

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Korach
July 27, 2020 *** 5 Tammuz, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Korach in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2958/jewish/Korach-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Korach incites a mutiny challenging Moses' leadership and the granting of the kehunah (priesthood) to Aaron. He is accompanied by Moses' inveterate foes, Dathan and Abiram. Joining them are 250 distinguished members of the community, who offer the sacrosanct ketoret (incense) to prove their worthiness for the priesthood. The earth opens up and swallows the mutineers, and a fire consumes the ketoret-offerers.

A subsequent plague is stopped by Aaron's offering of ketoret. Aaron's staff miraculously blossoms and brings forth almonds, to prove that his designation as high priest is divinely ordained.

G-d commands that a terumah ("uplifting") from each crop of grain, wine and oil, as well as all firstborn sheep and cattle, and other specified gifts, be given to the kohanim (priests).

Haftarah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1229167/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The prophet Samuel (a descendant of Korach, the protagonist of this week's Torah portion) gathers the Jews to firmly install Saul as king of Israel. During the course of his address to the Jews he called out, "Here I am; bear witness against me before G-d and before His anointed; whose ox did I take, or whose donkey did I take, or whom did I rob; or whom did I oppress, or from whose hand did I take a bribe..." This echoes Moses' statement in this week's Torah reading: "I have not taken a donkey from a single one of them, and I have not harmed a single one of them."

The nation gathers at Gilgal for a second coronation of King Saul—the first one having lacked a convincing consensus. They offer sacrifices and rejoice together. The prophet Samuel then delivers a talk: he asks the people to testify that he never committed crimes against the people, and they confirm. He discusses how G-d saved and aided them every step of the way and chastises them for wanting a flesh and blood king. He assures them that G-d will be with them if they follow in His ways, and of the consequences they will face if they do not follow G-d's word.

To underscore the seriousness of his words, Samuel asks G-d to send a thunderstorm, although it was not the rainy season. The Jewish people got the message and asked Samuel to intercede on their behalf and to have the thunderstorm cease.

The haftarah ends with a reassurance: "For G-d will not forsake His people for His great name's sake; for G-d has sworn to make you a people for Himself."

How Not to Argue (Korach 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/korach-5780/>

Korach was swallowed up by the ground, but his spirit is still alive and well, and in the unlikeliest of places – British and American universities.

Korach was the embodiment of what the Sages called, argument not for the sake of heaven. They contrasted this with the schools of Hillel and Shammai, who argued for the sake of heaven.[1] The difference between them, according to Bartenura, is that argument for the sake of heaven is argument for the sake of truth. Argument not for the sake of heaven is argument for the sake of victory and power, and they are two very different things.

Korach and his followers came from three different groups. Korach was from the tribe of Levi. Datan and Aviram came from the tribe of Reuben. And there were 250 leaders from different tribes. Each had a specific grievance.[2] The 250 leaders resented the fact that leadership roles had been taken from them after the sin of the Golden Calf and given instead to the tribe of Levi. Datan and Aviram felt aggrieved that their tribe – descendants of Jacob's firstborn – had been given no special status. Moses' reply to Korach – “Now you are trying to get the priesthood too ... Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?” – makes it clear that Korach wanted to be a Kohen, and probably wanted to be Kohen Gadol, High Priest, in place of Aaron.

The three groups had nothing in common except this, that they wanted to be leaders. Each of them wanted a more senior or prestigious position than they currently held. In a word, they wanted power. This was an argument not for the sake of heaven.

The text gives us a clear picture of how the rebels understood leadership. Their claim against Moses and Aaron was “Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?” Later, Datan and Aviram said to Moses, “And now you also want to lord it over us!”

As a general rule: if you want to understand resentments, listen to what people accuse others of, and you will then know what they themselves want. So for example, for many centuries various empires accused Jews of wanting to dominate the world. Jews have never wanted to dominate the world. Unlike almost any other long-standing civilisation, they never created or sought to create an empire. But the people who levelled this accusation against Jews belonged to empires which were beginning to crumble. They wanted to dominate the world but knew they could not, so they attributed their desire to Jews (in the psychological process known as splitting-and-projection, the single most important phenomenon in understanding antisemitism).[3] That is when they created antisemitic myths, the classic case being the protocols of the Elders of Zion, invented by writers or propagandists in Czarist Russia during the last stages of its decline.

What the rebels wanted was what they attributed to Moses and Aaron, a form of leadership unknown in the Torah and radically incompatible with the value Moses embodied, namely humility. They wanted to “set themselves above” the Lord's assembly and “lord it over” the people. They wanted power.

What then do you do when you seek not truth but power? You attack not the message

but the messenger. You attempt to destroy the standing and credibility of those you oppose. You attempt to de-voice your opponents. That is what Korach and his fellow rebels tried to do.

The explicit way in which they did so was to accuse Moses of setting himself above the congregation, of turning leadership into lordship.

They made other claims, as we can infer from Moses' response. He said, "I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them," implying that they had accused him of abusing his position for personal gain, misappropriating people's property. He said, "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea," implying that they had accused him of making up certain instructions or commands, attributing them to God when they were in fact his own idea.

The most egregious instance is the accusation levelled by Datan and Aviram: "Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?" This is a forerunner of those concepts of our time: fake news, alternative facts, and post-truth. These were obvious lies, but they knew that if they said them often enough at the right time, someone would believe them.

There was not the slightest attempt to set out the real issues: a leadership structure that left simmering discontent among the Levites, Reubenites and other tribal chiefs; a generation that had lost all hope of reaching the promised land; and whatever else was troubling the people. There were real problems, but the rebels were not interested in truth. They wanted power.

Their aim, as far as we can judge from the text, was to discredit Moses, damage his credibility, raise doubts among the people as to whether he really was receiving his instructions from God, and so besmirch his character that he would be unable to lead in the future, or at least be forced to capitulate to the rebels' demands. When you are arguing for the sake of power, truth doesn't come into it at all.

Argument not for the sake of heaven has resurfaced in our time in the form of the "cancel" or "call-out" culture that uses social media to turn people into non-persons when they are deemed to have committed some wrong – sometimes genuinely so (sexual harassment for example), sometimes merely for going against the moral fashion of the moment. Particularly disturbing has been the growing practice of denying or withdrawing a platform at university to someone whose views are deemed to be offensive to some (often minority) group.

So in March 2020, just before universities were shut down because of the Coronavirus crisis, Oxford University Professor Selina Todd was "no-platformed" by the Oxford International Women's Festival, at which she had been due to speak. A leading scholar of women's lives she had been deemed "transphobic," a charge that she denies. At around the same time the UN Women Oxford UK Society cancelled a talk by former Home Secretary Amber Rudd, an hour before it was due to take place.

In 2019 Cambridge University Divinity School rescinded its offer of a visiting fellowship to Canadian Professor of psychology Jordan Peterson. The Cambridge University Students Union commented, "His work and views are not representative of the student body and as such we do not see his visit as a valuable contribution to the University, but one that

works in opposition to the principles of the University.” In other words, we don’t like what he has to say. All three of these, and other such cases in recent years, are shameful and a betrayal of the principles of the University.

They are contemporary instances of arguments not for the sake of heaven. They are about abandoning the search for truth in favour of the pursuit of victory and power. They are about discrediting and devoicing – “cancelling” – an individual. A university is, or should be, the home of argument for the sake of heaven. It is where we go to participate in the collaborative pursuit of truth. We listen to views opposed to our own. We learn to defend our beliefs. Our understanding deepens, and intellectually, we grow. We learn what it means to care for truth. The pursuit of power has its place, but not where knowledge has its home.

That is why the Sages contrasted Korach and his fellow rebels with the schools of Hillel and Shammai:

For three years there was a dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel. The former claimed, ‘The law is in agreement with our views,’ and the latter insisted, ‘The law is in agreement with our views.’ Then a Voice from heaven (bat kol) announced, ‘These and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in accordance with the school of Hillel.’

Since both ‘these and those are the words of the living God’, why was the school of Hillel entitled to have the law determined in accordance with their rulings? Because they were kind and modest, they studied both their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai, and they were even so humble as to mention the teachings of the school of Shammai before their own.[4]

This is a beautiful portrait of the rabbinic ideal: we learn by listening to the views of our opponents, at times even before our own. I believe that what is happening at universities, turning the pursuit of truth into the pursuit of power, demonising and no-platforming those with whom people disagree, is the Korach phenomenon of our time, and very dangerous indeed. An old Latin motto says that to secure justice, audi alteram partem, “Listen to the other side.” It is through listening to the other side that we walk the path to truth. [1] Mishnah Avot 5:17. [2] This is a composite of the views of Ibn Ezra and Ramban. [3] See Vamik Volkan, *The Need to have Enemies and Allies* (1988). [4] Babylonian Talmud: Eruvin 13b.

[Korach by Rabbi Bruce Alpert](https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/)

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“The Torah of Adonai is perfect, reviving the soul,” reads the psalm (19:8). The word used here for perfection, temimah, implies completeness, but also simplicity, like a platonic ideal – something that exists in our minds but which can only be rendered in flawed representation here on earth. To change something that is perfect is to diminish it. Thus, the idea of perfection in revelation can lead one to a kind of fundamentalism that

summarily rejects changes as thwarting, or at least diminishing, God's will. Yet, the Torah that is the Book of Numbers challenges this conception of perfection. In last week's parashah, we learned that the Israelites did not know what to do with one who violated the Sabbath and needed Moses's intervention to find out (Numbers 15:32-36). In the previous parashah, the Israelites challenged Moses over who was disqualified from offering the Pesach sacrifice (Numbers 9:6-13). Later in the book (Numbers 27:1-11) the daughters of Zelophehad will charge that the laws of inheritance are unjust. God will amend those laws in response to their plea. The book will end with God amending the marriage laws to compensate for the changes just made in the inheritance laws. Thus, Numbers shows us that even the divine law requires interpretation and revision when it meets the complications and exigencies of the human condition.

Our parashah presents a different kind of challenge to our conception of perfection. In Parashat Terumah (Exodus 27:1-8), God gave Moses explicit instructions as to the size, materials and constructions of the Copper Altar. In Parashat Vayak'hel (Exodus 38:1-7) we learn that Bezalel carried out those instructions exactly as given. In this week's parashah, however, we learn that the firepans used by Korah and his followers are to be beaten into a plating to cover that divinely designed structure "as a reminder to the Israelites, so that no outsider – one not of Aaron's offspring – should presume to offer incense before the Lord." (Numbers 17:5). Thus, even God's very altar can be changed by the marks of unfolding human history.

Rather than an unchanging ideal, Numbers presents a picture of revelation that is constantly in flux. Unique situations and human infirmities require regular revisions of, and compensations to, God's laws. Significant historical moments require new acts of celebration or remembrance. Far from being a fixed star in the firmament, this Torah is a permanent negotiation between God's vision and human reality. Numbers is a testament to that negotiation.

And that is what makes the Torah perfect. For the Torah is not meant to be a platonic ideal, but a way of life for a striving but, ultimately, flawed humanity. By presenting its laws and its symbols as adapting to the exigencies that mark our existence, the Book of Numbers models a revelation that can live within and among us. Bound by the knowledge that we are but the latest link in a chain of tradition that stretches back to Sinai, we adapt that revelation with humility and caution. But we do so knowing that such adaptation is as crucial to our continuity as is our faith with our past.

The Torah's perfection is not a platonic ideal. Rather, it is the perfection of something that can live among us eternally. That is what gives it the power to revive the soul. (Rabbi Bruce Alpert (AJR '11) is Rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue in Wallingford, CT)

[When Push Comes to Shove: Protest in the Wilderness and in our Cities by Marc Gary](http://www.jtsa.edu/when-push-comes-to-shove)
<http://www.jtsa.edu/when-push-comes-to-shove>

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. (Marc Gary is Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer at JTS)

[Korach: When Silence is Not Golden by Rabbi Jay Kelman](https://www.torahinmotion.org/civicrm/mailling/view?reset=1&id=2691)

<https://www.torahinmotion.org/civicrm/mailling/view?reset=1&id=2691>

It is most difficult to solve a problem if the protagonists will not meet with each other and hear each other out. While there is no guarantee that talking will solve an issue, there is a guarantee that silence will perpetuate the problem.

Moshe was faced with a hopeless situation as Korach and his entourage challenged his leadership. Korach, Datan and Aviram, On the son of Pelet and 250 malcontents "demonstrated against Moshe and Aaron and declared to them, 'You have gone too far; all the people in the community are holy, and G-d is in their midst. Why are you setting yourselves above G-d's congregation?'" (Bamidbar 16:3). While these arguments were unfortunate, an effective leader is open to hearing the criticism and complaints of those whom he leads. While Moshe is taken aback, he quickly formulates a coherent response and proposes a test to see who G-d will choose. Had Korach agreed, tragedy could have been avoided.

Unfortunately, Korach was silent in the face of Moshe's offer. Moshe was forced to speak again, and this time, he was a little angrier: "Isn't it enough that the G-d of Israel has separated you from the community of Israel? He has brought you close to Him...it is actually against G-d that you and your party are demonstrating"(Bamidbar 16:9-11). And again, unfortunately, silence.

Moshe then tried his luck with Datan and Aviram. "Moshe then sent word to call Datan

and Aviram, and they said, we will not come"(Bamidbar 16:12). Instead of talking to Moshe, they ranted and raved to whomever would listen regarding Moshe's leadership. Not surprisingly, "Moshe became very angry". Again he tried to speak to Korach, and again he was met with silence. Unfortunately, this was not the first time that silence led to great tragedy. "And the brothers saw it was he [Joseph] that their father loved more than all the brothers, and they hated him and they could not say a peaceful word to him" (Breisheet 37:5). They could say a few non-peaceful words, though. "Do you want to be our king?" Those were the last words they would speak to him for many, many years. After Joseph's second dream, the brothers were silent, and it is Jacob—to whom the dream is repeated—who responds to his son.

Immediately thereafter, the brothers go to tend their father's sheep. It is surely no coincidence that when Joseph went to seek out his brothers, he "found them in Dotan" (Breisheet 37:17). "Dotan" and "Datan" have the exact same spelling; only the differing nekudot, the pronunciation marks that don't actually appear in the text, lead to a slightly different pronunciation. At Dotan there is no conversation; the brothers grab Joseph, throw him into the pit without saying a word, and sit down to eat lunch. A few generations later, we should not be surprised that Datan refuses to speak to Moshe and, measure for measure, Datan is swallowed up by the miraculous pit that opens in the ground. It was Reuven who suggested that Joseph be thrown into the pit; and while Joseph was rescued, Reuven's descendants Datan and his brother Aviram were not so lucky.

It is no wonder the Torah puts so much emphasis on speech—forbidding, with rare exceptions, negative words even if they may be true. Parshat Korach ends with many of the special laws of tithes given to the Kohanim and Levi'im. While this validates the special role they play, something Korach had challenged, there may be an additional message here. Generally, the way one separates tithes is through speech, through declaring specific parts of our produce to be given to our spiritual leaders. It is speech that distinguishes man from animal, and it is speech that—in many ways—determines whether we reflect the image of G-d, or whether we are no more than lowly animals. The choice is ours.

Crises of Leadership by Rabbi Kerry Olitzky

Are we more worried about our own egos than about the Jewish people as a whole?

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/crises-of-leadership/>

This portion features the well-known assault by Korach and others on Moses' leadership. Most will argue that Korach attempted to arrogate himself into a position of power. Following this line of logic, Korach's posture was deemed unacceptable, because Moses' leadership emanated from Divine selection. Thus, Korach's challenge to Moses' authority was interpreted as a direct affront to God.

Some rabbinic authorities argue that this incident was the most dangerous moment during the entire journey through the desert, even more vicious and damaging than the attacks of Amalek. Korach's uprising, of course, had to be crushed if God's rule was to be acknowledged and maintained. After all, this is the thread that holds the entire Torah together.

But should we assume that all challenges to authority are similarly invalid and must be met with the same reaction? How do we know when such challenges are “righteous” — to borrow an appropriate term from the vernacular — and should be encouraged and sustained? By probing the failed leadership plan of Korach, perhaps we can gain some insight for our own lives to help us navigate through the challenges that we must deal with every day.

Korach’s Critical Flaw

Korach was a man of the people. He emerged from the masses and thus seemed to speak for the common person. That was the foundation of his leadership. By portraying himself as a representative of the people, Korach was able to gather the support of others among the community.

But Korach was anything but a representative of the people who advocated for the concerns of the entire community. What seems to be Korach’s critical flaw was that he more interested in self-aggrandizement than ensuring a safe and profitable future for the ancient Israelites—and by extension the future of the Jewish people. Furthermore, he did not have an intimate relationship with the Divine. Because of both shortcomings, he failed.

Like all leaders, Moses was clearly imperfect. His character flaws were many, but he was able to overcome them in order to lead the people. As with Korach, when Moses allowed self-interest to guide him, he failed. Moses only became a successful leader when he learned to place the needs of the people ahead of his own.

Some say that we are in the midst of a crisis of leadership in the North American Jewish community. Affiliation and engagement rates are historically low. Inter-marriage rates are unprecedented. We could even say, as did our forebears, that we are at the most critical time in our journeys, as well. Just as the ancient passage of the Israelites was a journey of freedom through the desert, this too is a journey of freedom.

We need to learn from the examples of Korach and Moses and ask ourselves, “Are we more worried about our own egos than about the Jewish people as a whole?” No one would admit to such egocentrism, but when we are bound perhaps inseparably to our programs and institutions, and then project such worry onto the integrity of Judaism, it is difficult to discern the difference. And that is what leads us to Korach-like failed leadership.

But when we are able to transcend the self, which is only possible through a connection with the Divine, then we are able to help guide us on a positive future course for the Jewish people, one that sees everyone as a vital part of it. (Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky is the author of more than 75 books and hundreds of articles, including (with Leonard Kravitz) "Shir Hashirim: A Modern Commentary on the Song of Songs." He was the longtime executive director of Big Tent Judaism and formerly served on the faculty/administration of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.)