



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

38 Korach — Holy Rebels at their Spouses' Command

Text

במדבר טז

א וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח בֶּן-יִצְהָר בֶּן-קֵהֶת בֶּן-לוֹי וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֶלְיָאֵב וְאוּן בֶּן-פֹּלֵת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן. ב וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁי־מִבְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתַּיִם נְשִׂאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי-שָׁם. ג וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה כָּל־שָׁם קָדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-קֵהֶל יְהוָה. ד וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו. ה וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-קֹרַח וְאֶל-כָּל-עַדְתּוֹ לֵאמֹר בְּקֹרַח וַיִּדַע יְהוָה אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ וְאֶת-הַקְדוֹשׁ וְהַקְרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר-בּוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו. ו ז אֵת עֲשׂוֹ קְחוּ-לָכֶם מַחְתּוֹת קֹרַח וְכָל-עַדְתּוֹ. ז וְתָנוּ בְהֶן אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָעוּ עֲלֵיהֶן קִטְרֹת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה מִחַר וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה הוּא הַקְדוֹשׁ רַב-לָכֶם בְּנֵי לׁוֹי. ח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-קֹרַח שְׁמַעוּ-נָא בְנֵי לׁוֹי. ט הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם כִּי-הִבְדִּיל אֵל הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת-עַבְדֵּי מִשְׁכַּן יְהוָה וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׁרְתָם. י וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת-כָּל-אַחֶיךָ בְּנֵי-לוֹי אֶתְךָ וּבִקְשָׁתֶם גַּם-כֹּהֲנָה. יא לָכֵן אֲתָה וְכָל-עַדְתְּךָ הֵנּוּ עֹדִים עַל-יְהוָה וְאַהֲרֹן מֵהָהוּא כִּי תִלוּנוּ (תְּלִינוּ) עֲלָיו. יב וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה לְקַרְאֵת לְדָתָן וְלְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֶלְיָאֵב וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא נַעֲלָה. יג הַמַּעַט כִּי הָעֲלִיתָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ זִבְתַּח לְחַלְבֵּי וְדַבַּשׁ לְהַמִּיתָנוּ בְּמִדְבָר כִּי-תִשְׁתַּרְרַר עֲלֵינוּ גַם-הַשְּׁתַרְרָר. יד אַף לֹא אֶל-אֶרֶץ זִבְתַּח חֶלְבֵּי וְדַבַּשׁ הֵבִיא תָנוּ וְתָתֵן-לָנוּ נַחֲלַת שְׂדֵה וְכָרֶם הַעֲיִנִי הָאֲנָשִׁים הָהֵם תִּנְקַר לֹא נַעֲלָה. טו וַיַּחֲרַם לִמֹּשֶׁה מֵאֵד וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-יְהוָה אֵל-תִּפְּן אֶל-מִנְחַתָּם לֹא חָמוֹר אֶחָד מֵהֶם נִשְׂאָתִי וְלֹא הִרַעַתִּי אֶת-אֶחָד מֵהֶם. טז וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-קֹרַח רַח אֲתָה וְכָל-עַדְתְּךָ הֵיוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֲתָה וְהֵם וְאַהֲרֹן מִחַר. יז וְקָחוּ אִישׁ מַחְתּוֹת וּנְתַתֶּם עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וְהַקְרַבְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אִישׁ מַחְתּוֹת חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתַּיִם מַחְתּוֹת וְאַהֲרֹן אִישׁ מַחְתּוֹת. יח וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מַחְתּוֹת וַיִּתְּנוּ עֲלֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר וַיִּשְׁמָעוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קִטְרֹת וַיַּעֲמְדוּ פֶתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וּמֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן. יט וַיִּקְהָלוּ עֲלֵיהֶם קֹרַח אֶת-כָּל-הָעֵדָה אֶל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּרְא כְבוֹד-יְהוָה אֶל-כָּל-הָעֵדָה. {ס} כ וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר. כא הִבְדִּלוּ מֵתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶכְלָה אֹתָם כִּרְגַע. כב וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פָּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל אֵל הֵי הָרוּחַ תֵּלַכְל-בְּשָׂר הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יַחְטֵא וְעַל כָּל-הָעֵדָה תִּקְצַף. {ס} כג וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. כד דַּבֵּר אֶל-הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר הֲעֵלוּ מִסְבִּיב לְמִשְׁכַּן-קֹרַח דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם. כה וַיִּקְמוּ מֹשֶׁה וַיִּלְךְ אֶל-דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּקְרַב יִשְׂרָאֵל. כו וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר סוּרוּ נָא מֵעַל אֹהֶלֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים הַרְשָׁעִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶל-תִּגְעוּ בְּכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם פֶּן-תִּסְפוּ בְּכָל-חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם. כז וַיַּעֲלוּ מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן-קֹרַח דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם מִסְבִּיב וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם יָצְאוּ וַצִּבִּיב פֶּתַח אֹהֶלֵיהֶם וּנְשֵׂיהֶם וּבְנֵיהֶם וְטַפָּם. כח וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי-יְהוָה שְׁלַחֲנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי-לֹא מַלְבִּי. כט אִם-כַּמּוֹת כָּל-הָאָדָם יִמְתּוּן אֵלֶּה וּפְקַדַת כָּל-הָאָדָם יִפְקַד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא יְהוָה שְׁלַחֲנִי. ל וְאִם-בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה וּפְצָתָה הָאָדָמָה אֶת-פִּיהָ וּבִלְעָה אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שָׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֶתֶם כִּי נִצְצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת-יְהוָה. לא וַיְהִי כִכֵּל תוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶת-כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּבְקַע הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם. לב וַתִּפְתַּח הָאֶרֶץ אֶת-פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת-בְּתִיחֶם וְאֶת כָּל-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לָקַח רַח וְאֶת כָּל-הַרְכּוּשׁ. לג וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שָׂאֵלָה וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאֶרֶץ וַיִּאֲבְדוּ מֵתוֹךְ הַקֵּהֶל. לד וְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סְבִיב תֵּיהֶם נִסּוּ לִקְלֹם כִּי אָמְרוּ פֶן-תִּבְלַעֵנוּ הָאֶרֶץ. לה וְאֲשֶׁר יִצְאָה מֵאֵת יְהוָה וְתֵאכְלֵךְ אֶת חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאַתַּיִם אִישׁ מִקְרִיבֵי הַקִּטְרֹת.



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Bamidbar 16

1 Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth — descendants of Reuben — 2 to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. 3 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?" 4 When Moses heard this, he fell on his face. 5 Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Come morning, the Lord will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen. 6 Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans, 7 and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!"

8 Moses said further to Korah, "Hear me, sons of Levi. 9 Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, to perform the duties of the Lord's Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? 10 Now that He has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too? 11 Truly, it is against the Lord that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aaron that you should rail against him?"

12 Moses sent for Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come! 13 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 it over us? 14 Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come!" 15 Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Lord, "Pay no regard to their oblation. I have not taken the ass of any one of them, nor have I wronged any one of them."

16 And Moses said to Korah, "Tomorrow, you and all your company appear before the Lord, you and they and Aaron. 17 Each of you take his fire pan and lay incense on it, and each of you bring his fire pan before the Lord, two hundred and fifty fire pans; you and Aaron also [bring] your fire pans." 18 Each of them took his fire pan, put fire in it, laid incense on it, and took his place at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, as did Moses and Aaron. 19 Korah gathered the whole community against them at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.

Then the Presence of the Lord appeared to the whole community, 20 and the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 21 "Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!" 22 But they fell on their faces and said, "O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?"

23 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 24 "Speak to the community and say: Withdraw from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram." 25 Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him. 26 He addressed the community, saying, "Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins." 27 So



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they withdrew from about the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Now Dathan and Abiram had come out and they stood at the entrance of their tents, with their wives, their children, and their little ones.

28 And Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: 29 if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all mankind, it was not the Lord who sent me. 30 But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord." 31 Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. 33 They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. 34 All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, "The earth might swallow us!"

35 And a fire went forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense.

Context

Parashat Korach opens with challenges to the authority of Moshe and Aharon by members of the tribes of Levi and Reuven. Moshe handles the confrontation by arranging to test their ability to deal with the sacred realm – fire-pans and incense.- the next day. The outcome of the test is that the earth opens up and swallows all of Korach's people and their possessions, and the rebels themselves are consumed by divine fire. By Moshe's command, also using a fire-pan and incense, Aharon stays a plague that threatens the people whose disillusionment makes them restless against their leaders. The sprouting and flowering of Aharon's staff compared with those of all of the other tribal chieftains is offered as further proof of the rightfulness of his authority.

Responsibility for the sacred areas and materials is carefully designated to the Levite families, lest anyone else die as a result of breaching the sanctuary.

Those who serve in the sanctuary have no portion of land in Israel. The priests – Aharon's daughters and sons, and their descendants are to be sustained by the high quality sacred offerings brought by the people. For their portion, the Levites will have the tithes of the harvest offered by the people.

Explorations

Korach and his followers confront the leaders of the Israelite people, Moshe and Aharon. Among



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the rebels is a member of a distinguished family in the tribe of the Levi (Korach himself), of the tribe of the firstborn, Reuven (Dotan, Aviram and On), as well as leaders of other Israelite tribes, well-known figures all. They advance a claim to undermine the legitimacy of the power hierarchy on the grounds that the entire congregation is holy, and that the divine dwells among them all.

"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?" (Bamidbar 16:3)

Korach and his followers argue that since every person is equal in holiness, there is no reason for the two brothers, Moshe and Aharon to have so much power and control. Indeed, the major appointments have been given to the leaders' own relatives – the Levites. Korach's group seeks to bring upon the nation a participatory democracy to replace a theocratic dictatorship. The hereditary class structure is unacceptable to them; they call for a more egalitarian community.

Korach's claims seem very appealing to contemporary sensibilities. Yet, the terrible demise of the rebels and their entire cohort, and the ensuing plague disturbs our comfort with the cause. If the divine reaction is so severe, then it behooves us to inquire further about the incident. What textual clues might explain the outcome and inform our interpretation?

Some commentators speculate about the roots of the rebellion. Korach's confrontation follows immediately on the heels of the incident with the scouts and the punishment of the congregation – the adults are condemned to perish in the desert without entering the Promised Land. Ramban suggests that there might have been discontent with the leadership who seem to have failed the community. Ibn Ezra sees the inauguration of the Mishkan as the cause for discontent – the Levites had been installed in place of the Reuvenites. Particular families had been favored. The rebellion might arise from seething internal politics and conflicts within the community.

Many commentators try to learn about the rebellion from the first verse of our parasha. The text states that Korach “took” without offering an object to complete the verb. What did Korach “take”? This is the first of two possibilities Rashi proposes,

“**And Korach took,**” this section is explained beautifully in midrash Tanchuma. And Korach took: He took himself to one side in order to be separated from the midst of the congregation in order to complain about the priesthood - that is what the Targum Onkulus says: (in Aramaic) 'v'eitpaleg' - he separated himself from the rest of the congregation to hold on to the dispute.

Rashi explains that Korach takes himself aside, that is, separates himself from the community, creating division and fomenting conflict. This is not to say that the sages do not tolerate differences of opinion. Indeed, they are desired. On the same first verse, for example, Ramban criticizes Rashi for his interpretation that Korach took himself aside, separated himself. He understands that Korach was summoning his resolve, awakening his heart to speak his views.



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The Mishna distinguishes between two varieties of disputes,

Any dispute that is for the sake of heaven is destined to endure; one that is not for the sake of heaven is not destined to endure. Which is a dispute that is for the sake of heaven? The dispute(s) between Hillel and Shamai. Which is a dispute that is not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his company. (Avot 5:17)

A midrash in Bamidbar Rabba speculates about the kind of dispute that Korach put forward,

The verse literally states: "and Korach took..." (Bamidbar 16:1). What is recorded immediately preceding this section? "Let them make for themselves *tzitzit*..." (Bamidbar 15:38). Korach sprang forth and said to Moshe: 'if a garment is entirely colored with sky-blue *tekhelet* dye, is it or is it not exempt from the obligation of *tzitzit*?' Said Moshe: 'it is nevertheless obligated in *tzitzit*!' Korach then retorted: 'if a garment that is colored entirely with sky-blue *tekhelet* dye cannot exempt itself, shall four small threads then exempt it?!'

He further asked: 'if a house is entirely filled with scrolls of the Torah, is it or is it not exempt from the *mezuzah*?' Said Moshe: 'it is nevertheless obligated to have a *mezuzah*!' Korach then retorted: 'if an entire Torah scroll that contains 275 separate sections cannot exempt the house, shall two small sections in the *mezuzah* scroll then exempt it?!' Korach concluded: 'you were not commanded concerning these things and have fabricated them from your own mind!' This is what is meant by the verse: "and Korach took".

This midrash points to disputes about religious ritual objects. The first of these, *tzitzit* -fringes, are commanded in the Torah immediately preceding our parasha. Korach poses two similar challenges – he claims the irrelevance of ritual symbols to a whole that embodies the concept in its entirety. Why would a completely blue garment need blue ritual fringes? Why would a room of torah scrolls need short excerpts from the torah on its doorposts?

Korach's conclusion in this midrash, “you were not commanded concerning these things and have fabricated them from your own mind!” suggests that Korach is not opening a dispute in order to understand better how to fulfill divine will. He seems to be trying to show Moshe's interpretation to be absurd, and thereby delegitimize Moshe's authority. Korach's logic undermines the significance and sanctity of ritual itself. A short passage in the talmud explains a quality common to both of these rituals,

Israel is dear because the Holy One, Blessed be S/he,
surrounds/encompasses them with ritual observances: phylacteries upon



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their heads, phylacteries upon their arms, fringes upon their garments and mezuzot [scriptures] upon their openings [doorposts]. (Menachot 44a)

This text suggests that there is something special, loving about sanctifying the boundaries of our bodies and homes with a divine marker. Similarly to the argument put forward in the midrash about *tzitzit* and *mezuzah*, in the torah, Korah claims that everyone is part of one and the same whole – there is no need to distinguish or mark out particular leaders.

The dynamic between part and whole comes up again in another talmudic passage that tries to explain why one of the rebels, On, does not appear further in the text when the punishments are described. Apparently, he survives the punishment on account of his spouse.

Rab said: On, the son of Peleth, was saved by his spouse. Said she to him, 'What does it matter to you? Whether the one [Moshe] remains master or the other [Korah] becomes master, you are but a disciple.' He replied, 'But what can I do? I have taken part in their counsel, and they have sworn me [to be] with them.' She said, 'I know that they are all a holy community, as it is written, seeing all the congregation are holy, everyone of them. [So,]' she proceeded, 'Sit here, and I will save you.' She gave him wine to drink, intoxicated him and laid him down within [the tent]. Then she sat down at the entrance thereto and loosened her hair. Whoever came [to summon him] saw her and retreated.

Meanwhile, Korah's spouse joined them [the rebels] and said to him [Korah], 'See what Moshe has done. He himself has become king; his brother he appointed High Priest; his brother's sons he has made the vice High Priests. If *terumah*-offerings are brought, he decrees, Let it be for the priest; if the tithe is brought, which belongs to you [i.e., to the Levite], he orders, Give a tenth part thereof to the priest. Moreover, he has had your hair cut off, and makes sport of you as though you were dirt; for he was jealous of your hair.' Said he to her, 'But he has done likewise!' She replied, 'Since all the greatness was his, he said also, Let me die with the Philistines. Moreover, he has commanded you, Set [fringes] of blue wool [in the corners of your garments]; but if there is virtue in blue wool, then bring forth blue wool, and clothe your entire academy with it.' Thus it is written, Every wise woman builds her house — this refers to the spouse of On, the son of Peleth; but the foolish pluck it down with her hands — this refers to Korah's spouse. (Sanhedrin 109b-110a)

This story contrasts two women, each of whom directs her spouse's behavior. One saves him from his demise, the other goads him on to his terrible end. On's spouse believes that hierarchy is inevitable – challenging the current leaders will not bring egalitarianism to the people, only a change at the helm. Given the risks of confronting Moshe and Aharon, she prefers to leave the



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status quo intact, let others conduct the struggle, and keep her spouse safe at home under her guard.

Korach's spouse has completely different priorities. She does not seem to be concerned either with politics or with the potential risks of rebellion. She focuses Korach on the humiliation that he has suffered under Moshe. She riles him up about what she considers Moshe's egotism and jealousy. Rather than an expression of divine service and connection, she uses the commandment of *tzitzit* as a tool for manipulation in a cynical bid for power. Korach's spouse feeds him with disingenuous claims and motivates him to seek power for himself.

The moral at the end of the stories makes clear a recurrent theme – women, often at home, are orchestrating their spouses' often public behavior. In both of these cases, the man becomes a compliant, passive object of the woman's domination. In the first case, On's spouse actually drugs him – to save him from his commitment to the gang. In the second case, Korach's spouse not only persuades him to rebel, but supplies him with the specific content of his arguments.

A midrash on Psalm 104 describes an interaction between two talmudic scholars, Beruria and Rabbi Meir.

There were once some thugs in the neighborhood of R. Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. R. Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His spouse Beruria said to him,

“How do you interpret [that such a prayer should be permitted]? Because it is written, 'Let sins [not sinners] be uprooted from the earth' (Psalms 104:35)? Is it written sinners? It is written sins! Further, look at the end of the verse, 'and let the wicked cease.' Since the sins will cease, there will be no more wicked people! Rather pray for them that they should repent, and there will be no more wicked.”
He did pray for them, and they repented. (Brakhot 10a)

This midrash concerns a talmudic sage, Rabbi Meir, known for the great depth and complexity of his thinking.

No one was equal to Rabbi Meir in his generation. But the *halakha*-law does not accord with him because his colleagues couldn't fathom the depth of his mind. Some say that his name was really Rabbi Nehorai, or Rabbi Nechmiah, or Rabbi Eleazer – but he was called Rabbi Meir because he enlightened his colleagues. He would declare what was *tamei*-impure *tahor* -pure, and what is *tahor*, *tamei*, and he would give reasons to prove it. (Eruvin 13b)

In the midrash, a great scholar is a passive recipient of his spouse's incisive ethical teaching. Without any response, he completely changes his behavior to correspond to her opinion. Her intervention succeeds to save people's lives and turn them away from transgression.



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In one place, the talmud offers general statements about the advice of women spouses,

Rab also said: He who follows his spouse's counsel will descend into hell, for it is written, “But there was none like Ahab [who did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his spouse stirred up]” (Kings I 21:25). R. Papa objected to Abaye: But people say, If your spouse is short, bend down and hear her whisper! — There is no difficulty: the one refers to general matters; the other to household affairs. Another version: the one refers to religious matters, the other to secular questions. (Bava Metzia 59a)

In this passage, R Papa holds women's authority to be acceptable in household and/or secular matters, but not in “general” or religious matters. There is no doubt that Beruria confounds this opinion. Our talmudic midrash about Korach and his spouse shares significantly with the biblical example of Jezebel who “stirred up” her spouse Ahab. Like Korach, Ahab meets an untimely end on account of his haughty hubris.

A few lines later on the same page, another statement about women spouses is recorded,

R. Helbo said, “One must always observe the honor due to his spouse, because blessings rest on a man's home only on account of his spouse, for it is written, 'And he treated Abram well for her sake'” (Ber. 12:16). And thus did Raba say to the townspeople of Mahuza [a large town on the Tigris River where Raba had his academy], “Honor your spouses, that you may be enriched.”

An anecdote is told about Barack and Michelle Obama,

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama went out to lunch one day and suddenly the owner of the restaurant walked over to greet them. The owner kindly introduced himself to the President, then turned and told the First Lady, “Wow Michelle, you still look great!” As the owner walked away from the table, the President asked Ms. Obama, “Someone you know from the past?” Ms. Obama responded, “Yeah, he had a strong crush on me in high school.” Mr. Obama laughed and said jokingly, “And to think, had you married him, you could've been co-owner of this fine restaurant here.” Ms. Obama looked up and replied, “No, had I married him, he would've been President of the United States.”

Having explored these narratives and some interpretations, whatever depth and meaning we might plumb, the concept of spouses who lurk behind men is ultimately dissatisfying and demeaning to all. The women are literally behind the men, that is, hidden from view, excluded from the actions under consideration. Furthermore, contrary to their public facades, in private, the men are passive objects of manipulation. We are left with a clear need for women's autonomy to take decisive action as leaders and policy-makers – to put into public religious and secular policy and practice the exquisite ethical values and priorities that Beruria embodies. Perhaps we will also socialize men with the gumption to counteract the greed and hubris that Korach's midrashic spouse and biblical Jezebel advocate.



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Questions for Discussion

Explore your view about Korach's arguments – in the parasha, in the interpretations etc.? - are they appealing, persuasive? Is he motivated by desire for power for himself and his cohort, or by belief in the equality of everyone? Explain.

When we challenge those with power in our society, how might we ensure that we use power for the benefit of the public and not just to replace one group of autocrats with another?

Consider Moshe's response to Korach's challenge – in our text. Evaluate how you see Moshe and Aharon's leadership in this incident. According to what emotions and attitudes does Moshe respond? Do you believe in the possibility of leadership that is not corrupted by power? What are the important criteria for good leaders, in your view?

Consider what non-hierarchical models for power-sharing you have experienced (in any area of life), or you would like to experience?

How does the sacred service in which the priests and Levites engage derive from and parallel the Israelite sacred service of working the land? What are the purposes and dis/advantages of dividing ritual and economic tasks and the power that comes with them? Should this division of tasks be based on inherited status or according to sex? On what basis do we privilege certain tasks and ascribe to them power in our society today? Do these privileges correspond to the tasks that we consider sacred?

Discuss some models of male spouses supporting and/or influencing women's policy decisions, public and private, in biblical or other texts (novels, different canons), in historical or contemporary life. Discuss the effect of these models on their relationships and on society.

Discuss whether there is, and ought to be any difference between the roles of male and female spouses in relation to decision-making authority in the family, in private and in public? If one spouse [of either gender] holds public office / authority, should s/he exercise that authority according to the advice/guidance of the other spouse who was not chosen for that position? What are the relevant considerations?

Study Links

[Here](#) is a unique rich and controversial perspective on Korach, one of few who dare to entertain the possibility of the greatness of his rebellion. Yehoshua Engelman includes the following hasidic view, “The Seer of Lublin said 'Were I alive at the time – I would have supported Korach'.”



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Rachel Adler's essay about Beruria, "[The Virgin in the Brothel and Other Anomalies: Character and Context in the Legend of Beruriah](#)" demonstrates refined critical feminist interpretation of rabbinic texts.

Daniel Boyarin published a [fascinating academic article](#) about Rabbi Meir as “patron saint of the incongruous.” See particularly from page 530:

"21st-century organisations tend to adopt the flatter structures that have become possible as more and more information within an organisation comes online. Instead of a managerial hierarchy with seven to ten or more layers of fat, flat organisations have three or four levels. Flat organisations are a cross between a spider's web (interconnected networks) and a leaping frog able to jump into innovations, reinvention, and renewal."

From an essay by Karin Klenke in the field of organizational studies that discusses non-hierarchical organizational structures, "[Keeping Control in Nonhierarchical Organisations](#)".

Become acquainted and experiment with *Open Space Technology* by exploring this and many sites: [Open Space Technology](#) is a simple way to run productive meetings, for five to 2000+ people, and a powerful way to lead any kind of organization, in everyday practice and extraordinary change.

Summary of Issues

The difficulty to understand the motives for Korach's rebellion in the torah is compounded by the contradiction between his stated aims and the divine punishment that is meted out to him and his cohort. Many rabbinic interpretations attribute men's decisions and behavior to the influence of their female spouses.

Methods & Observations

Where torah texts seem to present contradictions, rabbinic interpretations often conjecture about missing information and propose possible resolutions. As we appreciate the richness of this midrashic process, we must also be attentive to the latent assumptions and world-views that inform it, particularly concerning women's roles.

Contact

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