

IN DEFENSE OF KORAH

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Within a relatively short period of time, four insurrections threaten Moses. Two of them are counter-revolutionary, in the sense that their leaders reject Moses and deny God's plan to settle the Israelites in the Promised Land. For example, after the negative report by the scouts the people say: *'Let us appoint a chief* [meaning someone different from Moses] *and let us return to Egypt'* (Num. 14:4). According to legend, the preferred new leaders are Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben.¹ Seizing this opportunity, Dathan and Abiram lead the second insurrection. They assert that life was better in Egypt and want to return thereby, denying "the whole Divine origin of [Moses'] mission as well as the special relation of God to Israel."² That is most definitely counterrevolutionary.

The third insurrection is an attempted coup d'état. Korah, a Levite, who is Moses' cousin, accepts the Covenant. He believes in God's promises, but he is angry with Moses and says that power and prestige should be more widely shared. Specifically, he opposes the appointment of Moses' brother Aaron and Aaron's descendants as priests. It would be easy to dismiss Korah as merely jealous of his cousins' prestige and power, but there is more to his motives than simple jealousy, as I shall point out.

The fourth general and disorganized uprising is a result of the punishment of Dathan and Abiram, who are swallowed into the earth, and the punishment of the followers of Korah, who are burned to death. The masses of people are shocked by the sudden and brutal death of their leaders which they witness. They begin to rail against Moses and Aaron: *'The two of you have caused the death of the people of God'* (Num. 17:6). They menace Moses and Aaron and might have killed them had it not been for a plague unleashed by the Almighty. To Moses' credit, he orders Aaron to make expiation for the Israelites, and Aaron protects almost all of them with the smoke from incense.

As I mentioned earlier, Korah's challenge to Moses is different from the other three in that he opposes individuals, not the Covenant. In my view, his

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challenge has some merit. To defend Korah, I shall answer the following four questions: Who is Korah? Why does he oppose Moses and Aaron? Does Korah achieve anything from his attempted coup d'état? What implications do Korah's initiatives have for us?

WHO IS KORAH?

Korah, a respected and influential leader of the Levites, is the son of Yitzhar, who was a younger brother of Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron. According to Midrash, before the Exodus Korah was an important person in Egypt, because he worked in the king's palace and amassed a sizeable fortune.³ At Sinai, he was most probably in the forefront of the Levites who rallied to Moses and who killed the worshippers of the Golden Calf that had been made by Aaron. His ability to recruit 250 Israelite leaders, presumably from all the tribes, to challenge Moses proves his considerable influence. Midrash calls these 250 men "all the chiefs of Israel and the Sanhedrin . . ."⁴

Korah is married and has three sons, who with many other descendants will play important roles in Israelite history long after the supposed demise of Korah. I say "supposed demise" because when the 250 followers of Korah offer burning incense to the Lord, as Moses has instructed them to do, *a fire went forth from the Lord and consumed [them]* (16:15). The text does not explicitly include Korah (but see Sanhedrin 110a).

WHY DOES KORAH OPPOSE MOSES AND AARON?

He is already in a bad mood because another Levite, Elzaphon, a man junior to him in the tribe, has been appointed to a leadership position to which Korah aspired.⁵ But what instigates his rebellion is the appointment of Moses' brother as priest. Korah explains his opposition in the most simple and direct way: He says to Moses '*rav lakhem*' (16:3). The widely-used Etz Hayim Humash translates this phrase as "You have gone too far." Robert Alter's translation is more clear: "You have too much." Or, it could be: "You take too much." Korah has accepted one son of Amram, namely Moses, as leader, but he balks at the appointment of another member of the Amram family, namely Aaron, as high priest. It is not only Aaron the individual that he opposes. He realizes that the family of Aaron, to be called the House of Aaron, will be ensconced in power as priests for all time. Korah must have been sin-

cere when he claimed that all Israel – not just the sons of Amram – is holy (16:3), which implies – possibly as a tactic to recruit allies for himself from other tribes – that the priesthood should rotate among the tribes. Moses sarcastically throws the phrase *rav lakhem* back at Korah: Be satisfied with what you have; you will serve the Almighty. But, Korah feels he and his family are losing something.

Korah is offended by the subordinate political and economic role the Levites will play after the establishment of the Aaronide priesthood. Levite men from the age of 25 to the age of 50 will serve the Aaronides in the Sanctuary as guards, porters of the Sanctuary in the desert, musicians, doorkeepers; they will also become teachers and judges but only as assistants to the Aaronides. Unlike the other tribes, they will have no territory in the Promised Land, which means their wealth and their incomes will be restricted to a portion of the offerings that the Israelites bring to the Sanctuary. In a somewhat condescending way, Moses will ask the Israelites to tithe their farm produce for the benefit of the Levites, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, once every three years (Deut. 14:28-29). Levites will be granted cities after settlement in the Promised Land, but we read in the Book of Joshua that the Aaronides get a proportionately large share of them.⁶

Korah is also offended by the requirement that Levite men who are not priests must completely shave their heads, their beards, and bodies, thereby removing outward signs of their masculinity. According to tradition, Korah's wife mocks his appearance.⁷

Korah senses the beginnings of an authoritarian oligarchy, which he opposes, and he perceives that Moses is not so modest as he is usually portrayed. According to the "iron law of oligarchy" (Robert Michels), a small group of people will eventually emerge to govern any organization or institution. If rule by the few is inevitable, their legitimacy or acceptance depends on their behavior toward the general population. How open or closed are they to recruits from outside their own families? Are they authoritarian or do they respond to the wishes of the people? Do they accept diversity, or do they attempt to impose conformity? How do they deal with challenges to their policies and power? Are they corrupt?

At the core of the nascent oligarchy among the Israelites are Moses, Aaron, Aaron's two sons Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's grandson Phineas, plus Joshua

and Caleb. Caleb, according to legend, was the perfect sycophant, giving Moses all the credit for leading the Israelites from Egypt, for parting the sea, for giving Israel manna in the desert.⁸ This entourage would probably include the other 10 scouts along with Joshua and Caleb. None of them was a tribal prince who had been "consecrated with the holy anointing oil . . ."⁹ Rather, they were lower- ranking tribal leaders different from the men chosen by God at the beginning of the Book of Numbers to conduct the census and whom God calls *the princes* of the tribes (Num. 1:16). It is not unreasonable to speculate that Moses was counting on these subordinate men to support him in the years to come. He was, of course, shocked by their negative report. And, even worse for Moses, his choices as scouts provoked the anger of the higher-ranking princes who later supported Korah.¹⁰

Moses reacts decisively to the challenge to his authority. Keeping information about God's choice of Aaron to himself, which is typical authoritarian behavior, Moses refuses to recognize any of Korah's interests and devises a clever plan to rid himself of Korah and his supporters. He knows full well what happened to Aaron's sons who offered incense burning on unauthorized fire. Without consulting the Almighty, he tells Korah's supporters to offer burning incense before the altar. The fact that Korah and his supporters quickly accept Moses' challenge proves they were unaware of God's choice of Aaron as high priest. Because of their devotion to God and the Covenant, they "were sure that this trial by ordeal would prove their case and vindicate their cause."¹¹ They did not perceive themselves as rebels.

The most important sign of Moses' growing sense of his own pre-eminence is revealed when the people demand water. Although God told him to speak to the rock, Moses struck it with his staff, after asking the people *shall we* [meaning Aaron and himself] *get water for you out of this rock?* (20:10). Thus, Moses takes credit for the water which gushes forth. In the words of Jacob Milgrom, Moses ascribes "the miracle to his own powers."¹² For this "usurpation" (as Milgrom calls it)¹³ of God's powers, Moses will be punished by not being allowed to enter the Promised Land.

DID KORAH ACHIEVE ANYTHING FOR THE LEVITES?

Despite the crushing of Korah's attempted coup, some concessions will be made to the Levites as a whole. One concession is symbolic. Israel is re-

minded that the Aaronides and Moses are and remain Levites. The tribal leaders are instructed to give their wooden staves to Moses, who will place them in the Sanctuary. The staff that sprouts leaves and blossoms will be the staff of the man chosen by God as priest. Aaron's name is inscribed on the Levites' staff which duly sprouts leaves and blossoms, showing, according to Hirsch, that "Jewish priests do not cease to be Levites . . ." They are the elite of the tribe. Moreover, neither the Levites as a whole nor the Aaronides as priests are superior to other Israelites. Hirsch says they are to be seen as the vanguard, whose role is to lead the "spiritual and general development of life."¹⁴

Another concession to Korah in particular is that his three sons survive. They play important roles in Israel's future. Among other things, they compose several psalms. Korah's most famous descendant is Samuel. Samuel, the Levite,¹⁵ ruled Israel in the interim between the disgrace and downfall of the priesthood at Shilo and the creation of the monarchy and a rejuvenated priesthood. Evidence in the text (I Chron. 9:19) as well as inscriptions found by archaeologists prove that in time there would be an important House of Korah as Korah wished.¹⁶

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US OF KORAH'S REVOLT?

I see two. First, the rebellion of Korah is a sign of the uncertainties within any society undergoing re-organization. The children of Israel grew into a people in Egypt in terms of numbers. As they progress toward the Promised Land, God is giving them in a very short period of time an infrastructure and identity with the commandments, institutions, and rules. There is also a hierarchy of authority, based on differing relationships with the Sanctuary which holds the altars and tablets of the Covenant. The Israelites do not fully understand the innovations, and observing the four rebellions and the brutal punishments, the people are desperately confused about their own relationship with the Sanctuary. They lament: *'We are lost, all of us lost . . . we are doomed to perish'* (Num. 17:27). The Almighty is trying to explain that the high priest can approach the Ark of the Covenant, the other priests approach the altars with sacrifices, the Levites guard the outer perimeters, and all the other Israelites bring sacrifices to the Levites and priests. Altogether, they are the Chosen People. In the Books of Leviticus and Numbers, the rules and

regulations are being set forth as they must be in any newly-formed society or newly-independent state. Another painful re-organization will take place later with the creation of the monarchy.

The second implication is the danger of a closed authoritarian oligarchy. Gordis has urged taking Korah's complaints seriously; it is worth listening to what dissidents in our communities have to say.¹⁷ It is true that petty motives and jealousy may motivate opposition to leaders, who are necessary in any institution, but more important issues are also at stake. Diverse opinions and practices may enrich our communities and institutions; they may bring about needed changes within the context of the Covenant. An authoritarian and exclusive group of leaders running secular and religious institutions risks driving people away from these institutions. They may even alienate them from the Israelite people and the Israelite state. For these reasons, the oligarchs are a greater threat to the children of Israel than is Korah.

NOTES

1. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. III, trans. Paul Radin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 5728-1968) p. 276.
2. Numbers 5:15, S. R. Hirsch, *Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, Numbers*, trans Isaac Levy (New York: Judaica Press, 1966) p. 280.
3. Numbers 18:15, *Midrash Rabbah Numbers*, Vol. Two, trans Judah J. Slotki (London and New York: The Soncino Press, 1983) p. 726.
4. Numbers 18:2, *Midrash*, p. 708.
5. Numbers 3:30, *Midrash*, p. 708.
6. Joshua 21, 13 out of 23 cities, Cf. www.JewishEncyclopedia.com , "Kohath."
7. Ginzberg, p. 288.
8. Ginzberg, p. 273.
9. Cited by J. M. Cohen, "Spies, Princes and Korah's Rebellion," *Dor le Dor*, X:4 (Summer 1982) p. 221.
10. Cohen, p. 227.
11. Y. Green, "The Rebellion of the Bechorim," *Dor le Dor*, XIV:2 (Winter 1985/86) p.79.
12. J. Milgrom, "Commentary," in *The JPS Torah Commentary, Numbers*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 5750/1990) p. 422.
13. Milgrom, p. 292.
14. Hirsch, p. 294.
15. Rashi on I Samuel 1:1, in A. J. Rosenberg, editor and translator, *Samuel I* (New York: Judaica Press, 1991) p. 3.
16. B. A. Levine, trans. and commentator, *The Anchor Bible – Numbers 21–36* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) pp. 429-430.
17. Rabbi Dr. Daniel Gordis, speech at Adas Israel, Washington D.C., *Parashat Korah*, June 2003.

