

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Korach
June 24, 2023 *** 5 Tammuz, 5783

Korach in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Korach," refers to Korach, head of the rebellion against Moses and Aaron, and is found in Numbers 16:1.

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: I Samuel 11:14-12:22

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."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Hierarchy and Politics: The Never – Ending Story by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/korach/hierarchy-politics-never-ending-story/)
<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/korach/hierarchy-politics-never-ending-story/>

It was a classic struggle for power. The only thing that made it different from the usual dramas of royal courts, parliamentary meetings, or corridors of power was that it took place in Burgers' Zoo in Arnhem, Holland, and the key characters were male chimpanzees.

Frans de Waal's study, *Chimpanzee Politics*,^[1] has rightly become a classic. In it he describes how the alpha male, Yeroen, having been the dominant force for some time, found himself increasingly challenged by a young pretender, Luit. Luit could not depose Yeroen on his own, so he formed an alliance with another young contender, Nikkie. Eventually Luit succeeded and Yeroen was deposed.

Luit was good at his job. He was skilled at peacekeeping within the group. He stood up for the underdog and as a result was widely respected. The females recognised his leadership qualities and were always ready to groom him and let him play with their children. Yeroen had nothing to gain by opposing him. He was already too old to become alpha male again. Nonetheless, Yeroen decided to join forces with the young Nikkie. One night they caught Luit unawares and killed him. The deposed alpha male had his revenge.

Reading this, I thought of the story of Hillel in *Pirkei Avot* (2:6): "He saw a skull floating upon the water, and said: Because you drowned others, you were drowned; and those who drowned you, will themselves be drowned."

In fact, so humanlike were power struggles among the chimpanzees that in 1995, Newt Gingrich, Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, included de Waal's work among the twenty-five books he recommended young congressional Republicans to read.^[2]

Korach was a graduate of the same Machiavellian school of politics. He

understood the three ground rules. First you have to be a populist. Play on people's discontents and make it seem as if you are on their side against the current leader. "You have gone too far!" he said to Moses and Aaron. "The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" ([Num. 16:3](#)).

Second, assemble allies. Korach himself was a Levite. His grievance was that Moses had appointed his brother Aaron as High Priest. Evidently he felt that as Moses' cousin – he was the son of Yitzhar, brother of Moses' and Aaron's father Amram – the position should have gone to him. He thought it unfair that both leadership roles should have gone to a single family within the clan.

Korach could hardly expect much support from within his own tribe. The other Levites had nothing to gain by deposing Aaron. Instead he found allies among two other disaffected groups: the Reubenites, Dathan and Aviram, and "250 Israelites who were men of rank within the community, representatives at the assembly, and famous" (v. 2). The Reubenites were aggrieved that as descendants of Jacob's firstborn, they had no special leadership roles. According to Ibn Ezra, the 250 "men of rank" were upset that, after the sin of the Golden Calf, leadership had passed from the firstborn within each tribe to the single tribe of Levi.

The revolt was bound to ultimately fail since their grievances were different and could not all be satisfied. But that has never stopped unholy alliances. People with a grudge are more intent on deposing the current leader than on any constructive plan of action of their own. "Hate defeats rationality," said the Sages. [3] Injured pride, the feeling that honour should have gone to you, not him, has led to destructive and self-destructive action for as long as humans have existed on earth.

Third, choose the moment when the person you seek to depose is vulnerable. Ramban notes that the Korach revolt took place immediately after the episode of the spies and the ensuing verdict that the people would not enter the land until the next generation. So long as the Israelites, whatever their complaints, felt that they were moving toward their destination, there was no realistic chance of rousing the people in revolt. Only when they realised that they would not live to cross the Jordan was rebellion possible. The people seemingly had nothing to lose.

The comparison between human and chimpanzee politics is not meant lightly. Judaism has long understood that *Homo sapiens* is a mix of what the Zohar calls *nefesh habehamit* and *nefesh haElokit*, the animal soul and the Godly soul. We are not disembodied minds. We have physical desires and these are encoded in our genes. Scientists speak today about three systems: the "reptile" brain that produces the most primal fight-or-flight responses, the "monkey" brain that is

social, emotional, and sensitive to hierarchy, and the human brain, the prefrontal cortex, that is slow, reflective and capable of thinking through consequences of alternative courses of action. This confirms what Jews and others – Plato and Aristotle among them – have long known. It is in the tension and interplay between these systems that the drama of human freedom is played out. In his most recent book, Frans de Waal notes that “among chimpanzees, hierarchy permeates everything.” Among the females this is taken for granted and does not lead to conflict. But among males, “power is always up for grabs.” It “has to be fought for and jealously guarded against contenders.” Male chimpanzees are “schmoozing and scheming Machiavellians.”^[4] The question is: Are we?

This is not a minor question. It may even be the most important of all if humanity is to have a future. Anthropologists are generally agreed that the earliest humans, the hunter-gatherers, were generally egalitarian. Everyone had their part to play in the group. Their main tasks were to stay alive, find food, and avoid predators. There was no such thing as accumulated wealth. It was only with the development of agriculture, cities, and trade that hierarchy came to dominate human societies. There was usually an absolute leader, a governing (literate) class, and the masses, used as labour in monumental building schemes and as troops for the imperial army. Judaism enters the world as a protest against this kind of structure.

We see this in the opening chapter of the Torah in which God creates the human person in His image and likeness, meaning that we are all equally fragments of the Divine. Why, asked the Sages, was man created singly? “So that no one could say: My ancestors were greater than yours” ([Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5](#)). Something of this egalitarianism can be heard in Moses’ remark to Joshua, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that He would rest his spirit on them” ([Num. 11:29](#)).

However, like many of the Torah’s ideals – among them vegetarianism, the abolition of slavery, and the institution of monogamy – egalitarianism could not happen overnight. It would take centuries, millennia, and in many respects has not yet been fully achieved.

There were two hierarchical structures in biblical Israel. There were kings and there were priests, among them the High Priest. Both were introduced after a crisis: monarchy after the failure of the rule of the “judges”, the Levitical and Aaronide priesthood after the sin of the Golden Calf. Both led, inevitably, to tension and division.

Biblical Israel survived as a united kingdom^[5] for only three generations of kings and then split in two. The priesthood became a major source of division in the late

Second Temple period, leading to sectarian divisions between Sadducees, Boethusians, and the rest. The story of Korach explains why. Where there is hierarchy, there will be competition as to who is the alpha male.

Is hierarchy an inevitable feature of all advanced civilisations? Maimonides seems to say yes. For him, monarchy was a positive institution, not a mere concession.

Abarbanel seems to say no. There are passages in his writings that suggest he was a utopian anarchist who believed that in an ideal world no one would rule over anyone. We would each acknowledge only the sovereignty of God.

Putting together the story of Korach and Frans de Waal's chimpanzee version of *House of Cards*,^[6] the conclusion seems to follow that where there is hierarchy, there will be struggles to be alpha male. The result is what Thomas Hobbes called "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death."^[7]

That is why the rabbis focused their attention not on the hierarchical crowns of kingship or priesthood but on the non-hierarchical crown of Torah, which is open to all who seek it. Here competition leads not to conflict but to an increase of wisdom,^[8] and where Heaven itself, seeing Sages disagree, says, "These and those are the words of the living God."^[9]

The Korach story repeats itself in every generation. The antidote is daily immersion in the alternative world of Torah study that seeks truth not power, and values all equally as voices in a sacred conversation. [1] Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics*, London, Cape, 1982. [2] This essay was written in the days following the Brexit vote in Britain, when a struggle was taking place over the leadership of both main political parties. I leave it to the reader to draw any comparisons, either with primate politics or the story of Korach. [3] Bereishit Rabbah 55:8. [4] Frans de Waal, *Are we smart enough to know how smart animals are?* New York, Norton, 2016, 168. [5] Following the Brexit vote, the question is being asked in Britain as to whether the United Kingdom will remain a united kingdom. [6] Michael Dobbs, *House of Cards* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989). [7] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), pt. 1, ch. 11. [8] Baba Batra 21a. [9] Meaning, both views are correct, see Eruvin 13b; Gittin 6b.

[Korach: Holding onto Hope for Korach by Rabbi Daniel K Alter](https://truah.org/resources/daniel-alter-korach-moraltorah2023/)

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The story of Korach is a troubling tale of rebellion and divine retribution. Our Torah vilifies him, and our Talmud doubles down, detailing and reiterating his torturous ruin. The rabbis describe Korach and his followers with such indignation, such contempt! In their eyes, Korach is a lost cause. And yet, one rabbi voices another opinion.

In the Talmud, Sanhedrin 109b, Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira calls Korach an *aveidah hamitbakeshet*, a lost item that one still seeks. Unlike others, Rabbi Yehuda does not feel *ye'ush*, a sense of resignation or despair that a lost item, or in this case a

lost person, would not or could not be recovered. He compares Korach to the author of Psalm 119, a lengthy acrostic in which the author acknowledges their errors and aspires for a better path. Rabbi Yehuda wishes for a Korach who would utter, "Would that my ways were firm in keeping Your laws...I will keep Your laws; do not utterly forsake me...May Your steadfast love reach me, Adonai, Your deliverance..." (Psalm 119:5, 8, 41). Unlike his colleagues, unlike Moses, perhaps even unlike God, Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira holds onto hope that even Korach can make *teshuvah*. Even more, Rabbi Yehuda *seeks it out*.

In our online lives, we continually face challengers who frustrate us by their beliefs and their behavior. While we may not go so far as to hope for the fires or chasms of Korach's punishment, we are often quick to take drastic action. What do we do? We block. We unfollow. We unfriend. We sever what for so many of us has become the primary connection to those outside our ever-shrinking group of close friends and family. We do it out of anger. We do it out of frustration. We do it out of loathing. We do it out of contempt. And that virtual contempt is bleeding into the real world.

In his book *Blink*, author Malcolm Gladwell describes the work of Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist who studies divorce. As Gladwell describes, Gottman has honed his skill at recognizing more than 20 different signs and emotions to evaluate a relationship. One of these behaviors stands above the rest as the most destructive, the single biggest indicator that a couple will divorce. That pattern is contempt.

On an episode of his podcast, journalist Ezra Klein interviewed author Sheila Liming, who wrote a book called *Hanging Out* about increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation among Americans. There, Klein explored the difference between anger and contempt:

...Anger is a constructive emotion often. It's an emotion that wants resolution... when I'm angry with you, what I want to do is have some kind of interaction around that anger. Anger is relational. And contempt is the opposite. Contempt is, I just can't even. I'm just not going to deal with you. You're beneath notice. You're not part of my circle anymore. You're not worth engaging with...

When we escalate from anger to contempt, to what 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described as "the unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of another," we move our gaze from a person's actions to their individuality, their personhood. We elevate ourselves and look down upon them with derision and scorn. We no longer see a person made *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, and by losing sight of another, we lose sight of ourselves.

In [Numbers 16:33](#), we learn that Korach and all his people "went down alive into Sheol...the earth closed over them, and they vanished from the midst of the

congregation.” This is not the result of anger. When we feel anger, we desire resolution. When we feel contempt, we seek to erase that person from existence. And now, with the ease of clicking a button, we can effectively do so.

As Klein explains,

The dominant negative emotion online is contempt. And the dominant negative emotion in real interactions is anger. In real life, you get pissed off at a person. Then maybe you have a fight... But those things bring some kind of healing oftentimes or some kind of new space the two of you can occupy together, whereas online, I think you get used to saying, well, I'm done with you. I can't with you. And I wonder how much, if you get more and more used to that online, it becomes your reaction to conflict in real life.

The next time you consider blocking, unfollowing, or unfriending, the next time your cursor hovers over that button, remember the compassion of Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira. If you feel angry, be angry! Then engage with the hope of resolution. Yes, it is an unfortunate truth that some people truly are toxic, and while I believe everyone is capable of *teshuvah*, sometimes it is healthier to disconnect. If we must make that decision, let us make it from a place of thoughtful compassion for ourselves and others, and not from a place of raging contempt for them.

(Rabbi Daniel K. Alter looks forward to beginning his new role as the first Rabbi-Educator of Temple Kol Emeth in Marietta, GA, next month. He moonlights as a writer for Torah Aura, a Jewish education publishing company, and is an established geek (@DarthRabbi) and an aspiring golfer.)

[Korah: Becoming Holdy by Rabbi Yehudah Levi](http://canfeinesharim.org/korah-becoming-holy/)

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The portion of Korach is named for the rebellious Levite Korach who started a dispute over the issue of kedushah. The concept of kedushah is central in Judaism, and its meaning can have profound impact on the environment today. Kedushah or the corresponding adjective, kadosh, are usually translated obscurely as “sanctity” or “holy”; its real meaning is: devotion to a sublime ideal.

[2]

In our portion the Torah tells us that, following his demagogic presentation, there was no longer room on earth for Korach; the earth swallowed him up. At the core of his claims was the statement: “The whole community is kadosh”. [3] That does not sound so terrible – does it? After all, we need go back only four verses from here to read G-d's demand “That does not sound so terrible – does it? After all, we need go back only four verses from here to read G-d's demand ” and you shall be kadosh”. But really it is terrible! The obligation to be kadosh is central to the teachings of the Torah and should guide us in all aspects of our lives to strive toward kedushah. But if you are already kadosh, there is no more need to strive.

Thus Korach's complacency pulled the rug from under the Torah, and his arguments were rejected.

What does it mean to strive constantly for kedushah? The first time the commandment to "be kadosh" appears in the Torah, the Ramban[4] quotes the Midrash[5] which explains that most of the body of Torah law 'hangs on' this commandment. He explains further that the idea of being kadosh follows the specifications of what foods and relationships are forbidden in the Torah. He teaches that we may be fooled into thinking that as long as what we are consuming is permissible, the amount that we consume matters not. According to Ramban, one who abuses the resources of the world with the rationale that these resources are not forbidden, is called "naval bereshut haTorah," a 'vile person within the delineations of the Torah.' Ramban writes that to prevent such over-consumption, the Torah adds the general commandment of kedushah, "...that we should be separated from excess...in these and similar issues." The importance of the goal of kedushah in preventing overconsumption is connected in the very persona of Korach, who claimed that the Jews were already kadosh.

The Torah tells us that the earth swallowed up "all the people of Korach and all their possessions." Our sages wonder, why were the possessions mentioned here explicitly? They explain that Korach was a very wealthy man and that this wealth caused the arrogance that brought him down.[6] Wealth is an important tool in human hands enabling us to fulfill our task more effectively. But, if not used properly, it can cause our downfall – and even destroy the world!

The kedushah concept is central, not only to Judaism, but to environmental preservation as well. Specifically, the kedushah concept can be the key issue for problems caused by our habits of over-consumption, which defeat our attempts to achieve sustainability.

Early considerations of sustainability pin-pointed unchecked population growth as the greatest threat to the world's sustained survival. The rate of growth of world populations, they argued, could not be matched by increases in food production. More recent research has found that a factor of considerably greater importance is the average individual consumption, which is increasing at a much faster rate than that of population growth. In the course of thirty years, the world's population doubled, while energy consumption per capita increased eightfold in this period. We may add to this the fact that in North America and Western Europe, ten percent of the world's population consumes fifty percent of its energy.[7]

The danger to the world posed by excessive consumption is serious. Not only does it deplete the world's energy store, it also is the chief cause of the warming of the atmosphere, through excessive burning of fossil fuels. In other words, the

excessively high standard of living in some parts of the world is a major source of today's ecological crisis.

This over-consumption is also manifest in our use of raw materials. It can even be found in our dietary habits. Note that the production of one kilogram of beef consumes sixteen kilograms of grain.[8] Present efforts to stem the tide of over-consumption focus mainly on legislation to impose restraints on the public.[9] But this approach has very limited effectiveness. Auxiliary propaganda drives to recruit public support, too, are largely ineffectual, because they lack a rational basis. The spirit of "After us the deluge!" is difficult to overcome.[10]

All this shows that the root of the problem originates in a selfish world view which inflates personal consumption beyond the essential. Regarding this problem, the Torah instructs us to "be kadosh"[11], or, in other words, to refrain from self-indulgence and luxuries. To appreciate the significance of this commandment, let us, for a moment, take a global view. The world, with all its myriad components, was put at humankind's disposal to use and enjoy as we see fit. Without any restrictions, this would quickly lead to total disaster. Accordingly, the Torah provides some detailed guidelines, such as the requirement to respect property rights, marriage regulations etc. But above all these, the key directive is the commandment: "You shall be kadosh!" It instructs us to take from the world that which we need to do efficiently our job of running the world in accordance with the will of its Creator – but no more.

What does this mean in practice? When we prepare to eat a tasty morsel, we are obliged to ask ourselves: will this make me a stronger servant of G-d? Or, perhaps, I am eating it only because of the enjoyment? This does not imply that we are forbidden to enjoy the world in order to improve our mood when we feel down or to drink wine on Shabbat to help us attain the joyfulness required for sublime inspiration, etc. Indeed, the Sages already taught: "A person will be called to account for everything which his eye saw and he did not eat".[12] This surely does not imply that we must eat from everything; but there must be a reason – we have to weigh our decisions.

Every time we walk to the grocery down the street instead of driving, every time we turn off the boiler when we had enough hot water for our shower, we are being "kadosh" and, simultaneously, making a contribution toward sustainability. A child raised in this spirit will have "the quality of the environment" at his heart and may have more impact on the ecology than legislation imposed on a dissident public. *(Rabbi Prof. Yehudah Levi is a former Rector, head of the Physics/Electro-optics Department of the Jerusalem College of Technology, and has been a President of the American Orthodox Jewish Scientists both in the USA and Israel. He has published many books and journals on Torah and technical subjects, and has won awards for his writings. He is currently a lecturer at the Jerusalem Academy.)* NOTES: [1]Much of the above is from the

author's books: Torah and Science (Feldheim, 2006), chap.3 & Facing Current Challenges (Lambda, Brooklyn, NY, 1998) Essay 36. [2]Cf. Commentary of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch to Genesis 2:3 and Numbers 16:3-4. [3]Numbers 16:3 [4]Ramban is an acronym for Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman Gerondi, (1194 – c. 1270), a master of Jewish scholarship including biblical, halachic, and kabbalistic topics, who was born and raised in Spain and eventually moved to Israel. Here quoted is his commentary to Leviticus 19:1. [5]Torat Kohanim Leviticus 19 [6]Midrash Tehillim 49:3 and Shemot Raba 31:3 [7]Like herrings in a barrel”, from The Economist, Dec 23rd 1999 [8]F.M. Lappe, Diet for a Small Planet, Ballantine (NY, 1975); pp.11, 382. [9]For an insightful analysis of why legislation fails, see, e.g., M. Gerstenfeld, Environment and Confusion (Academon, Jerusalem, 1994). [10]A statement attributed to the French King Louis XV [11]Leviticus 19:2 [12]JT Kidushin, end

[Dare to Look Us in the Eye When You Leave by Vered Hollander-Goldfarb](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FHR_UF2l5MutnYr3VnsrtufAMIFLB8GE/view)

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What standards should a leader hold himself to? Moshe toils at the often-thankless job of leading the people at God's instruction for about 40 years. It is sometime during that period that Korach leads a rebellion questioning Moshe's status. Moshe is willing to accept questioning of his position as leader of the people, but when Datan and Aviram seem to question his integrity Moshe turns to God "I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them." (Bamidbar 16:15).

A similar theme is running through both the parashah and the haftarah. But while Moshe is in the middle of his tenure, we meet Shmuel as he takes leave of the people. Who cares about the job when it is over? A person who values honesty. This haftarah is on the seam between two periods: Ad hoc leadership until now as seen in the book of Judges, and kingship (and dynasties) from here onward. Shmuel was the last of the leaders that arose as they were needed. He saw it as his responsibility to travel far and wide to see that all were well. As age became an issue, he tried appointing his sons, but they did not follow in his path. The tired and frustrated people asked for a king, a symbol of continuity and stability. Shmuel balked, "But the LORD your God is your king!" (I Samuel 12:12). Nonetheless, God instructed Shmuel to anoint the chosen king, Shaul. Transition from one leader to another is always a delicate matter. It is emotionally difficult to relinquish a position, even if it is the right thing to do. Even if it is mandated by God and you are a prophet. Shmuel teaches us that before moving forward, we need to close potentially open matters. He gathered the people to confirm the appointment of the king and to hand over the reins. Instead of a party Shmuel demands a time of reckoning. Before handing over the reins, Shmuel confronts the people: "Here I am, [bear] witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed: Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand

have I received any bribe with which to blind my eyes? I will restore it to you.” (12:3) Rather than thank the people for a lovely time, Shmuel demands to be held accountable for the period during which he led the people. His list of potential iniquities can be well understood by anyone who studies history or reads the newspaper. These are matters that a leader might convince himself that he is entitled to.

Shmuel had a message for all leaders to come. It is not only how you got your job, or your great historic achievements, what really counts is your integrity in the details. Perhaps Shmuel’s demand of the people should be etched on the walls of government offices. The gold standard for both leaders and those electing them to office.

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Yahrtzeits

Debbie Rubin remembers her father Solomon Kaplan on Saturday June 24th.