



30 Sivan, 5784 | July 6, 2024

Korach: The Right Reasons **Rabbi Naima Hirsch Gelman, Class of 2024**

I am grateful that, as a member of Maharat's 12th graduating class, I was not personally subject to vitriol objecting to my ordination. *They're destroying Orthodoxy. They just want to be in charge. I'd be supportive, but only if they were doing it for the right reasons.* And so on. Of course, what does it mean for someone to be pursuing a leadership role "for the right reason?" Who gets to decide which reasons are right and which are wrong? And why is power such a bad thing for an Orthodox woman to pursue?

These questions feel especially resonant this week when we read *parshat Korach*, the primary Biblical example of would-be leaders challenging authority for all the wrong reasons. It's easy to understand from the narrative's conclusion that Korach was wrong in challenging Moshe's leadership. But today, we can't wait until the ground swallows someone up to determine who deserves to be in charge. So what might the story of Korach teach us about modern-day leadership?

When reading Korach's challenge to Moshe and Aharon's authority, I find myself sympathetic to his frustration. "The whole community is holy," Korach's faction declares, "why do you raise yourselves above the congregation?" (Bamidbar 16:3). The problem with the Moshe-Aharon administration seems to be an egalitarian one. Shouldn't leadership be open to anyone? Aren't all Jews equally holy in God's eyes?

I know that on the most fundamental level that the answer to both of those questions is yes: Anyone can lead a Jewish community, and no one Jew is holier than another. But if Korach and his acolytes were wrong enough to not only be humiliated (Bamidbar 16:19-22) but physically consumed (Bamidbar 16:31-33) by God, then what was so wrong with their challenge?

In *parshat Yitro*, Moshe's father-in-law observes the unhealthy dynamics of Moshe's current leadership style and prods him to change it. After watching Moshe "sit as magistrate" (Shemot 18:13) for a day, solving disputes and spreading God's teachings, Yitro observes that burnout is imminent and its consequences will be detrimental. "You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone" (Shemot 18:18). It is clear from how Yitro phrases his critique that his priority is not only Moshe's wellbeing but that of the entire nation. Yitro, himself a community leader, understands that Moshe should not be the only person to whom the

Jewish people can turn. He instructs Moshe to set up a justice system of “trustworthy [men] who spurn ill-gotten gain” (Shemot 18:21) so that Moshe can “make it easier for [himself] by letting them share the burden” (Shemot 18:22). The narrative doesn’t include any response from Moshe other than his immediate enactment of Yitro’s advice. Clearly Moshe is open to critique and will work to resolve toxic or unhealthy leadership dynamics.

Later on, when Korach approaches Moshe to supposedly demand a fair distribution of power, Moshe is immediately opposed to the validity of Korach’s claim. His first response is to “fall on his face” (Bamidbar 16:4) and his second is to question the purity of Korach’s intentions. Because Korach is also a Levi, Moshe does not trust the purity of Korach’s complaint. Korach already belongs to a “holier” sect of the nation that has access to private ritual spaces and holds important and visible leadership roles within ritual settings. Moshe therefore understands the nature of Korach’s quest for leadership as a personal grudge: “Truly, it is against God that you and all your company have banded together. For who is Aharon that you should rail against him?” (Bamidbar 16:11). Moshe understood that Korach wasn’t upset that he doesn’t have access to God; he was upset that someone else did. His lack of patience for the *halakhic* process, as we read in Midrash Tanchuma (Korach 2), further discredits his claim:

Korach quickly said to Moshe, “In the case of a *tallit* which is all [dyed with] *t’chaylet*, what is the rule about it being exempt from [the mitzvah of] *tzitzit*?” Moses said to him, “[Such a prayer shawl] is required to have *tzitzit*.” Korach said to him, “Would not a prayer shawl which is all *t’chaylet* exempt itself, when four [*t’chaylet*] threads exempt it?”...[Korach] said to him, “These are things about which you have not been commanded. Rather you are inventing them [by taking them] out of your own heart.” ... When Moses said “And put on the *tzitzit* of each corner a thread of *t’chaylet*,” what did Korach do? He immediately ordered them to make two hundred and fifty blue *tallitot* for those two hundred and fifty heads of *sanhedraot* who rose up against Moses to wrap themselves in...

Here, the midrash uses the juxtaposition between Korach’s rebellion and the end of last week’s parsha, where God instructs Moshe to teach the nation about the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, to teach us something about how Korach operates. By reading Korach’s question closely, we see that it is not a genuine question. He just wants Moshe to reinforce his understanding: a *tallit* dyed with *t’chaylet* shouldn’t need to have *tzitzit*. When Moshe responds with the correct answer, Korach responds out of spite, proving that his question is not about what God had meant. We see this theme playing out in other places in

Talmudic literature: Korach's quashed rebellion is cited as the prime example of an "argument not for the sake of Heaven" (Pirkei Avot 5:17).

Both in the *parsha* itself and within the rabbinic imagination, we see that Korach isn't bringing a thought-out critique of how the nation's leadership was chosen, or suggesting that he could do a better job based on his innate ability or strengths. As opposed to Yitro, whose critique was rooted in deep care for the nation, Korach doesn't seem to care about the people, only how he might stand over them. Under the leadership of someone else, the cause Korach supposedly fought for might have been heard by those in power. However, we can see that he was only interested in democratizing power enough for him to have more of it. Or, in modern parlance, Korach was pursuing leadership for "the wrong reasons." He wanted power for power's sake, not to act on any personal mission statement, or to further egalitarian values within ritual leadership.

I'm not ashamed to admit that my call to the rabbinate is, on some level, about gaining power, because I know that power is a necessary ingredient in the delicate recipe of creating change within communities. But I didn't become a rabbi so that I can have power. I became a rabbi so that I can use my power to lift up the voices of those who have long been silenced and to build a more expansive and egalitarian Orthodox community. My personal mission statement may sound like Korach's, but I take it beyond the personal to the communal. Yes, we are all holy. Let's build something great together.

Rabbi Naima Hirsch Gelman's journey to Maharat was sealed by her middle school female Gemara teacher, who inspired her to become a Gemara rebbe herself. While at Maharat, Naima served as the Rabbinic Fellow at the National Council for Jewish Women, was the Programming Director at the Beis Community, and taught at Hunter Hillel. She was a Va'tichtov and JOIN for Justice fellow. Naima will pursue her master's degree in education at the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education.