

PARASHAH: Korach (Korah)
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 16:1-18:32
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This is **Parashat Korach**. This is the telling of the story of the disloyalty of Korach, son of a Levite, and that rebellious bunch that followed him. I call it disloyalty owing to the fact that this complaint of Korach's was an audience designed to address the current leadership of Moshe and Aharon. However, knowing Korach's heart, a better-suited term might be open mutiny!

A summary of the story goes like this: Korach and followers from the leaders of 'Am Yisra'el challenge the authority of Moshe and Aharon, accusing the two brothers of "lording" over the people. Moshe's response is divine. He instructs them—nay challenges them to an authoritative proof-test. Since the human factor of choosing leadership is (in the eyes of Korach) obviously faulty, let God choose the appropriate man for the job!

They accept Moshe's challenge, and the next day HaShem does indeed intervene. At Moshe's spoken word (16:28-30), the supernatural judgment of HaShem vindicates the chosen leadership of Moshe and Aharon, and the earth opens her mouth and swallows the rebels alive! Also, a flame comes from the LORD and consumes the wicked men who would have offered an incense of fire before HaShem. As an object lesson to all who would otherwise follow after these sinners, the righteous son of Aharon, El'azar, is instructed by HaShem to fashion the fire pans used by this rebellious bunch, into plates to cover the altar for all to see and remember.

This initial tirade sparks a further challenge from the people, once they see that the enemies of God's chosen leaders have been killed. They cry murder! The Spirit of HaShem, who is observing this from the Ohel Moeyd (Tent of Meeting), sends out a plague to teach the unrighteous hoard a lesson they won't soon forget. In an act of mercy and intercession, and the request of Moshe, Aharon offers an atoning libation upon the altar to stay the wrath of the Almighty. Aharon's obedience effectively gains the favor of HaShem who then stays his hand of judgment, but not before 14, 700 of the community have been slain in his fury.

HaShem, feeling that he has effectively gained the attention of anyone entertaining thoughts of mutiny at this point, instructs Moshe to take staffs from each of the leaders of the Twelve Tribes, writing each leader's name on his respective staff. The staffs are then taken and placed before the Aron Kodosh (Ark of the Testimony) in the Ohel Moeyd. HaShem has promised that one of the dead sticks will miraculously sprout life, and that the man who owns that particular staff is the verified leader of the community.

The next day, Aharon's staff not only sprouts buds, but flowers and ripe almonds as well! God has made his choice. Each man has his staff returned to him, but Aharon's is placed near the Ark for a visual reminder to all who observe, that the LORD alone designates who will lead!

The remainder of the parashah describes the various priestly functions within the community, while outlining some of the privileges and inheritances afforded to the L'vi'im (Levites).

This particular story was well discussed among the company of the ancient traditions and writings of the Jewish people. **Talmud** and **Midrash** alike both give space for Korach and his uprising. Perhaps no other collection takes more time to explain Korach's ill feeling towards Moshe than the work known as the **Legends of the Jews** by Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953), available online at http://philologos.org/_eb-lotj/vol3/p08.htm. To this day Legends of the Jews remains a most remarkable and comprehensive compilation of stories connected to the Hebrew Bible. It is an indispensable reference on that body of literature known as Midrash, the imaginative retelling and elaboration on Bible stories in which mythological tales about demons and magic coexist with moralistic stories about the piety of the patriarchs. Legends is the first book to which one turns to learn about the postbiblical understanding of the biblical episode, or to discover the source for biblical legends that cannot be traced directly to the Bible. It is also the place to find answers to such questions as the date of Abraham's birth; what was Moses physical appearance; and what was the name of Potiphar's wife.

Let us glance a peek into Mr. Ginzberg's work. From Volume III, Chapter V we find concerning Korach:

...Then he tried to make Moses appear ridiculous in the eyes of the people. Shortly before this Moses had read to the people the law of the fringes in the borders of their garments. Korah now had garments of purple made for the two hundred fifty men that followed him, all of whom were chief justices. Arrayed thus, Korah and his company appeared before Moses and asked him if they were required to attach fringes to the corners of these garments. Moses answered, "Yea." Korah then began this argument. "If," said he, "one fringe of purple suffices to fulfill this commandment, should not a whole garment of purple answer the requirements of the law, even if there be no special fringe of purple in the corners?" He continued to lay before Moses similar artful questions: "Must a Mezuzah be attached to the doorpost of the house filled with the sacred Books?" Moses answered, "Yea," Then Korah said: "The two hundred and seventy sections of the Torah are not sufficient, whereas the two sections attached to the door-post suffice!" Korah put still another question: "If upon a man's skin there show a bright spot, the size of half a bean, is he clean or is he unclean?" Moses: "Unclean." "And," continued Korah, "if the spot spread and cover all the skin of him, is he then clean or unclean?" Moses: "Clean." "Laws so irrational," said Korah, "cannot possibly trace their origin from God. The Torah that thou didst teach to Israel is not therefore God's work, but thy work, hence art thou no prophet and Aaron is no high priest!"¹

The last line cited simply leaves no room for us to misunderstand the intention of the man Korach. And in the economy of the **TaNaKH**, to challenge God's chosen leader is to challenge God himself!

Biblical Idolatry

I can't help but be reminded of another familiar Torah lesson where a challenge of authority takes place, and where God's chosen leader is vindicated supernaturally. I'm referring to the story of Eliyahu (Elijah) and the false prophets of Ba'al. Allow me to recount that story here in our current portion and point out some valuable similarities.

The incident is recorded for us in 1 M'lakhim (1 Kings) chapter 18. The story is the familiar tale of Eliyahu haNaviy and his encounter with the false prophets of Ba'al at Mount Karmel. The people of Isra'el were once again (since the golden calf incident we read about earlier) engaged in grievous sin. The worship of the false god Ba'al was rife. In fact, the sin of idolatry was the most prevalent downfall of historical Isra'el during the time period of the TaNaKH! Eliyahu was out to set the record straight that day:

¹ http://philologos.org/__eb-lotj/vol3/p08.htm#THE%20REBELLION%20OF%20KORAH

"How long are you going to jump back and forth between two positions? If ADONAI is God, follow him; but if it's Ba'al, follow him!"

This profound challenge, found in 18:21, is the focal point of the entire passage! With the vindication of God as the ultimate authority, Eliyahu's leadership also takes on validity. If God is God, then Eliyahu is his chosen prophet!

As I've stated in other parash'ot, idolatry is one of the most insulting sins against our God! Why? When we replace God with a lesser interest, we are not only turning our attention towards something other than our LORD, we are actually focusing our love and affection—things which were created to belong to HaShem alone—towards something which has no authority to even be identified as God! In essence, we transfer the glory due to HaShem, to another, less qualified object! It doesn't have to have the name "Ba'al" to be a false god. Anything other than HaShem himself is an idol! No wonder our God is a "jealous" God! Similarly, when the people rose up in rebellion against the leadership of HaShem, they were in reality rebelling against the Almighty himself! For our God is the ultimate establisher of all earthly authorities, including specifically Moshe and Aharon as leaders of the Community of Isra'el.

The sages teach on this statement "jealous," which is expounded upon in the Torah portion at Sh'mot 34:14. According to the Midrash (a homiletic application of Scripture), the term jealous only applies when we as his created subjects transfer our affection to something that is less qualified to receive it than God himself. As an example, they tell of a married couple, where the husband, who is royalty, becomes enamored with a woman who is not his wife. The story says that upon discovery of his lust, his wife, the queen, confronts him about the other woman. Her husband confesses that he is fascinated with another. His wife then wants to know about the other woman's status. The king is puzzled. His wife explains that if he is lusting after someone of higher status than she is, then perhaps the other rightfully ought to receive it—since the other is equal to or higher than the queen is. But if the other woman is of lower status, then the queen has a right to be jealous, since her husband the king is stooping low to transfer his affection!

Of course the literal aspects of this Midrash are ridiculous—no other woman, whether queen or commoner should be occupying the king's thoughts! No one but his wife deserves his affection. Yet the teaching principle remains valid: God becomes jealous when we transfer our attention to a lower, less qualified object! He wouldn't be jealous if the object of our affection was equal to or higher than he was. Of course since there exists no other person or thing in the known universe that is equal to or higher than HaShem—he then has a right to become jealous!! This is the "clincher!" We cannot serve anything else and expect him not to be jealous!

When Korach challenged Moshe, he made the presumptuous statement that,

“After all, the entire community is holy, every one of them, and ADONAI is among them.” (16:3)

The problem with such a statement is that only the designated leader of the people was qualified to lead the people! HaShem makes the distinction! True, there was a measure of truth to Korach’s statement of the corporate holiness of the entire community, but that was not the real issue here. Korach had a problem with authority.

Conclusions

Authority was the issue in our current parashah, and it was the case in the story in M'lakhim. This is why Eliyahu haNaviy could make such a bold statement like "If ADONAI is God..."—of course ADONAI is God! He was trying to shock the people back into some sort of common sense! It is not as if there was ever any possibility that ADONAI might not actually be God and that Ba'al actually might be God instead. It was that since ADONAI definitely WAS God—let's get busy serving him! In other words, in our prophet's mind, there was never a contest. The same issue existed in the mind of Moshe: never did he doubt his chosen-ness! But since these insurrectionists were entertaining thoughts as to the validity of that truth, he staged the miraculous contest.

Oh that that depraved group of people gathered there at the foot of Mount Sinai would have caught a glimpse of what Eliyahu haNaviy knew! Oh that the wicked bunch gathered at the foot of Mount Karmel would have had the same revelation! Oh that those who would challenge God’s authority would see that it is tantamount to an assault on God himself!

Oh that we today might also catch it! Why did I call them depraved? When we allow our idolatrous passion to overtake our ability to internalize the glorious Truth of the unequalled glory of the Holy One of Isra'el, when this lust conceives sin and this sin leads to death—then we truly ARE depraved (James 1:13-15)!

2 Peter 2:19 quoting **Parashat Korach**, states that “The LORD knows his own...” This statement is made in context of a chapter dealing with foolish confrontations—just like the one Korach engaged in. Likewise, the bulk of Y’hudah (Jude) is given over to warnings against rising up against those who are clearly anointed ones of ADONAI Tzva’ot (particularly for this portion, verse 11)!

In my Torah commentary, I have briefly covered the topic of rebellion and lust. Our passage above in James actually further clarifies the danger of unbridled lust! What are idolatry and rebellion if not unbridled lust? Lust for power, and lust for that which does not belong to us! Korach and his bunch learned this lesson all too late and certainly to their destruction. That is why this type of

desire is so dangerous in the fact that it can totally overtake an individual to the point of destruction! The state of mind that the individual finds himself in is one of depravity, to be sure! In fact, don't take Ariel's word for it—read the following Scripture for yourself!

I challenge you to study Romans 1:18-32 and chart the downward progression of those who fail to recognize and proclaim that "**ADONAI is God! ADONAI is God!**" and that "**The LORD knows his own!**"

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v’chay-yeh o’lam nata-b’tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

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