

Parshat Korach
Almond Blossoms In 2020
Rabbanit Tanya Farber - Class of 2021

Parshat Korach eerily reminds us of the headlines of our reality and grapples with the existential issues of our historic moment. Our parsha, too, is about plague, power, privilege, political instability, factionalism and many other relatable threats. There are constructive and destructive responses to despair and upheaval, and parshat Korach contains them all and suggests a way towards healing and wholeness.

Though it is easy to dismiss Korach and company for their corrupt self-interest, blinding ambition, and wickedness, the spiritual lessons will be deeper and more relevant to our context if we can recognize their weaknesses within the dark corners of our own souls. Let's zoom out for a moment, to see how our reality and theirs converge. If we read the Torah in chronological order, as does the *Ramban*, then the rebellion of Korach emerges after the sin of the spies, when the generation in the desert is doomed to die. There is no point to life. The desert is bleak; the future is dark. Shift now to the pandemic -- with staggering statistics of loss and suffering, the concomitant financial devastation of our economy, and the realization that systemic racism seems hopelessly entrenched in the fabric of our society -- and we might be inclined to either give up altogether in bitterness and dejection; give in to our worst impulses, ambitions and petty concerns; or retreat into spiritual growth and expression, while avoiding the call of the hour to serve. We can map these responses onto the various factions of Korach's insurgency, erupting out of despair. Yet the parsha doesn't leave us there, but guides us toward restored vision and redemption.

Our focus here is on the alliance of these rebels and their different motives, rather than on the institution of Moshe and Aharon's leadership. After all, Moshe begins as a reluctant leader, as we recall in his initiation at the opening of *Sefer Shemot*, and he then, throughout his life, courageously puts himself on the line to advocate for the peoples' survival and destiny, even as they wear him down. The Torah itself attests to Moshe's extreme humility, hardly consistent with him as a power-hungry leader. Even though upon arrival to the Land of Israel Kohanim and Leviim would be an unlanded, dependent class, at this point, in the desert, the Kohanim are prominent and the Leviim entrusted with important but dangerous jobs (carrying the holy vessels and parts of the Mishkan could be life threatening, without the prestige of the *kehuna* and direct involvement in the priestly *avodah*.)

Though unified against the general establishment, Korach's federation of rebels do not necessarily share an agenda. Korach, a cousin of Aharon, seeks the *kehuna* -- and high priesthood -- for himself. The *bnai Reuven*, namely Dasan and Aviram, revolt against Moshe as a failed leader who took them out of the Egyptian land of milk and honey to let them perish in the desert. And then there is the group of 250 leaders, **חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאָתַיִם נְשִׂאֵי עֲדָה קְרָאִי**, **מוֹעֵד אֲנָשֵׁי-אֶסָם**, *two and hundred and fifty princes of the congregation, distinguished in the assembly, men of reputation*. To organize his campaign, Korach taps into each group's self interest, whether radically holy or profane.

The commentators differ in their understanding of what animates the group of 250 to mutiny. The *Netziv* (Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, rosh yeshiva of Volozhin Yeshiva) claims that the band of 250 leaders were righteous and motivated by love of God!

Rabbenu Chananel identifies the 250 leaders as members of the tribe of *Levi*, deprived of *kehuna*. *Ibn Ezra* and *Ramban* identify these 250 as the firstborn who lost their privilege to serve after the golden calf, to be replaced by the *Leviim*. However, if the band of 250 were the people's spiritual leaders, *gedolai Yirsoel*, as posited by the *Netziv*, they were motivated by a yearning for the chance to serve God in the highest way, usually reserved for *kohanim*.

The *Netziv* describes the *Ahavas Hashem*, love of God, that burned within them. He claims they were not interested in politics or status, but, rather, they craved sanctity and *devekus*, spiritual communion with God through the *avodah*, and were even ready to be *מוסר נפש*, give up their lives, to attain this level of connection to God. For, as *Rashi* intimates, the trial that Moshe proposed to thwart the rebellion was deadly, echoing back to the tragic demise of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, during the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. When the factions arose against Moshe and Aharon, Moshe devised an ordeal to determine who would serve as *kohanim*: let the people bring fire pans and offer the incense--the very service that killed Aharon's sons. According to the *Netziv*, the 250 princes knew that this was their one and only chance to perform this most sacred *avodah*, and aspired to die while serving God in ecstatic devotion.

As Rav Elchanan Samet points out in his article, *Moshe vs. the Rebels: A Challenge on Two Fronts*¹, the two recruited factions to Korach's campaign were devoured, either by Earth or Heavenly fire, aligning with their earthly or heavenly motives. *Dasan* and *Aviram* craved material comfort and earthly security, and were consumed by the Earth. By contrast, the 250 men were devoured by a Heavenly fire since their aspirations were spiritual, even if misguided. In fact, the Torah teaches us that their burned fire pans were holy and thus incorporated into a covering for the *mizbeach* (altar). Rav Samet does not address Korach's punishment, and the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 110a) disputes which fate he suffered. According to one view, Korach was consumed by both earth and fire, mapping onto the duality of his action. Korach both brought a fire pan of incense heavenward, and was driven by earthly ambitions, tormented by jealousies, and burning rivalry.

The ritual of incense that was offered by the 250 spiritual seekers in epic self sacrifice was the very ritual of incense that Aharon used, right after this ordeal, to bring healing and restore the congregation against the plague that ensued. In one case, with the 250 men, the ritual was in service of self, even if religious self -- the *Netziv* notes that the leaders abandoned their people and *Bnei Yisrael* felt bereft of their spiritual guides after their death; in the other case, Aharon's offering, the ritual was in service of others.

But the story does not end with the destruction of the enemy, the suppression of the revolt, and the halting of the plague through Aharon's bringing of incense. In the last scene, God instructs Moshe to take 12 staffs, one from each tribe, and place them in the sanctuary, with Aharon's in the middle. The next day, Aharon's staff, a mere barren stick of wood, blossoms and sprouts buds and almonds! But his life-generating staff only does so in the midst of the other staffs, as part of the greater community. Aharon's service, though perhaps performed in isolation, nourishes and sprouts life for the entire people. As has been noted by many, the word *קדש*, almond, *shin, kuf, dalet* is an anagram of the word *שקד*, holy. Aharon's holiness is not reserved for him but is a generative force for the people.

¹ <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/moshe-vs-rebels-challenge-two-fronts>

Aharon's budding, fruitful staff is then stored in the sanctuary as a reminder for future would-be rebels. Its symbolism can still support us today, at a time when our inner resources may feel as barren as a dry stick. It may be tempting, when gripped by fear and insecurity, to be ready to give up and point blame outwards, as did Dasan and Aviram. And during times of instability, a sinister Korach can take charge. Whether in self deception or full awareness, a Korach can employ holy rhetoric, exploit the vulnerable, poison the community, and infiltrate the most sacred spaces. Even if we can repress our inner Korach and keep our own egos and pernicious impulses in check, we are not immune to ambition, self-absorption, and pettiness in their less toxic forms, especially when we feel helpless and compassion-fatigue. On the other end, the *Netziv*, in his analysis of the 250 princes, introduces us to our hearts' capacity for narcissistic spirituality as a means of escape from pain and evasion of our responsibility to serve.

Aharon provides an alternative, aspirational model for us. We may not be able to offer incense to halt the plague of Covid-19 or racism, but our focus, rather than being earth-bound or purely heaven-bound, can instead look toward community, to offer nourishment and support to others. We can hold the world, both those we love and those we don't, in our prayers, expand our circle of concern to include others, and embrace our role whatever it is, even not as powerful leaders, to be a force of sustenance and nourishment and *kedusha*. And, like Aharon's staff, let our involvement in this historic moment not be only a protest against something, a fight against evil and suffering, but let it bloom to create a positive, restorative vision of a new world that is generative and life-affirming.



Rabbanit Tanya Farber served as a Jewish educator in yeshiva high schools in NY and NJ, coordinated a high school beit midrash, and taught her own 4th grade curriculum. Her teaching integrates text study with improv and other creative modalities, and Tefillah (prayer liturgy) with mindfulness and movement. Tanya also worked for a decade with adults with developmental disabilities, and remains committed to accessibility and inclusion in religious communities. Tanya studied Torah in charedi seminaries, batei midrash, study halls (Drisha, Hadar) and completed social justice internships. Her teaching fuses Torah and spiritual relevance with the ethical call to action and service.