

**Parshat Korach:
Contemplating Kedusha
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This week's *parsha* famously recounts the rebellion of Korach against Moshe and Aharon.

They [Korach, Datan, Aviram, and 250 chiefs of the community] combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all of 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? When Moses heard this, he fell on his face." (Numbers 16:3-4)

ג וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם
רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כָּל־מִן קְדוֹשִׁים וּבְתוֹכָם
ה' וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהַל ה': ד וַיִּשְׁמַע
מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פָּנָיו: (במדבר טז:ג-ד)

Overwhelmed or exasperated by Korach's confrontation, Moshe throws up his hands, and then sets up a demonstration of his family's unique status in response. Korach and his rowdy bunch will come to suffer a devastating fate for their claims of equality. God will mete out severe punishment against them and the earth will swallow them alive.

Many commentators see in this episode a power play between Korach and Moshe and Aharon. What Korach really wanted was to usurp authority for himself, they say. Yet his words belie that intention. His claim seems less political and more spiritual. It seems to be a contention about *kedusha* (holiness). And if that is the case, many questions arise. Just what about Korach's call for collective holiness was so wrong? Are we not a "*mamlechet kohanim*," a kingdom of priests and a "*goy kadosh*," a sacred community (Exodus 19:6)? Are we not an "*am segulah*," a treasured people (Ex. 19:5)?

Furthermore, regarding Moshe's own reaction, why was he so distraught? Just a few chapters ago, in Numbers 11, in the episode involving the prophecy of Eldad and Meidad, did Moshe himself not, like Korach, also advocate for a fully democratic spirituality? When Yehoshua sought to quash their seemingly rogue prophecy, did Moshe not retort:

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord put His spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:29)

... הַמְקִינָא אֶתְהּ לִי? וּמִי יִתֵּן כָּל־עַם ה' נְבִיאִים כִּי־יִתֵּן ה' אֶת־רוּחוֹ
עֲלֵיהֶם: (במדבר יא:כט)

Korach's claim seems to affirm just this sentiment, that "all of the Lord's people [are] prophets." "*Kol ha'am kulam kedoshim*," he said. All are equally holy. How then can we make sense of the unambiguous condemnation of his words?

The verses that immediately precede the story of Korach, in Numbers 15, provide an elucidating contrast. The laws of *tzitzit* are brought there, culminating with the following words:

Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God. I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the Lord your God." (Numbers 15:40-41)

מ לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים
לְאֱלֹהֵיכֶם: מֵא אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם לְהִיּוֹת לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (במדבר
טו:מ-מא)

Through *tzitzit*, and the visual reminder that they provide, we are charged here "*v'heyitem kedoshim* /*Elokeichem*," you shall be holy to God.

Herein lays a very subtle, but very crucial, difference between the spiritual life envisioned by Korach and the spiritual life encouraged by the Torah. Is holiness a fact of our people's existence or is it an aspiration? Is it a passive genetic inheritance or the byproduct of active devotion and commitment? Is our guiding directive to be a present-focused awareness of our already-attained status, as in "*kulam kedoshim*," we are all already holy? Or ought it be a future-directed never-fully-owned striving, as in "*kedoshim tehiyu*," you shall be holy?

The Torah clearly favors the latter model. In the famous words of *parshat Kedoshim*:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Leviticus 19:1-2)

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-כָּל-עֵדוּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם קְדוֹשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: (ויקרא יט:א-ב)

God here symbolizes a holiness of status--a static, reliable, unconditional form of *kedusha*. Holiness is a definitional fact of God's existence. "I, the Lord your God, am holy." But the holiness of the Jewish people is an altogether different project. For it is just that: It is a project, a task of a lifetime, something that is ever on the horizon of possibility, but never fully achieved. Indeed, the moment that one takes oneself to have achieved holiness is the very moment that it disappears. For holiness is essentially about *reaching for* transcendence, not arriving at a place of complaisance.

This is what Korach did not understand. And this was the spiritual error that cost him so dearly. A *goy kadosh* cannot tolerate such a toxic understanding of *kedusha*. It must literally be swallowed up by the earth because it threatens so deeply the path to authentic and deeply humble spirituality.

The 20th-century thinker Yeshayahu Leibowitz said this well:

The Judaism of Moses is arduous. It means knowing that we are *not* a holy people. The Judaism of Korach is very comforting. It allows every Jew to be proud and boast that he is a member of the holy people, which is holy in its very nature. This obligates him to nothing. There is no greater opposition than that between the conception of *Am Segulah* (a chosen people) as implying subjection to an obligation and *Am Segulah* as purely a privilege." (*Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, p. 86)

Kedusha as ontological status, as envisioned by Korach, is a dangerous supposition, both ethically and spiritually. It comes preciously close to ugly chauvinism and it stymies the possibility of real and continuous religious growth.

Leibowitz forcefully concludes, "The uniqueness of the Jewish people is not a fact; it is an endeavor. The holiness of Israel is not a reality; it is a task." (*Ibid.*)

Korach is a cautionary tale, reminding us of this terribly important distinction. It is also a clear charge toward an aspirational spirituality, one that rejects the self-satisfaction of asserting that "*kulam kedoshim*" (we *are* holy), and instead embraces the difficult striving of "*kedoshim tehiyu*" (we *shall be* holy), in the future, always, always in the future.



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