

Your Authority is an Illusion

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I have a weird relationship with people calling me “rabbi.”

One might think that this relationship would become less weird twelve years after my ordination, but to this day I always prefer that people just call me “Josh.” And yet, I continue to call my teachers from rabbinical school by their title of Rabbi, Professor, or Dr. long after my contemporaries felt comfortable calling them by their first names. I suppose that this self-contradiction is proof that people are consistently inconsistent, but my general hesitation stems from the fact that I want to exercise Jewish leadership because of the work that I do, rather than the title that I hold. The fact that I am a rabbi means that I possess professional training and skills that allow me to serve people in a particular way. But leadership is an entirely different goal, one not given to me by my title, but one I can only hope to model through my actions.

In Parashat Korah, we are forced to witness the possibility of Moshe’s mantle of leadership slipping away from him through the rebellion of Korah and his followers. Although ultimately God intervenes in this conflict by causing the earth to swallow up Korah and his followers ([Num. 26:10](#)), few people reading the parashah would be blamed for thinking that Korah has a point upon the start of his rebellion.

Every time I read this parashah, the hypothetical questions I ponder are endless: What exactly is wrong about Korah’s critique of Moshe? Would the Israelites not make it to Canaan if they were led by someone else other than Moshe? However, a deeper exploration of the parashah reveals that our tradition wants us to focus less on the hypotheticals and more on the powerful statement about leadership made by choosing Moshe and rejecting Korah.

Upon challenging Moshe and Aharon, Korah audaciously asks, “Why do you uplift yourselves over the congregation of Adonai?” ([Num. 16:3](#)). Looking at the context of our parashah, many of our earlier commentators argue that Korah’s critique is rooted in the fact that Moshe and Aharon, two brothers, hold both the highest political and religious positions among the Israelites. Regarding this verse, Rashi states that “it is one thing for you [Moshe] to have taken the kingship for yourself—but you shouldn’t have assigned the priesthood to Aharon” ([Rashi on 16:3](#)), and Ibn Ezra states, “Making Aharon the High Priest and Moshe, who taught him what to do, even higher than him [is the root of Korah’s critique]” ([Ibn Ezra 16:3](#)). In each case, our commentaries assume that Korah rebels because he’s angry that Moshe’s family is holding all the levers of religious and political power.

At first glance, Korah’s critique appears to have merit. The Talmud Yerushalmi contains several references to the edict that “priests may be not anointed as kings” ([JT Shekalim 6:1](#)), likely due to the rabbis’ displeasure toward the decision of the Hasmoneans to simultaneously hold both the kingship and the priesthood. Yet a midrash identifies an important difference between Aharon and the Hasmonean dynasty:

Moshe said to them: If my brother Aharon had seized the priesthood for himself, your complaints against him would have been well-put. But since it was given to him by the Holy One, blessed be God—to Whom belong greatness, might, and majesty—is not anyone who rises up against Aharon rising up against the Holy One, blessed be God? Therefore it is written, “For who is Aharon that you should rail against him?” ([Bemidbar Rabbah 18:9](#))

According to the midrash, Moshe and Aharon hold their roles because God *decided* that they would; the appointment is permanent. They did not take the roles by force. Yet taking a role by force is exactly what Korah intends to do, exactly the kind of leadership model the rabbis want to critique regarding the Hasmoneans. By misunderstanding the nature of Moshe and Aharon's leadership, Korah makes a category mistake that undermines his entire claim to power.

Moshe and Aharon's leadership is *sui generis*; God gave them roles because that's the way that God wanted it. For the rest of us, leadership must be earned, a truth far too many people forget.

In *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky argue that it is easy for leaders to forget that "authority gained is a product of social expectations" (168). When a person is ready to do the work, when they provide something that improves the lives of others, leadership becomes possible. In contrast, regarding leadership Heifetz and Linsky warn us that "to believe it [authority] comes from you is an illusion. Don't let it get to your head."

Korah wanted a title, a title he neither earned through doing the work, nor received due to divine mandate. That's why the Torah and our rabbinic tradition look so poorly upon his rebellion. What appears to be a legitimate critique against Moshe and Aharon is actually a heretical notion of leadership, where a person tries to seize power because they believe it is owed to them.

Moshe's leadership is unique because he did not seek out leadership but thrived in it once he answered the call to serve. Regarding this, Rabbi Meshulam Feivish of Zabriza writes in *Yosher Divrei Emet* that we should "[learn from Moshe's own reluctance to lead] not to compete for any mitzvah that has an aspect of authority in it. Flee from such a thing. If it is right for you, God will force the whole world to make that opportunity for leadership come your way" (#30, 33–34).

Moshe and Aharon were literally called to leadership, yet all of us today must earn it. Authority born from feelings of

entitlement is the most corrosive kind of authority, the kind our tradition interprets into Korah's rebellion. Real authority is earned through leadership and goodness, the kind we have an obligation to teach ourselves, our families, and our communities.