

# Parashat Korach קורח

Torah: Numbers 16:1–18:32

Haftarah: 1 Samuel 11: 14–12:22

## The “Promised Land” is Egypt?!

### General Overview

The Lord had issued a death sentence to the generation of people who had rejected the Land. The judgements carried out as a result of Korach’s rebellion culminating in 16:31-35 were one of the ways this death sentence was carried out. Were they too sweeping? After all, not everyone 20 years old or older accepted the spies’ report did they? They could not all have been as rebellious as it seemed. Or were they?

This week’s parasha begins to illustrate just how far the seeds of rebellion had spread in the camp of the Israelites. In reality, the problem was more serious than many would imagine. In this parasha, we will see how one incident of mutiny multiplied itself and resulted in the deaths of nearly 15,000 Israelites — and the 40 years of wandering had only just begun!

### Exposition

Let us, therefore, examine *Parashat Korach* and learn what we can from this rebellion. As we do so, we will use this outline:

- I. The Challengers
- II. Their Contention
- III. Moshe's Counter
- IV. God's Choice
- V. God's Confirmations

In this excerpt from Parashat Korach, we will focus on section II, Their Contention.

### II. Their Contention

The challengers: Korach, people from the tribe of Reuben, including Dathan and Abiram, and the 250 people who stood with them, complained to Moshe and Aaron in 16:3 that Moshe and Aaron took too much power upon themselves.

Here were two brothers, one was the spiritual leader, and the other was the prophet or lawgiver — the two highest positions in the nation. Our challengers accused them of “selfishly taking power and prestige for themselves at the expense of the rest of the nation which was just as qualified as they (for the entire assembly — all of them are holy).”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The ArtScroll Chumash*, 821.

### **A. What a Deal!**

Let us state this challenge a little differently in order to try to get a grip on what seems to be the gripe of these troublemakers. From their perspective, it seemed like Moshe and Aaron had a real racket going on. One brother provided the laws, which enabled the other and his family to really rake it in! What a deal! There is also a Midrash that describes the contention in this light. For its fullest impact, we will quote it at length:

There was once a widow in my neighbourhood who had two daughters and one field. When she came to plough, Moshe said to her, "You shall not plough with an ox and an ass together" (Deuteronomy 22:10).

When she came to sow, he said to her, "You shall not sow thy field with divers seeds" (Leviticus 19:19). When she came to reap and stack the corn, he said to her, "Leave gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, and the corner of the field for the poor." When she came to thresh, he said to her, "Give tithes, priestly dues, the first and second tithes." She justified heaven's pronouncement and gave him.

What did this poor woman do? She went and sold her field and purchased with the proceeds two lambs, to clothe herself from its shearing and enjoy its products. As soon as they gave birth, Aaron came and said to her, "Give me the first-born since the Holy One blessed be He said, 'Every first-born that shall be born of thy herd and flock, the male one, thou shalt consecrate to the Lord thy God'." She justified heaven's pronouncement and gave him the offspring.

The time came for the shearing and she sheared them — came Aaron and said to her, "Give me the first of the shearing since the Holy One blessed be He said, 'And this shall be the priest's due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice' ..." (Deuteronomy 18:3). Thereupon she said, "Since I have no more strength to withstand the man, I shall slaughter them and eat them."

As soon as she had slaughtered them, Aaron came and said to her: Give me the shoulder, two cheeks and maw, (Deuteronomy 18:3). Whereupon she said: Even after I have slaughtered them I am not delivered from his hand. Let them be forbidden my use. Said Aaron to her: In that case it is all mine since the Holy One said, "Every devoted thing ... in Israel shall be Mine" (Numbers 18:14).

He took them, departed, and left her weeping with her two daughters. Such was the lot that befell this unfortunate woman! So much they do in the name of the Holy One blessed be He.<sup>2</sup>

This is quite possibly how Korach and his conspirators may have felt and thought regarding the leadership of Moshe and Aaron. They posed a challenge to what was perceived to be, by the rebels, a monopoly in the national leadership.

### **B. Green with Envy?**

There is another possible aspect to their challenge. The text is very careful to point out the family names of the leaders of this rebellion. If these people wanted to rebel, the fires of jealousy and envy could very easily have spurred them on.

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<sup>2</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 188–189.

Remember that some were from the tribe of Reuben. They may have thought that their tribe should have been the national leaders instead of Judah, or especially instead of Moshe, who was from Levi. It seems reasonable that when the Reubenites saw the honoured position of Judah in the camp formation, jealousy could easily have taken root. However, this jealousy would naturally have been against Judah, not against the descendants of Levi. How did this envy toward Moshe and Aaron get a foothold among the conspirators?

It came in through Korach, who himself was a Levite. Also remember that Korach's family encamped in very close proximity to the Reubenites. This undoubtedly helped to spread the fires of contention. Accordingly, Korach may have been thinking, "Why was Aaron chosen to be the spiritual leader when others may also qualify?"

Thus Korach could have been jealous of both his cousin Aaron who had received the position of High Priest, and of his other cousin, Elizaphan, son of Uzziel, who had been chosen to lead the family of Kohat"(3:30). Moreover, please note that the text tells us in 16:1, "Korach took ... ," but the direct object for the verb "took" is missing. Rabbi Munk helps us to understand the importance of this detail when he writes,

The interpretation given by Rashi is that he "took" himself, that is, he separated himself from the community. Other commentators explain that he took on feelings of envy and took it upon himself to change his path in life.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Korach took. He took what was not his to have while Moshe and Aaron gave what had been given to them. In the end, Korach was responsible for taking the lives of many of his countryman. In the process he blamed Moshe for it. But it was really he who simply took.

### **C. Same Tune, Different Words**

Korach's cronies had more to say. It was not enough that Korach would inspire them to challenge the right of Moshe and Aaron to lead Israel. They also had to revert to the same tune that the rebellious have sung since leaving Egypt. Only this tune has a slightly different variation.

Dathan and Abiram had two problems with Moshe. They felt that he "dominated" them, making himself the ruler over them. They stated the second problem like this; "You haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards (16:14). Instead, "You have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert ... " (16:13).

In each of Israel's rebellions, there are similarities, but differences in the way they are expressed. The first rebellions came out of a fear of hunger or starvation and their perception of the reality of their freedom and seemingly insecure life in the wilderness gradually worsened. When it did, the children of Israel made pleas to go back to Egypt, lest they die in the wilderness. Then their rebellion progressed to an even worse state. In Numbers 11, they cried out for the "free" Egyptian fish. They seem to have forgotten that although they did not

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<sup>3</sup> Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 186.

have to pay over the counter for the fish, nevertheless, they paid with their freedom, and in some cases, their very lives.

Now, in this parasha, the complainers take their obstinacy to even greater depths. Here, we see them referring to Egypt in the same way the Lord referred to the Promised Land. It is a complete reversal. It represents the horrible depth into which the mutiny had sunk.

Leibowitz draws a sobering application from all of this. She compares this attitude to the contemporary descendants of Jacob who find complacency in the Diaspora equivalent to being in their “Jerusalem.” She remarks,

But here is something new and unprecedented — a complete reversal of values, calling black white and white black. What was slavery is termed freedom; the land of uncleanness is given the title exclusively applied to the holy land. It is a symbol for all time to those who in the lands of their dispersion proclaim: “Here is our Jerusalem!”<sup>4</sup>

#### ***D. Please Discard the Label***

Let us take the application we learn from this rebellion of the Israelites even a step further, for this lesson is critical for life in the body of Messiah. Just as Dathan and Abiram distorted reality and made false judgement calls regarding the Promised Land, so also do some in the body of Messiah. Our judgements and labelling are not concerning the Land, necessarily, but concerning people — other brothers and sisters in Messiah. New Creations, avoid making judgments and unfairly labelling people. This distorts the truth of who they are in Messiah. Our new man desires to look at that other believer whom some may call “irksome” and know him after the Spirit instead of the flesh. This is what Paul was describing in 2 Corinthians 5:16 when he said,

So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view, though we once regarded Messiah in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Messiah he is a new creation ... .

It may be true that some believers may walk in their flesh much of the time, but we need to remember that their flesh is not their real identity. They, like us, are truly new people. In Messiah, we are saints and not sinners! Judging and labelling someone falsely may actually contribute to that believer walking in the flesh. For, he may be walking in the flesh because of a false perception of himself based on the feedback he gets from other brothers and sisters. However, we can really help him/her, and give due glory to God, by referring to him in truthful, biblical terms, using God’s description of him such as “child of God,” “justified one,” or “forgiven one,” rather than with words that merely describe his flesh.

In other words, we must not describe a believer according to his flesh, because that is his flesh — it is not the real him!

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<sup>4</sup> Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 210.