

## 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 תש"ף



### When Push Comes to Shove: Protests in the Wilderness and in Our Cities

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As I sit down to write this Torah commentary on Parashat Korah—the story of a protest against the political and religious authority of Moses and Aaron—tens of thousands of people are in the streets of our major cities protesting the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers and the killings and harassment of other black men and women throughout our nation. Of course, the two protests—the Korah rebellion in the wilderness of Sinai and the street protests in our major cities—have virtually nothing in common. Korah and his followers sought personal aggrandizement while the protesters out my window seek racial justice. Nevertheless, we should ask: What does our Torah parashah teach us in this pregnant moment of anguish and unrest?

Parashat Korah portrays two rebellions as if they were one: the rebellion of Korah of the tribe of Levi against the priestly supremacy of Aaron, and the rebellion of Dathan, Abiram, and On, all from the tribe of Reuben, against the political authority of Moses. The targets of the two rebellions are different (Moses and Aaron in the Korah rebellion; Moses alone in the Reubenite rebellion) and the punishments meted out are different (a consuming fire in the first; swallowing up by the earth in the second). The 12th-century biblical exegete Ibn Ezra noted these two distinct strands in his commentary on Numbers (16:35) and modern biblical scholars, such as Robert Alter, agree with that conclusion (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 168–169). The reason why the two rebellions are intertwined and portrayed as one is unknown, but one thing is clear: the protests challenged both the sacerdotal and political power structure.

On its face, the rebellion of Korah had a populist appeal: “They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?’” (Num. 16:3). To our ears, that appeal for greater democracy and equality seems quite reasonable, but Moses (and the careful reader of the text) knows that these are the words of a demagogue—someone corrupting God’s imperative to become a holy people (Lev. 19:2) with, most likely, his personal ambition to seize the priesthood for himself. Later in the narrative, Dathan and Abiram take another arrow from the demagogue’s quiver and distort historical fact to cast a pall over Moses’s political leadership: “Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey [They are referring to Egypt!] to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?” (Num. 16:13). Hiding one’s corrupt ambition for unrestrained power behind a veil of superficial reasonableness and perverting the truth and historical facts are the handmaids of demagoguery.

In the face of these challenges, Moses demonstrates exemplary leadership. His first reaction is anguish and humility: “When Moses heard this, he fell on his face” (16:4) and “Moses was much aggrieved” (16:15). He was, no doubt, in great pain that rebels such as these have found a following among the community to which he had devoted his life. But Moses immediately recovers and proposes a test of religious authenticity (the offering of sacred fire) to Korah, who has backed himself into a corner and must agree to the test. He also offers to sit down and parley with Dathan and Abiram, but they refuse to engage in dialogue about their grievances and thereby disavow Moses’s authority in its entirety. As expected, things go quite badly for the rebels as God causes them to be incinerated and swallowed up by the earth.

While condemning the demagoguery and ruthless ambition of Korah and the other ringleaders, our Rabbis recognized that protests, arguments, and controversies are often praiseworthy. “Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will in the end yield results; and any which is not for the sake of Heaven will in the end not yield results” (M. Avot 5:17). The protests of Korah and his followers clearly fall into the

latter category, as the Mishnah explicitly recognizes. But protests against repression and for human dignity, protests that challenge the abuse of state and police power that snuffs out the lives of black men and other people who have been marginalized and debased, protests that challenge us to live up to the ideals we affirm as Jews and that reflect the biblical principal that all persons are created in the image of God and that to extinguish the life of one is to diminish God’s presence in this world—these protests, when conducted peacefully, are surely for the sake of Heaven, and we pray that they will in the end yield results.

For our political leaders, the message of our parashah and the example of Moses provide clear guideposts: reject the half-truths and historical distortions of demagogues (don’t romanticize earlier times when our fellow citizens were enslaved or later denied their basic rights), exhibit the anguish and humility of Moses rather than indifference or incitement. And finally, know that the true test of moral and political leadership is not words but results. Like Moses, we must prove the legitimacy of our authority not through words but with actions and achievements.

In a remarkable reversal of accepted rabbinic understanding of this parashah, the Hasidic sage, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe, referred to Korah as “*unzer heilige zeide*”—our holy grandfather. How can this be? How can this demagogue be “our holy grandfather”? The rebbe’s meaning is a mystery but let me offer a possible interpretation of his words. We are all descendants of Korah, because we are heirs to a tradition of rebellion against perceived injustice. And he is our “holy grandfather,” because his expressed vision—of a community where everyone is treated as equally holy and entitled to respect and freedom from arbitrary and abusive authority—is one worthy of pursuit.

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