



When a Question Threatens

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In this week's parashah, Korah organizes a group of two hundred and fifty well-respected people to protest Moses and Aaron's leadership. "You have gone too far," Korah and his group announce. "For all the community is holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourself above God's congregation?" (Num. 16:3). Moses is appalled, God is furious, and in response, the earth opens up and swallows the protesters, their households, and all their possessions. What are we as readers to make of this episode? Do we attempt to creatively rehabilitate Korah, despite his divine punishment, as an example of those who bravely attempt to speak truth to power? Or do we side with Moses and try to figure out why Korah must have truly deserved what he got?

Neither of these approaches is entirely satisfying. I tend to be sympathetic to the perspective that Korah's challenge doesn't merit being swallowed alive. His desire for a fully egalitarian society is, if perhaps impractical, certainly understandable. And the response to his group seems to prove his point: surely a just society ought to be open to hearing challenges and taking them seriously, rather than smiting those who are troubled by the existing power structure. Yet how can we fully take Korah's side if his devastating punishment comes from God?

I want to suggest that instead of siding with Korah and defending the actions of his group, or siding with God and coming up with a rationale for Korah's harsh punishment, a more satisfying response to this story's

challenge might come from the rabbis, who are themselves conflicted inheritors of the tradition.

The rabbis rewrite Korah's story in a number of different ways, some more sympathetic than others. In one version presented in Bemidbar Rabbah, Korah's challenge is not about the general leadership structure but rather relates to the particulars of certain mitzvot. Korah asks Moses whether a garment entirely made out of tekhelet (the sky blue dye commanded for biblical tzitzit) would be exempt from tzitzit, and when told that it would not be, objects, "A tallit that is entirely made of tekhelet doesn't exempt itself, but four threads [of tzitzit] exempt it?!" He then asks whether a house full of Torah scrolls would be exempt from needing a mezuzah on its doorposts, and when again told that it would not be, objects, "The two hundred and seventy-five chapters of the Torah don't exempt the house, but the one chapter that is in the mezuzah exempts it?!" He then proceeds to accuse Moses of making the whole thing up.

Korah's questions in this version of the story pose a serious challenge to the seeming arbitrariness of the halakhic system, and for this reason they remind me of the way the rabbis present another famous questioner who happens to be one of their own: a sage named Rabbi Yirmiyah. Like the rabbinic version of Korah, Rabbi Yirmiyah likes to ask questions about why halakha is the way it is, and similarly like Korah, asks about hypothetical cases to demonstrate the arbitrariness of the law. Most famously, he asks about the legal ruling for a lost chick who is found with one

foot within fifty cubits of its coop, in which case it would need to be returned to its owner, and one foot outside fifty cubits, in which case it would belong to its finder—and he asks several other such questions throughout the Talmud. Of course, the rabbis also like to use hypothetical cases to test halakhic principles, so Rabbi Yirmiyah's questions are not so far outside the pale. Nonetheless, he becomes a kind of scapegoat within the tradition for the rabbis' ambivalence toward their own intellectual project. As punishment, he is not swallowed up into the earth, but he is famously kicked out of the rabbinic study hall (BT Bava Batra 23b), which for a rabbi in late antiquity is basically just as awful.

A lesser-known fact about Rabbi Yirmiyah, however, is that after being kicked out of the study hall, he later returns to the intellectual community (BT Bava Batra 165b). His colleagues realize that they still need his wisdom, and they send him some questions, which he answers with a combination of sagacity and deep humility. Upon realizing that he is not the threat they at first perceived him to be, his colleagues welcome him back, and though the text does not say so explicitly, I imagine that he is thrilled and relieved to return.

Parshat Korah presents the story of a question perceived as a communal threat that is met with complete suppression, one that we may never fully make sense of. But the rabbinic tradition offers us two helpful resources: first, a tradition in which Korah is seen as someone whose questions may be deeply challenging but nonetheless stem from real intellectual engagement; and second, through the R. Yirmiyah narratives, an alternative tale of what a community can do, at least at a minimum, to take questioners seriously, even if they at first raised some hackles. Each of us knows what it is like to hear a

challenge to our commitments that makes us deeply uncomfortable. I hope we can learn from the stories the rabbinic tradition offers us about considering new models for what curiosity, and even repair, can look like.