

## Did Korah Get a Bum Rap?

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We have a marvelous love for this Government of ours; in fact, it is almost a religion, and it is well that it should be, because we have a splendid form of government and we have a splendid set of laws. We have everything here that we need, except that we have neglected the fundamentals upon which the American Government was principally predicated.

How many of you remember the first thing that the Declaration of Independence said? It said: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that there are certain inalienable rights for the people, and among them are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;" and it said further, "We hold the view that all men are created equal."

--"EVERY MAN A KING" Share Our Wealth Radio  
Speech by Senator Huey P. Long, of Louisiana, February  
23, 1934

Given the level of political demagoguery that has permeated (some would say befouled) the political process in America, few today remember the career of Huey Long, until recently considered the most significant demagogue to have ever ascended to the pinnacle of power in the United States. Reading the excerpts from one of his most famous speeches today, and evaluating some of his public works programs that attempted to redress economic imbalances between the rich and poor in America, one might be surprised that he was both loved—and feared. And even to this day scholars debate the degree to which Long's populism was only a ruse to concentrate ever more power into his own hands and whether to consider him a fascist leader—who was indisputably on the rise until his assassination in 1935.

The memory of Huey Long, and the continued concern over the role of demagoguery in American politics, comes to mind this week because we see a prime example of it in Parashat Korah—the figure of Korah himself. (The character of Dathan, played by Edgar G. Robinson, in *The Ten Commandments*, was essentially based on Korah). Korah was long vilified by the Rabbinic Sages, and of course the Torah itself condemns him as the paradigmatic

rebel against the divinely sanctioned leadership of Moses and Aaron.

Our portion quickly addresses the heart of the matter:

Now Korah . . . betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. 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. 16:1–3)

A reader of the plain sense of biblical narrative (*peshat*) might not find anything particularly objectionable in the brief, programmatic speech of Korah. After all, only a few verses earlier, the Torah commands all Israelites (i.e., not only *kohanim*) to attach tzitzit to the corners of their garments, in order to demonstrate all Israel's status as "Holy to the LORD" (Num. 15:40): And even more significantly, in the narrative run-up to the Divine revelation on Mount Sinai, God is exquisitely clear on the subject: "Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5–6). Seen in light of this biblical context, what Korah proclaims does not seem off base, at least at first blush.

Moreover, even some of our most prominent rabbinic exegetes assess Korah's statement soberly, even as they were aware of his ultimate downfall. For example, in his commentary on Numbers 16:3, Rashi unpacks Korah's words in a not unsympathetic vein: "Why do you (Moses and Aaron) raise yourselves above the LORD's congregation?" But then, channeling the words of Midrash Tanhuma, Rashi changes the Bible's plural address into a speech of Korah directly to Moses: "If you have taken royal rank for yourself, you should at least not have chosen the priesthood for your brother—it is not you two alone who heard at Sinai: 'I am

the LORD your God', all the congregation heard it!" To his credit, Rashi understands that there is nothing objectionable per se in Korah's words.

Another of our greatest medieval masters, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, similarly analyzes the biblical narrative and is ostensibly willing to understand Korah's charge as having some basis in the narrative truth of the Torah. Thus, we see through these observations, it is not on the basis of the charge itself that Korah is condemned, rather it must be something else. So, why does the Torah consider him as worthy of the death penalty?

Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, a student of Rashi's grandsons, offers an explanation that helps us understand Korah's more insidious motives:

From Moses's response, in which he said to Korah (*Now that God has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?* (Num. 16:10), one learns that it was in seeking the High Priesthood that Korah sought to subvert (the leadership of Moses and Aaron). But Korah would speak as though he was speaking on behalf of the entire congregation, so that all would become accommodated to his words, and would not realize that he was simply seeking (power) for himself.

That Korah's seemingly reasonable words were in fact nothing more than a power grab was seen by a character more or less invented whole cloth by the rabbis in the midrash, the wife of the mysterious figure of On ben Peleth. On is mentioned in the opening of our parashah; however, after this appearance, On is never mentioned again.<sup>1</sup> The midrash, picking up this oddity of introducing a character in an important episode but then failing to mention him again in the narrative, imagines the following conversation between On and his clever wife (Sanhedrin 109b–110a):

Rav says: On, son of Peleth, his wife saved him. She said to him: What is the difference to you? If this Master (i.e., Moses), is the great one, you are the student. And if this Master (i.e., Korah), is the great one, you are the student. On said to her: What shall I do? I took counsel and I took an oath with them that I would be with them. She said to him: I know that the entire assembly is holy, as it is written: "For all

the assembly is holy" (Num. 16:3). She said to him: Sit, for I will save you. She gave him wine to drink and caused him to become drunk and laid him inside their tent. She sat at the entrance and exposed her hair. Anyone who came and saw her stepped back. In the meantime (Korah and the other rebels) were swallowed.

—and On, son of Peleth, escaped punishment!

Not only does this midrash explain the disappearance of a character from the biblical narrative, it creates a character, On's wife, who insightfully discerns what her husband has not seen, namely, that Korah's "program" is little more than a power grab, however he couches it. If all the Israelites are de facto "junior partners" in the leadership structure, despite all of them "being holy," that will not change under Korah. And when she cites the verse "the entire assembly is holy, as it is written," she understands that not as the opening to undermine the divinely sanctioned leadership, but rather as an aspirational observation that is supposed to lead the congregation to holiness in interpersonal relations. (That she exploits this knowledge to save her husband is not a detriment but rather serves to make her a gutsy heroine in another vein altogether.)

That we live in a world of conflict is a given, both in the Bible and ever since. Wise people learn to discern the difference between leaders who would guide society, through conflicts, to its better self, and those who would seek to undermine authority under the ruse that they are fighting "for the common man"—when in reality they seek only to establish themselves in power and enrich themselves while they are doing it. The Sages rightfully intuited Korah's true nature in their observation in the Mishnah (Avot 5:17):

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his congregation.

May we gain and preserve the discernment to steer clear always from demagoguery, and to support leaders who do not exploit the natural divisions within society but lead people, despite their differences, to lead good—indeed, holy—lives.

<sup>1</sup>For a pithy explanation of a contemporary, text-critical approach, see the insightful commentary of Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 313, n. 4.