

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Korah: Democrat or Demagogue?

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Korah is the first left oppositionist in the history of radical politics.

—Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (111)

How shall we read the Korah story? What is his rebellion about? Is Korah the first left-wing radical? He seems to want to level the distinction between leaders and masses. All of the people are holy, he claims. There is no need for a priestly caste which, in the wilderness setting, is a governance class. This view relies on the Midrash's framing of Korah's claim: "It is not you alone who have heard at Sinai, 'I am the LORD your God.' All of the people heard it" (Tanhuma Korah 4). From Korah's point of view, the promise of Exodus 19:6, that Israel will be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," has been fulfilled. Mass reception of the divine word means equal standing in holiness. Korah, on this view, is something of a hero, a tribune of egalitarianism before its time.

Moses and God, of course, disagree—as should we. Considered more closely, Korah's rebellion is more like a power grab than a revolution. He doesn't argue for equal-access holiness so much as for a Levitical takeover of priestly prerogatives. A typical demagogue, he uses populist claims to disguise the aggressive interests of his faction. Perhaps he believes that all the people are holy, perhaps not. But he certainly believes that he and his conspirators are holy, as holy as the priests whom they mean to diminish or displace.

Korah's theo-politics are, from a modern point of view, arcane. But his cynical motives and strategies are not. Populism, then as now, is the favored guise of factionalists—Machiavellian wolves in democratic sheep's clothing.

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קרח תשע"ט



How to Challenge Authority

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When is it appropriate to challenge a leader? While this week's parashah, Korah, is perhaps the most dramatic attempt to answer this question in the Torah, this question percolates from the beginning of Moses's tenure. At first glance, the answer would seem to be that Moses should never be challenged. As God's chosen leader, the Israelites should submit to his authority in all cases. After all, things end badly for those who do not follow this course, as the story of Korah shows.

The parashah opens with Korah and his followers approaching Moses to claim their own mantle of authority, arguing that Moses and Aaron should not be above the rest of the nation because "all of the community, everyone is holy" (Num, 16:3). Unsurprisingly, God does not take well to this challenge, and the story ends in dramatic fashion, with the earth opening its mouth and swallowing Korah and his followers whole (vv.31–33). So in this version of the challenge, those who question God's appointed leaders are not only to be ignored, they are to be punished with great violence and fury.

In Pirkei Avot, the dispute of Korach and his congregation is held up as the paradigm of *mahloket shelo leshem shamayim*, a dispute that is not for the sake of heaven (M. Avot 5:17). Korah's claim is not made in good faith, and therefore, he must be understood as the threat that he is. There is no value to Korah's challenge, nor in Korah himself. Instead, he must be destroyed, in order that he does not destroy Moses's authority.

However, 11 chapters after the story of Korah, the Torah tells another story of people who come forward to challenge Moses's authority. Here too, there is a complaint about a particular distribution of power in society. However, where the story of Korah ends in the violent death of hundreds, this narrative ends in Moses granting the correctness of the challenge, with the backing of God. Which story is this? This is the story of the daughters of Tzelofehad.

The daughters of Tzelofehad come to Moses with a complaint, just like Korah. They assert that their father's death has ensured that his family will not inherit a share of the land of Canaan, because their father had only daughters. Far from rebuking these women, Moses takes their question straight to God. God affirms that the sisters should inherit their fathers' portion, and thus, a new law is made (Num. 27:1-11).

While these stories have dramatically different outcomes, there are clues in the Torah that they are meant to be read as a pair. First, both stories list the names of the parties involved in the challenge, singling them out as distinct from among the nation. Second, the daughters tell Moses explicitly that their father was not among the congregation of Korah, but that he instead died from a different sin (v. 3), suggesting that they do not want to be linked to Korah's legacy. Third, in both cases, Moses turns to God to understand how to resolve the challenge, rather than trying to solve it himself. The parallels are clear.

However, there are also important differences. The Torah uses the word *vayikahalu*, they assembled (16:3), to explain how Korah and his congregation approached Moses and Aaron, implying the formation of a distinct renegade faction within the people. In contrast, the daughters of Tzelofehad are *vatikravnah*, they come close (27:1), suggesting that their challenge is not one of civil strife, but rather, of a desire to come closer to the rest of the community. Their approach is intended to be productive, improving the cohesion of the community, not oppositional.

Therefore, what we see here is that the difference between Korah and Tzelofehad's daughters is less in their ways of raising their concern and more in their actual goals, whether stated or unstated. Maimonides, in his commentary on the Mishnah, explains that the problem with Korah and his congregation is that they are not seeking truth, but instead, are simply trying to open up conflict. However, those who argue for the sake of heaven are seeking truth, and are willing to meet it wherever they find it, whether that truth helps them achieve their goals or not. The daughters of Tzelofehad do have an agenda, but they are genuinely seeking a ruling from God. Their willingness to work within the system, instead of in opposition to it, is what allows their challenge to Moses to endure, and for the law to change in their favor.

Returning to our original question, what these two stories tell us is not that the Torah rejects the idea that leaders can be challenged. Instead, they *should* be challenged when there is a genuine injustice being perpetrated, whether intentionally or not. However, those challenges are only worthwhile if they are brought for the sake of seeking truth, instead of solely to pursue a particular predetermined agenda. Judaism is a religion that values dispute, rather than shying from it. But it is only when we are like the daughters of Tzelofehad, bringing challenges for the sake of heaven, that those challenges and their righteousness will endure.

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