at him, startled. "We've been close; why such a harsh blessing?"

"My words are meant as a berachah," he responded. "Remember, if you do nothing, you have no enemies. A sign that you're doing, that you're accomplishing, is that you have enemies."

No one was more loved than Moses. And yet, even Moses had his detractors. That's the price of strong leadership. As Rabbi Israel Salanter said: "A rabbi who is loved by everyone is not a rabbi, and a rabbi who is disliked by everyone is not a mensch." © 2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Guarding the Temple

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

G-d told Aharon, "Bring your fellow Levites from your ancestral tribe to join you and assist you when you and your sons minister before the Tent

of Meeting" (*Bamidbar* 18:2). What will you be doing there? You will be guarding the Temple. But why would G-d's Temple require guards? This "guarding" was to show the proper respect due to the Temple. In fact, this guard duty was considered one of the sacred services performed by the *Kohanim* and *Leviim*, and the *Kohanim* wore their priestly garments when they carried it out. (They would change out of the garments when sleeping between shifts, as it was forbidden to sleep while wearing them.) Since guard duty was considered a priestly service, some say that children could not take part in it, and that the watchmen had to be twenty or older. Even at the age of twenty, *Kohanim* and *Leviim* were not authorized to perform all the services, but they were permitted to do this.

Because guard duty was a type of divine service, it should have been performed while standing. However, because it was for an extended period of time, the watchmen were permitted to sit when they were tired (though not to sleep, of course). In general, sitting in the courtyard of the Temple was not allowed, but in this case it was allowed as it was to enable the proper guarding of the Temple.

There is a disagreement as to the extent of the guarding. The Rambam says it was done at night only. However, according to some commentaries on *Mishnah Tamid*, the guarding was done around the clock. Others distinguish between the different places that were guarded saying that some areas were guarded around the clock, while others were guarded only part of the time. Within this opinion, there is a disagreement about whether the part-time guarding was during the day or night. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Speak to the congregation, saying, "Arise from around the encampment of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram." (Bamidbar 16:24) Korach started a communist rebellion. He argued that Moshe and Aharon were too much of a "royal family" by keeping the various leadership roles for themselves. The Jews were all equally holy, he said, and did not need Moshe lording over them. Of course, the source of his rebellion was not fellowship but rather jealousy and a desire for his own power.

When the 250 men offered incense, it ignited Hashem's wrath. Hashem told Moshe and Aharon to step away from the others, so He might destroy them in an instant. Moshe pleaded, "Should one man sin and the entire congregation endure Your wrath?" To that, Hashem answered with these words. "Tell the nation to move from the vicinity of Korach, Dasan, and Aviram."

Korach had gathered all the people to watch the "show" so they might see Moshe embarrassed when Hashem accepted the offerings of the others. It was a moment of truth. Who was right, Moshe or

Korach?

At that moment, Hashem commanded, "Let everyone step away from Korach's group." Moshe had argued that Korach was the guilty party, not the whole of the Jewish People. Hashem's response was that until they took a stand and separated themselves from the guilty party, they were just as culpable as he was. It's not enough to be neutral. If you don't stand for good, you stand for evil. One must take an active position, and that's what Hashem wanted here. By virtue of stepping away from Korach, the people would show they disavowed him and what he stood for, and in that merit their lives were spared.

The Gemara in Avoda Zara (3a) tells us that at the end of days, the nations of the world will argue that if they had been given the Torah and Mitzvos, they would have fulfilled them. Hashem offers them an "easy mitzvah," Sukkah. It doesn't cost much, and you just sit there. The gentiles eagerly built the Sukkos on their roofs. Then, Hashem shined the summer sun on them, and they got too hot. They left the Sukkah, but not before they kicked it with enmity.

Homiletically, the mitzvah of Sukkah is one of peaceful inclusion, where all are welcome. Hashem gave this mitzvah to the world so they could show their tolerance. However, they weren't happy with it, and kicked the Sukkah as they left. This was an act that showed where they stood, and they couldn't argue.

Today, the world around us is becoming increasingly more anti-Jewish, and vociferously decrying our existence. To me, this is a sign that they are showing where they stand, kicking that Sukkah of peace, and soon, Hashem will spread His Sukkah of peace over Klal Yisrael, and leave the rest of the world out in the cold – where they have chosen to stand.

R' Paysach Krohn became a Mohel (ritual circumciser) at a young age and found it difficult at first to find work. Trying to support his widowed mother and orphaned siblings at the age of 21, he felt the strain of people not trusting his abilities because of his youth.

One day, a man approached him and said, "My wife is expecting. When she has a baby, YOU'RE going to do the bris!" R' Paysach got tremendous chizuk and encouragement from this and was able to push on and find opportunities to perform brissim.

A few months later, the fellow had a baby - a girl! R' Paysach was still grateful for the confidence the fellow had placed in him. He would later call it, "The greatest bris I never performed." © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Datan and Aviram

Our parasha begins with the rebellion of Korach and his followers. Korach was a Levi from the sub-family of Kahath, the same holy family as Moshe and Aharon. Nachshoni explains, "It was this

(the punishment given to the spies and to the people for accepting their negative report) which brought to the surface all the accumulated bitterness of the dissatisfied, who, until now, had not dared to come out against Moshe. Now they took advantage of this bitterness to settle accounts." Our Rabbis tell us that the rebellion that he led was a dispute caused by the fact that Moshe was the governmental leader of the people while his brother, Aharon, was the spiritual leader of the community. Korach wished to replace Aharon in his leadership role, partly because he believed that Moshe, not Hashem, had chosen Aharon to be the Kohein Gadol. Korach gathered with him other tribes who also believed that their leadership was passed over. Among this rebellious group were two men who rebelled against any leader that did not benefit them personally. These two men were Datan and Aviram, from the tribe of Reuvein.

The characters of Datan and Aviram are known from other places in the Torah, other rebellions and skirmishes with Moshe, although this is the only time that their names are mentioned directly. Midrashim have always assigned those "rebellions" caused by Datan and Aviram, though the Torah did not identify the people involved. The reason for the Midrashim assigning those other rebellions to Datan and Aviram is that the nature of these disputes are all the same, a disloyalty to Moshe and Hashem (or really any leader) when the situation or advice would not lead to their personal benefit.

The specific words of their conversations with Moshe during this rebellion are an indication of their behavior throughout the other incidents attributed to them. The first statement of the rebellion was not issued by Datan or Aviram, but it speaks to their own argument. The Torah states, "They (Korach's followers) gathered together against Moshe and against Aharon and said to them, 'It is much for you! For the entire assembly – all of them – are holy and Hashem is among them, so why do you exalt yourselves over the congregation of Hashem?'" The Ramban argues that Korach could not complain about losing status like the firstborn of each of the tribes, as he was a Levi, who replaced the firstborn in their service in the Temple. Korach wanted a greater leadership position since he believed that he was passed over when the leader of the Leviim was from his father's youngest son, Elitzaphan.

When Moshe tried to separate some of the rebels from Korach, since their complaints were inherently different than those of Korach, he first sent for Datan and Aviram. If we accept the interpretations of the Mishnah, Moshe already had experience with these two men (the two Jews who were fighting in Egypt, the complaints at the Red Sea, and the men placing the manna outside the camp on Shabbat to embarrass Moshe and make it appear that Moshe had

lied to the people). Datan and Aviram answered Moshe succinctly, "We shall not go up!" They continued, "Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to cause us to die in the Wilderness, yet you seek to dominate us, even to dominate further? Moreover, you did not bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor did you give us a heritage of field and vineyard! Even if you would put out the eyes of those men, we shall not go up."

This statement needs further analysis. According to the P'sikta, Datan and Aviram had become rich in Egypt and had received special treatment because of their collusion with the Egyptian leaders. Datan and Aviram, therefore, saw Egypt as a land of milk and honey for them. They also complained that Moshe did not bring them to a land of milk and honey because they were excluded from benefitting from the land together with the other men of the B'nei Yisrael because of listening to the spies mentioned in last week's parasha. For Datan and Aviram, it is not the land which can be of milk and honey, as those words only applied when the benefit accrued to them personally. The land itself was not special because of Hashem's blessing; it was only special if it benefitted them.

But this dispute did not benefit Datan and Aviram, so it is difficult to understand why they joined with the two hundred fifty firstborn men who sided with Korach. The firstborn were displaced by the Leviim as those who would serve in the Temple. Datan and Aviram expressed their view of the rebellion differently, as Nachshoni explains, "your having brought us up and decreed destruction upon us in the desert is what unites us, despite our disparate goals." Nachshoni points out that they each took their firepans and lit them with incense to indicate that they all wished to be the Kohein Gadol and serve Hashem.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin presents a question about Datan and Aviram's statement to Moshe that "you did not bring us to a land flowing with milk and honey, nor did you give us a heritage of field and vineyard!" Why was this statement necessary after they had already proclaimed that Moshe had taken them out of Egypt to die in the desert? Obviously, if Moshe had taken them to die in the desert, they would not be able to inherit land. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that they were saying that Moshe had lied to them since that generation would die in the desert, but that he also had lied to the second generation by promising them the same promise that he had not fulfilled to the first generation. This was their way to instill rebellion in the next generation.

We have yet to see the benefit to Datan and Aviram that would cause them to become involved in this dispute. HaRav Sorotzkin quotes a Midrash. When the twelve spies returned from the land, part of the ten wicked spies' assessment was, "is it not better for us to

return to Egypt?" The people then said, "Let us appoint a leader and let us return to Egypt." The Midrash explains that the people had wished to appoint Datan in place of Moshe and Aviram in place of Aharon. These two men were noted as rebels, fighters. The nation believed that Datan and Aviram would exhibit that same zealotness in leading the people back to Egypt.

The Talmud is clear that this rebellion was not "for the sake of heaven." We must be very careful when we support any cause, that we are not reacting for our own personal benefit, but instead, for the benefit of all Israel. We should learn from Datan and Aviram exactly how not to act. © 2025 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

His "eye," not his "eyes." That's what Chazal point to with regard to how a pikei'ach (perceptive person) like Korach could undertake a sh'tus, a "stupidity" like fomenting a rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu.

The words of the Midrash, brought by Rashi (Bamidbar 16:7), are: "His eye misled him. He saw [in a prophecy] that Shmuel would be one of his descendants" and assumed that he, Korach, was thereby licensed to foment a rebellion.

Why his "eye," in the singular?

The fact that we have a pair of eyes allows, of course, for a special sort of vision, stereopsis, which gives us the ability to perceive depth and three-dimensional structures by combining the slightly different images received by each eye. That facilitates our ability to judge the relative distance of objects and perceive depth.

Korach was focused on only one aspect, his genealogical legacy, his future descendant Shmuel. He didn't employ the full complement of vision, and remained blind to the larger issue of what he was actually about to do -- foster a schismatic rebellion against Hashem's chosen messenger. He saw a picture, yes, just not the big picture.

Chazal famously teach that "falsehood has no feet" -- that the word sheker teeters on the single "foot" of the letter kuf -- while truth is stable, as each letter of the word emes is firmly grounded (Shabbos 104a).

But that same Gemara also notes that the letters of sheker are adjacent to one another in the alphabet, while those of emes span the entire aleph-beis. That fact, Chazal say, teaches us that falsehood is easily found, but truth, only with great difficulty.

I understand that to mean that one can be misled by focusing on only one aspect of something. Perceiving the truth, by contrast, requires spanning the entirety of what is seen, the "big picture," complete with stereopsis. It's a lesson much needed in our polarized, black-and-white, one-dimensional times. © 2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

The name alone makes me uncomfortable. It's not just what Korach did, because there have been many rebellions against the Torah leadership throughout the ages. It is also about who he was and what he became.

A hot topic is the Erev Rav, the Mixed Multitude. They're the fire-starters in the Chumash ever since Moshe Rabbeinu took them out of Egypt with the Jewish People. There's not really much positive to say about them, and anyone since who has made life difficult for the Jewish nation has often been labeled with their name.

But the truth is, we're pretty good at producing our own worst enemies. Last week's parsha previewed that, and this week's parsha is its follow-up. The Gemora says that one of the most arrogant groups of people are Jews who do not learn Torah. These parshios make it clear that not learning is not a prerequisite. We have been shown that a person can be a talmid chacham and still fit the bill, sometimes because of what they know.

The Gemora also explains that arrogant people on the scale of Korach and the spies don't come out of nowhere. One of the main sources of their souls are the 974 Generations that existed (briefly) prior to Creation. The Leshem explains that these "beings" were not humans and they did not live in a world anything like ours. Contrary to what many have mistakenly thought, these 974 generations were not an earlier version of our Creation. They were just a spiritual mechanism to actualize the reality of evil so we could have free will in our world.

Does any of this really make a difference? Perhaps it does between God and the Korachs of history when it comes to passing judgment on their level of culpability. But down here, the damage is the damage no matter what the reason for it. If someone is injured because someone accidentally pulled a trigger, they bleed the same way. And "Just following orders" does not usually get a person off the moral hook.

Is it a coincidence then that his name was Korach, which is similar to the word kerach -- ice? It was a testament to the kind of person he was, that he had a frigid personality, the kind that results when a person is arrogant. Like a person over-exposed to the cold, his spiritual circulation stopped and he spiritually gangrened, a lot like the left in this country and the leadership of Iran.

Iran is getting pummeled. And they will get even more pummeled in the days to come because their arrogance, which got them into this trouble in the first place, is so out of control. America has now joined the war. Logic dictates that Iran step down and lick their wounds. It also dictates that Hamas give back the

remaining hostages and get out of the war as soon as they can. Arrogance dictates a do-or-die strategy.

Similarly, the left in this country is taking steps to get their way at great risk to the security of the country. Nothing to do with truth or falsehood, right or wrong... just use their power and position to get the man in their way out of it. Its leaders have been caught being hypocritical, but they don't feel the need to defend themselves because it is not about being moral, only about being in power.

And last week's parsha and this week's as well remind us that this is not a new problem, but that it has been a thorn in God's side, so-to-speak, for millennia now... on that He seems to have put there Himself... for our good... somehow. Yes, it makes bad worse, but it also makes good, better. As Chazal say, when Malchus Edom (Western society today) claims to be kosher when it is really treif, Moshiach will finally come. When the world turns upside down and right becomes wrong and vice versa, get your Shabbos best ready so it will be ready to greet him.

That's why the final war, the GR"A said, is against the Erev Rav and is the worst of all. He says that you either fight against them or are on their side, even if you think you are neutral. It's easy to fight a self-professed enemy who does nothing to hide it, like Hamas and Iran. It is far trickier to defend yourself against an enemy who claims to be on your side while stabbing you in the back. It just confuses too many people into thinking the wrong way and doing the wrong thing.

The spies got straightened out in the same parsha last week, as did Korach and his assembly. It was also perfectly clear who did it, even though many still challenged Moshe Rabbeinu after the earth closed its mouth once again. What arrogance won't make people do!

I can't speak for everyone, but I think most of us can agree that we have witnessed how we ourselves have stood up for things we have said or done already knowing that we were wrong. We should have admitted our mistakes and perhaps even apologized, but something inside of us just wouldn't let us... hoping that somehow we could save face, all the while destroying more of it. I have personally been awed by just how far people will go to protect themselves, and at what cost. And from hereon in, it will be our ability to humble ourselves before the truth that may actually save our lives, and our portion in the World to Come. It's war alright, but it is also a test of character to see who we really are and what we really believe. © 2025 Rabbi P. Winston and torah.org

