

Parshat Korach
Man has a Mouth and The Earth has a Mouth
Sofia Freudenstein - Class of 2025

In Parshat Korach, our titular character – sensing a loss of hope among the Jewish people – brings a challenge of authority that shakes the foundations of Moshe’s leadership and the future of *Bnei Israel*. The fate of Korach and his followers is quite dramatic:

וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת-פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת-בֵּיתֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל-הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקֹרַח וְאֶת כָּל-הָרְכוּשׁ:
וַיִּרְדּוּ יָהִם וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאָרֶץ וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקְּהָל:
וְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבֵתֵיהֶם נָסוּ לְקֵלָם כִּי אָמְרוּ פֹן-תִּבְלַעֵנוּ הָאָרֶץ: (במדבר טז:לב-לד)

And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah’s people and all their possessions.

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.

All Israel around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us!” (Numbers 16:32-34)

In an almost comical manner, the earth swallows Korach and his followers, a dramatic act of divine punishment. But something that stood out to me more this year in its reading, is the earth’s *swallowing* of Korach and his followers, as if the earth itself is a character in this story.

This is not the first time the earth acts in this way, and with such moral force. The Gemara in Sanhedrin 37b compares our *parsha* to the last time the earth opened its mouth, in the book of *Bereishit*:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה עֲשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמִי אֲחִיךָ צַעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאָדָמָה:
וְעַתָּה אָרְוֵר אֶתְּךָ מִן-הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת-פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת-דְּמִי אֲחִיךָ מִיָּדִי:
(בראשית ד:י-יא)



What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!

Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. (Genesis 4:10-11)

Here, the earth not only swallows, but screams. The earth demands justice for Hevel, murdered by his very own brother! This is a gruesome image: the earth choking on Hevel's blood, a visceral reaction of disgust and horror towards Cain. In Parshat Korach too, the earth is an integral character in the narrative, showing the reader who is right and who is wrong.

How does our relationship with the earth shift when we begin seeing the earth as another being, instead of just what we live on?

Mara Benjamin in her article "There Is No 'Away:': Ecological Fact as Jewish Theological Problem,"¹ argues that Jewish theology is not properly prepared for the current climate moment. So many have written about the power of the approach of *לשמרה ולעבדה* from Genesis 2:15. God commands Adam to till and guard the land in the Garden of Eden, and this, in the writings of modern thinkers such as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik or Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, becomes the paradigmatic model for Jewish environmentalism. But this model of stewardship, as Benjamin calls it, suggests a kind of moral hierarchy: **we** take care of the land. We are the objects, and the earth our subject to be subdued. Benjamin believes that such a hierarchy and therefore superiority of us in contrast to the world, creates an impasse for meaningful Jewish Climate Theology. When we look down upon what is different from us, how are we to truly have empathy, how are we to really see ourselves in their shoes? [David Zvi Kalman](#) writes: "Climate change, and its punishing effects, are here, and getting worse, yet Jewish thinking and advocacy on climate change are still stuck in prevention mode."² We already have Torah from our pulpit rabbis, elementary schools, and UJA organizations telling us each to personally cultivate and protect the earth – to recycle, try to minimize our carbon emissions. But we are beyond that. Individual actions are

¹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/290>.

² https://www.jta.org/2022/06/07/ideas/jewish-environmental-thought-is-not-ready-for-the-climate-crisis-but-our-tradition-is?fbclid=IwAR19YAat7GAtja6WbguHBbpnImd-sYRGttw7q_kmZARLZdiZDG-OQSN6MQw.



not enough. We need something that will move us as a collective in a way that nothing else yet has. Benjamin asserts that we have thus far failed because we are not sufficiently empathetic to the world – unable to truly view it as a fellow being with whom we are in relation.

Benjamin says this comes from a fear of seeing the earth as a character in our own stories, with whom we must contend, since that is often understood in and of itself as being *avodah zara* (idolatry). She writes:

No scholar or thinker I have read yet has named that incompatibility for what it is, presumably because it is painful to recognize the incoherence of a tradition to which one is attached with lived reality. But it will not do to elide the problem, cherry-picking verses here and there or appealing to “Jewish values”. Contorted arguments for Jewish theological superiority over and against “animism” or “paganism” cannot help us here. Nor can we prop up ethical monotheism as an obvious good, juxtaposing it with superficial and self-serving accounts of other religious modalities. It is time for us to face the fact that climate disaster has pulled Jewish theology up short.³

Per Benjamin, we’ve shied away from relating to the earth as alive because we see religions deeply unlike ours do so. We think of the biblical idolatry of Asherah, in which fertility rituals involved tree-worship, or First Nations’ tobacco rituals where Gaia is honored. But we lose out by being scared of such images.

What if animism, a world that is alive and breathing, is an opportunity to have empathy for the earth, not to worship it?

Benjamin suggests in another [paper](#) that animism can actually already be found within our own tradition. She points to *Tehillim*, where mountains move and rabbits gallop, as a new framework for seeing the world.⁴

³<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/4/290>.

⁴ <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/reading-psalms-as-the-water-rises>.



But I don't think we have to look so far as *Ketuvim*. Our *parsha*, by animating the earth in its swallowing of evildoers like Korach and his followers, creates a character we are in relationship with. Not only that – a character that is necessary in the story in order to administer and teach us about justice.

A *midrash* from *Kohelet Rabbah* uses our animated earth from our *parsha* to illustrate a parallel:

אמר רבי ברכיה בשם רבי שמעון בן לקיש, כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא באדם ברא בארץ לדגמא לו, אדם יש לו ראש והארץ יש לה ראש, שנאמר (משלי ח, כו): וראש עפרות תבל. אדם יש לו עינים והארץ יש לה עינים, שנאמר (שמות י, ה): וכסה את עין הארץ. אדם יש לו אזנים והארץ יש לה אזנים, שנאמר (ישעיה א, ב): והאזיני ארץ. אדם יש לו פה והארץ יש לה פה, שנאמר (במדבר טז, לב): ותפתח הארץ את פיה. אדם אוכל והארץ אוכלת, שנאמר (במדבר יג, לב): ארץ אכלת יושביה. אדם שותה והארץ שותה, שנאמר (דברים יא, יא): למטר השמים תשתה מים. אדם מקיא והארץ מקיאה, שנאמר (ויקרא יח, כח): ולא תקיא הארץ וגו'. אדם יש לו ידים והארץ יש לה ידים, שנאמר (בראשית לד, כא): והארץ הנה רחבת ידים. אדם יש לו ירכים והארץ יש לה ירכים, שנאמר (ירמיה לא, ז): וקבצתים מירכתי ארץ. אדם יש לו טבור והארץ יש לה טבור, שנאמר (יחזקאל לח, יב): ישבי על טבור הארץ. אדם יש לו ערוה והארץ יש לה ערוה, שנאמר (בראשית מב, ט): לראות את ערות הארץ באתם. אדם יש לו רגלים והארץ יש לה רגלים, שנאמר: והארץ לעולם עמדת. (קהלת רבה א:ד)

Rabbi Berekhya said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: Everything that the Holy One blessed be He created in man, He created its parallel for the earth. Man has a head and the earth has a head [*rosh*], as it is stated: “[He had not yet made earth and fields, or] the beginning [*rosh*] of the dust of the world” (Proverbs 8:26). Man has eyes [*einayim*] and the earth has eyes, as it is stated: “They will cover the face [*ein*] of the earth” (Exodus 10:5). A person has ears and the earth has ears, as it is stated: “Listen, earth” (Isaiah 1:2). **Man has a mouth and the earth has a mouth, as it is stated: “The earth opened its mouth” (Numbers 16:32).** Man eats and the earth eats, as it is stated: “A land that consumes its inhabitants” (Numbers 13:32). Man drinks and the earth drinks, as it is stated: “[But the land]...by the rain of the heavens it drinks water” (Deuteronomy 11:11). Man vomits and the earth vomits, as it is stated: “So the land will not vomit [you out]” (Leviticus 18:28). Man has hands and the earth has



hands [*yadayim*], as it is stated: “The land is spacious [*rahavat yadayim*]” (Genesis 34:21). Man has thighs and the earth has thighs [*yerekhayim*], as it is stated: “I will gather them from the ends [*miyarketei*] of the earth” (Jeremiah 31:8). Man has a navel [*tabbur*] and the earth has a navel, as it is stated: “Dwellers in the middle of [*betabbur*] the earth” (Ezekiel 38:12). Man has nakedness and the earth has nakedness, as it is stated: “To see the nakedness of the land you have come” (Genesis 42:9). Man has feet and the earth has feet, as it is stated: “And the earth abides [*omadet*] forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:4). (Kohelet Rabbah 1:4:1)

The *midrash* here creates an analog between the earth and humanity. The earth has hands, the earth eats, the earth has a navel. And *midrash* is not merely a play with words: it is instructive. It teaches us, using these linguistic parallels from different verses, that God intentionally creates analogs between human beings and the earth. By God seeing the earth as having a body, we learn that God wants us to see ourselves as intertwined with the earth and its fate. God wants us to look at our bodies and wonder, what is the earth equivalent? What does it mean for the earth to awaken? To cry? To sing? And what do we do about this now that we cannot unsee our connection?

Our *parsha* began with Korach’s protest of כולם קדושים, we are all holy (Numbers 16:3). Rashi writes that Korach’s claim was good – after all, we were all at Mount Sinai. Now imagine if we were to expand the “כולם” according to Prof. Benjamin’s vision. We, us and the world around us, are all holy. How then, could we not be compelled to action? How might we be moved to protect the land so that we may not be swallowed up by it?

This is what Prof. Benjamin is asking of us. To begin thinking of the earth in this way. And then to imagine what such a relationship could lead to, what it could repair.





Sofia Freudenstein graduated with an Honours Bachelor degree from the University of Toronto in May 2021, double-majoring in Jewish Studies and Philosophy. Her undergraduate thesis was on assessing Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought, and she also completed her first basic unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Baycrest Geriatric Hospital at that time. Before university, Sofia competed in the International Chidon HaTanach, and participated in the Drisha High School Program, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, and the Tikvah High School Program. She spent a gap year at Midreshet Lindenbaum, interned for the organization Ayeka, has been Co-Rosh Beit Midrash at Camp Stone for two summers, and was the Director of Experiential Education at the Drisha High School Program this past summer. Sofia has been involved in her local Hillel as a Student Leader and Multifaith Chaplaincy Intern, and was a member of the Hillel

International Student Cabinet. While in the Core Semikha program, Sofia is also pursuing a masters degree in Jewish Philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University., and is the Maharat Intern for ASBI in Chicago for the 5783 year. Sofia fondly remembers hearing Torah from scholar-in-residence Rabba Sara Hurwitz at her parents' minyan when she was 13, and has been looking forward to this opportunity for learning and growth in leadership ever since.