

Korah Had Options and So Do We

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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' 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.