

# The Korach Rebellion

## -A Midrashic Study

Our parsha describes yet another dark episode in the Israelite wilderness experience, yet another uprising. This time, we have a new type of rebellion on our hands. Unlike the treachery of the spies or the story of the "lusting" for meat, this rebellion targets Moses and Aharon directly. It is almost as if this uprising is not about God at all. There is no rejection of the desert conditions or wishing for Egypt. This is a mutiny.

The leader of the mutiny is Korach, Moses' cousin. He leads a well orchestrated campaign against Moses and Aharon amassing quite a following. But it isn't just personal. Like any revolutionary movement there are principled arguments and ideological claims. The ideas and ideals will be expressed in the form of party slogans, propaganda, public demonstrations and the like.

We shall look into the agenda that Korach raises in his fight against Moses and Aharon. What does he say that gains such wide appeal? Is there genuine reason for complaint? Is Korach a well meaning ideologue, or a political opportunist?

### METHODOLOGY

This week, we shall attempt to answer some of these questions by using Midrash and we shall follow a specific methodology.

Our first task as we study each Midrash will be to understand the Midrash on its own terms. We shall ask what the Midrash wishes to teach us regarding the Korach rebellion.

But then we shall move on to a further, deeper level of analysis. We will move on to study use the Midrashic tradition as a sophisticated commentary, demonstrating the way in which Midrash functions as a punctilious Torah scholar. We will see how Midrash combs the text, identifying the unusual turns-of-phrase, the line which seems not to fit, highlighting important themes and variant strains in the Torah text.

Let me just add something before we start. The better you are acquainted with the parsha itself, the more you will appreciate the skill and art of the Rabbis who composed these Midrashim. Before you read on, you would do well to study Ch.16 reading through the text critically.

Here are some questions for you:

### Chavruta

#### 1. Read Ch. 16

As you read through the chapter, try to identify the flow of the argument.

(You will sometimes find that Moshe replies to the rebels with the very same words as they address him. eg. "rav lachem" in passuk 3,7 and "Hame'at" in passuk 9, 13.)

2. You have probably realised that it is difficult to identify a single faction or a uniform complaint here. If that is so, then ...
  - identify the different factions, and their particular complaints.
  - How many "tests" does Moshe set for the rebels? What is each "test" meant to prove?
3. 16:1 "And Korach took" - What did he take? see mepharshim?
4. 16:15 - Why does Moshe say this? Has he been accused of impropriety?
5. The political catalysts for the rebellion: See the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban on 16:1

For an important structural view of the two (or more) distinct stands in the Korach story, see either [Rav Leibtag](#) or Rav Samet (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/38korach.htm>).

### MIDRASH 1 - ALL THE PEOPLE ARE HOLY.

"And Korach took'(16:1): What parsha precedes this episode? - 'Speak to the Israelites concerning the making of Tzitzit (fringes).(15:34)

Korach stepped forward turning to Moses: 'You say, "Put on the fringe a thread of blue (*Techelet*) wool."(ibid.) What about a garment that is itself a blue colour (*Techelet*), would it not be exempt from the blue thread (on the Tzitzit)?'

Moses replied, 'It is obligatory to have the blue thread.'

Said Korach, 'A garment which is all blue is not exempt and four meagre threads do the trick!?'

Korach attacked again: 'A room full of Sifrei Torah, would it need a Mezuza?'

Moses answered in the affirmative.

Korach replied, 'The Torah contains 275 sections and they are not enough to fulfil the house's obligation to have a Mezuza, but these two sections (written in the Mezuza scroll) will fulfil the obligation for the entire house!

- Moses, you must be making this stuff up!" (Midrash Tanchuma)

Every D'rash begins with a foothold in the text itself. What textual aberration draws the attention of the darshan in our case?

" And Korach took'(16:1): What parsha precedes this episode?"

The technique which is adopted for this Midrash is that of "*semichut parshiot*" which, for students of Rashi, will be a familiar mode of commentary. What this means is that we search for a connection between the previous parsha (paragraph) and the opening parsha. The idea is to somehow connect the content of the two, otherwise independent, Torah paragraphs.

But let us note that in our case there is an added textual reason to adopt the methodology of "*semichut parshiot*": It is the opening passuk which states that "Korach took", but never tells us what it was that he "took"! While searching for the missing object of the statement, the *darshanim* decided to connect this open question to the previous parsha; Korach took - the parsha of tzitzit (to ridicule it.)

CONTENT

But let us progress to the content of this Midrash. Upon reading this Midrash at first glance, it would seem that Korach's challenge lies in the detailed technicalities of a Torah discussion. The argument here revolves around a certain logical inconsistency in the system of commands prescribed by the Torah. A four cornered garment must be adorned with ritual fringes - Tzitzit - which contain a single thread dyed blue by the *Techelet* die (a rare and expensive dye.) Korach asks about a four cornered garment which is entirely dyed with *Techelet* colour. He mocks the law that would require such a garment to have the additional blue thread. If the objective is to reflect upon a single thread of blue, then the single blue thread is certainly superfluous if we are dealing with an entirely blue garment? Indeed, why is Moses so pedantic about legal details? He clearly cannot see the wood from the trees. He tells Moses, "You look only to the letter of the law, but what of the spirit? Why are you so weighed down by the detail and not by the larger picture?"

This theme is further illustrated by the second example. If a room contains an entire stock of Torah scrolls, why does it need the miniscule Mezuzah scroll on the door. Are the contents of the room not enough?

So at first glance, the argument is a challenge to Torah law and its authoritative interpretation. Korach mocks the inconsistencies that Halakha (and all law) sometimes contains, and he uses this as a springboard to launch his offensive against Moshe's leadership. [2]

But look closer. Both these Halakhic examples are identical. Maybe there is something in the comparison between these two cases that tells us even more. The cases examined both concern logical inconsistencies. In each case a lone ritual act is considered unnecessary or superfluous in the presence of a much larger representative element. Why have a single scroll if the entire room is Torah? Why have a single blue strand when the entire garment is woven from blue threads?

What do both these stories tell us about Korach's rebellion? Was the rebellion based on a disagreement about Torah interpretation? Maybe, this Midrash is hiding a deeper reading of the text:

"They massed against Moses and Aharon and said to them, 'You have gone too far, for ALL THE COMMUNITY IS HOLY, all of them and the Lord is in their midst. WHY DO YOU RAISE YOURSELVES above the Lord's congregation?'" (16:3)

"For all the community is holy ... Why do you raise yourselves." The argument voiced here is not a discussion about Torah. It is a strident call for equality and democratisation. Korach attempts to undermine Moses' position on simple democratic grounds. All the people are holy and God is in their midst. We don't need leaders or intermediaries.

He uses the metaphor of the Tallit, the four cornered garment, and the Mezuzah. Both of these laws are symbolic, and designed to lead to a higher purpose. The law of Tzitzit is to act as a "reminder" of God's presence within our lives. "The *Techelet* colour is similar to the sea which is similar to the sky which reminds us of God's Holy presence." (Rashi on 15:34). The special *Techelet* blue is supposed to direct the heart and mind heavenwards. Likewise we place the Mezuzah as a reminder so that "these words will be upon your heart" (The Shema - Deut 6:2). These laws are not important in themselves, says Korach; they are simply legislated to lead a person to God. Logic would suggest that a *Techelet* garment, with a full blue

colour, is indicative of God in a more intense and powerful manner than the modest blue thread of the Tzitzit. Likewise, how can a Mezuzah replace the Torah scroll in its entirety? Moses stands by the letter of the law; a blue thread is a fundamental requirement, a Mezuzah scroll is essential to fulfil the dictates of the law. But Korach asks, Why is it necessary to limit the symbolic act to a single thread, to a small piece of parchment? Why not extend it to the entire garment, the whole house?

And by the same logic, why not crown the entire nation with Torah, with leadership? If they are all holy, then why is Moses or Aharon in a position of privilege? Why not give the prophecy or the high priesthood to the average man? All the people are holy (the entire Tallit is blue) so why do we need leaders (a special thread)? Why are you - Moses - standing aloof in the leadership role? Do you not respect the holiness of the nation? Do you view yourselves as "holier" in some way?

Indeed, the Ibn Ezra suggests that it was the appointment of the Levi'im to the Mishkan service which precipitated the unrest. Who did the Levi'im replace, asks the Ibn Ezra. He tells us that the Levi'im took the place of the firstborn. Prior to the Mishkan, the firstborn acted as the religious representative. Now, after the Mishkan, only the Levites served in the Mishkan. But, we should realise, the firstborn system is more democratic; every family has a representative. The Levite system (and the Levites are Moshe's tribe!) is sectarian and aristocratic. It singles out a particular group thereby creating an elite system rather than a more egalitarian system.

#### WHO IS HOLY?

So the argument is a moral, democratic one. This Midrash gives us a halakhic reading which supports this egalitarian line of argument. On this backdrop, a further pivotal detail of the story is more readily understood. We are referring to the test of the Ketoret which is utilised to identify the authentic leadership group.

"...In the morning, THE LORD WILL MAKE KNOWN WHO IS HIS, AND WHO IS HOLY ... and he who He has chosen will be brought close to Him. This is what to do: take firepans, Korach and all your band, and tomorrow put fire on them and lay incense upon them before the Lord. Then the man who the Lord chooses, HE SHALL BE THE HOLY ONE. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" (16:5-7)

Moses offers the Korach clan to act as High Priest for a day. They will perform the incense ritual, the most holy of rituals, which also carries a death penalty if abused. Moses' challenge to the Levite rebels is a direct response to their own argument. Apart from the symmetry in the linguistic retort ("Rav Lachem - You have gone too far"), Moses seems to be juggling with this issue of "Holiness". If the people are indeed "holy" as Korach claims, and therefore befitting of the leadership, then the incense should work for them. Is everyone a holy person befitting of the priesthood or is the holy person the person who God chooses? The "showdown" takes place "before God". It is only God who can decide who has the authentic aura of "holiness."

Professor Yishayahu Leibowitz deepens the connection between Tzitzit and Korach when he notes that the paragraph about Tzitzit also raises the issue of "Holiness":

"And you will see them (the Tzitzit) and remember all the

commands of the LORD, not straying after your heart or your eyes ... in order that you may remember and perform all my command AND YOU WILL BE HOLY TO THE LORD."

Yishayahu Leibowitz puts it in the following way:

"The difference between these two perceptions of 'holiness' is the distinction between religious faith and pagan worship. The holiness of Parshat Tzitzit is not a given assumption but a task. There we are not told, "You are holy", but a demand is made to "become holy." But in the religious consciousness of Korach and his followers, "The entire congregation is holy." Holiness is something bestowed upon one.

The distinction between the two concepts is deeper still: ... In Parshat Tzitzit, holiness is expressed in the most sublime aspect of the life of faith and the religious mindset of man; that he is required to accept upon himself a task. Nothing is promised or assured. He is simply charged with a demand ... But, in the holiness of Korach and his group ... man frees himself from responsibility, from the mission with which he is charged and from the obligation to struggle." (Notes on the weekly Parsha pg.96-97)

So, here is an argument that relates to democratisation and Holiness. Is holiness a virtue that is innate within the Jewish nation [the garment of *Techelet*] or is it something that one must work towards, something to achieve? If it is the former, then there really is no good reason to accept Moses and Aharon over Korach as national leader. But if the latter is correct - that holiness is a product of years of self-refinement - then Korach's argument begins to look exceptionally weak.

## MIDRASH 2 - INTEGRITY OF A LEADER.

"What did Korach do? He gathered the entire congregation and began to tell stories: "There was once a widow in my neighbourhood who had two little girls, orphans. She owned a modest field (from which they made their living.) She began to plough the field; Moses told her 'Do not plough with an ox and an ass together'(Deut. 22:10). She began to sow the field, He said 'Do not sow the field with mixtures of seeds (Lev. 19:19). She began to harvest the crop; he said, 'leave the gleanings, and the edge of your field for the poor'. She gathered the harvest; he said "Give the tithes to the Priest and the Levite'. She gave it all to him. She sold her field and bought two sheep in order to clothe her children from their fleece and to gain profit from their offspring and milk. They gave birth; Aaron came and demanded the firstborns, as it states: 'Every firstborn.... you must sanctify to God.'(Deut. 15:19) She gave him the lambs. Then she came to shear the sheep. Aaron came, 'Give me the first of the fleece,' he said. "God gave it to me, as it states, "The first of the fleece give to him."(Deut. 18:14)' .... she stood there crying with her two daughters. That is what they did to this desperate woman. This is what they do and they pin it all on the word of God." (Midrash Tehillim)

Korach is quite a storyteller! He knows how to manipulate the crowds, to appeal to their soft side. Like an expert politician, Korach uses human interest stories: images of poverty stricken single-parent families to manipulate public opinion, to arouse public rage. Let us examine Korach's argument as contained within this text.

The Midrash suggests a new argument in Korach's propaganda armoury. Korach claims: Moses and Aharon are using the Torah, abusing the Torah, to their own personal gain. They interfere in the lives of every normal person, always making demands which they claim are based in the Torah text and therefore in God's law. But is it a coincidence that many of these benefits go into their own pockets? (and let us not forget that it was Moses who brought the law to the people in the first place. Is it a coincidence?) Korach has ample "evidence" at his disposal, and he manages to combine these facts with a perfect "human interest" story.

## THE TEXTUAL BASIS?

Does this Midrash have a rooting in the text? Where do these themes manifest themselves in the Torah narrative? I believe there are TWO basis in the text for this Midrash.

The first is the one point in the story where Moses seems to get personally offended, a very unusual trait for Moses. In this episode, Moses calls Dathan and Aviram - Korach's colleagues - to a meeting in an attempt to resolve the dispute.

"Moses sent for Dathan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said, 'We will not come! Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness that you would also lord over us?' ... Moses was greatly saddened and he said to God, "Pay no attention to their prayers. I HAVE NOT TAKEN THE ASS OF ANY ONE OF THEM NOR HAVE I WRONGED ANY ONE OF THEM." (16:12-15) [3]

Where do we read that ANYONE has accused Moshe of a lack of personal integrity? Why SHOULD Moshe assume that he is being accused of fraud?

And indeed looking at the text, Moses' response seems inconsistent with the accusations that have been levelled against him. Let us recap. Dathan and Aviram accuse Moses of failing in his mission of taking the Israelites to the promised land. Moses is offended, upset and turns to God. But his prayer to God relates to a very different theme. Moses appeals to God with a request that He testify and reaffirm that he, Moses, has been absolutely honest regarding his personal integrity as leader. We have not heard these accusations explicitly in the Torah text but our Midrash - in typical Midrashic style - ably puts these words into Korach's eloquent mouth. The Midrash here manages to uncover these hidden accusations that hurt Moses more than any other critique.

Maybe this is the reason that public miracles are used to defeat the rebellion. A statement from God is the only way that these false accusations can indeed be proved as false.

A second origin of this particular Midrash should emerge from the "*semichut parshiot*" or alignment of topics in the Torah text. The Midrash shines the spotlight upon the "Matnot Kehuna" the priestly contributions. Reading ahead at the Korach story, one sees that Chapter 18 is devoted in its entirety to the special status of the Levites and their rightful receipt of tithes of all sorts. One understands the need for the Torah to restate the special appointment of the Tribe of Levi at this historical juncture, but we wonder why there needs to be such a detailed listing of the priestly contributions. Once again, the Midrash focuses our minds sharply as to the contentious nature of the "Matnot Kehuna." There is no doubt that the Korach rebellion seriously damaged the status of Shevet Levi. After this rebellion no one could confront the Leviim

without a hint of cynicism creeping into the back of their minds, saying: What makes you so worthy? - After all, seeds of cynicism, sown by the Korach's of society are all to frequently difficult to erase from our consciousness. After Korach the Torah felt a need to reinstate the importance of "Matnot Kehuna." The Midrash sees Korach as having made a frontal attack on this Halakhic sphere.

### MIDRASHIC APPROACH No. 3 - A FAMILY ARGUMENT.

"Why did Korach create a dispute? His uncle, Eltzafan the son of Uzziel was appointed as Chieftain over the Tribe of Levi (Numbers 3:30). Korach said, 'My father is one of four boys - "And the sons of Kehat: Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron and Uzziel.'"(Ex. 6:18) Amram the firstborn, has his son Aaron as the priest and Moses as the national leader. Who should take the role of chieftain? Obviously the second son, and I am Yitzhar's son! I should have become chieftain and now Moses has appointed the son of Uzziel - the youngest - over me! I am going to oppose Moses and overturn the appointment." (Tanchuma)

First let us focus on the textual foundation for this Midrash. It is quite obvious:

"Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kehat, the son of Levi, took .." (16:1)

Why mention the long genealogy? This Midrash perceives Korach as bearing a grudge based on ancestry.

Here, the Midrash does not make an attempt to cloak Korach's rebellion in any ideological stance. Here we have simple family rivalry, power politics, jealousy. We have one member of a family resenting the advance of his cousin. Korach is jealous and it is his self-centred ambition that fuels the rebellion

### TIMING.

It is interesting to think about what series of events precipitated this rebellion. What caused the feeling in the camp to be such that the leadership of Moses and Aaron were questioned? NACHMANIDES suggests that the rebellion happened in the wake of the decree that Israel wander in the desert for forty years. After this event the national morale plunged to an all-time low. The people were bitter and despondent. This was not the first hiccup in the journey to the Promised Land, and the emotional climate provided fertile ground for cultivating feelings of discontent amongst the people. Korach simply took advantage of these emotions and developed the themes of Moses' leadership failure, embellishing it and making it into a full-scale mutiny.

But the IBN EZRA sees the issue differently. As we have seen, he speaks of the elevation of the tribe of Levi (see Bamidbar Ch.3,4,8) as the main cause of the rebellion. The people saw Moses giving special rights and privileges to his own tribe. Now the Levites served in the Temple and were eligible to receive tithes from the rest of the nation. Who set up this hierarchy? Who decided that the Levites be more prestigious? Moses.

Now this argument is somewhat problematic, seeing that Korach himself is a Levite, but the Ibn Ezra explains that this was Korach's genius. He had the ability to unite multiple groups with completely different agendas under a single banner: "All the people are Holy!" The Ibn Ezra explains that the appointment of the Levites to High

Service and the subsequent "reshuffle" opened a Pandora's box of complaints. The firstborn Israelites (Korach was a firstborn) were upset that they had been "demoted" from the Temple service. Reuvenites (Reuven is the firstborn tribe of Jacob) like Dathan and Aviram were wondering why the Levites had been chosen and their tribe passed over. The Levites were offended that only Aaron's sons had received the call to the Priesthood whereas they, the Levites - were mere assistants. Korach took all the malcontents and united them in a call for democratic appointments in the community.

Look at these readings of the timing of this rebellion. They each seem to reflect one of the strands raised in our Midrashim.

### SUMMARY

We have seen a number of attempts to explain this rebellion. Was it fuelled by ideological egalitarianism or personal jealousy? Was it a genuine feeling of no confidence in Moses, accusations regarding his personal integrity, or were the Israelites simply looking for a scapegoat after the decree to wander for forty years?

And then, there is a second question; who is stirring up the trouble? Is it Dathan and Aviram, or is it the 250 chieftains or is it Korach himself? It would seem that each group here has a clashing agenda, but yet they are working together in harmony. Then diverse arguments associated with Korach suggest to us that Korach's mutiny, rather than being a unified movement, might have been a coalition of several factions with very different agendas. Korach - the Levite and relative of Moses - is joined by "Dathan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and Onn ... all Reuvenites ... and two hundred and fifty chieftains of the Israelite community." (16:1-2) It would seem that most of these people are motivated, to a significant degree, by personal self-interest. Maybe it is for this reason that the Mishna states:

"Every controversy which is pursued in a heavenly cause is destined to be perpetuated and that which is not pursued in a heavenly cause will not be perpetuated. What is a controversy for the sake of heaven? This is the controversy of Hillel and Shamai. And what is that controversy that is not pursued in a heavenly cause? This is the argument of Korach and his clan" (Avot 5:17)

This argument is not directed towards heaven. It looks towards earth. It is not really about ideals at all. The ideals are just a foil for the real ambition, the personal vendetta, the desire for fame and power. Korach's group had no unified agenda other than toppling Moses. It is for this reason that their issues "will not be perpetuated". A moral or ideological truth lasts for ever, but misplaced personal ambition at the expense of others will always be consumed by its own fore - just like Korach.

### Shabbat Shalom

[2] For an approach that views the Korach debate in terms of an argument as to the nature of Torah, see REFLECTIONS OF THE RAV vol. 1. by Rabbi A. Besdin; Chapter XIII (pg.139-149) entitled, "The Common-Sense' Rebellion Against Torah Authority".

[3] This is also the connection point with the Haftara. See I Samuel 12:3-5 in the Haftara.