

The National Jewish

Post & Opinion

Volume 75, Number 19 • June 10, 2009 • 18 Sivan 5769 Two Dollars

www.jewishpostopinion.com

KORACH'S REBELLION OF INFORMAL LEADERS

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda Bat Sarah

The spies had returned with an “evil report” from their reconnaissance of the land, which is to say they lost faith (Numbers 13:32) and they allowed themselves to be intimidated. Their lapse of faith had a demoralizing effect on the people, and it created an opening for Korach to instigate rebellion.

The Torah reading Korach begins, *Va'yikach Korach* (ויקח קרח), “And Korach took...” but it doesn't specify *what* he took. (Numbers 16:1) The Midrash indicates that he took himself to one side, separating himself from the main body of the people. (Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3) Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that he took it upon himself to question Moses and Aaron. And Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) teaches that the language of the text suggests he persisted in his quarrel with them. Withal, he took advantage of the opening created by the evil report of the spies to launch a revolt against their authority.

Datan, Aviram, and On, princes of the tribe of Reuven, attached themselves to Korach as additional organizers and agitators for the rebellion. After recruiting 250 men who were willing to back them, they confronted Moses.

Why did princes of the congregation threaten Moses with rebellion? Who were they? Why did they join together in a rebellion? What interest and ideology did Korach promote to recruit them?

Rabbi Hirsch teaches that the princes were **בְּרָאִים** (i.e., princes *of them*)—not formal leaders of the tribes, but informal leaders, “popular heads, men of leading influence among the people.” (See Hirsch comment on Numbers 13:1-2.) We imagine from the previous Torah reading, Shelach Lecha, they went along because they had been condemned to die in the wilderness, never to enter the land.

Possibly they were angry and resentful of Moses' leadership, which they may have believed had led them into their predicament.

What did Korach promise to recruit them into the rebellion?

They understood power within the context of their own tribe, because their experience was limited to exercising power within a tribal arena. Possibly Korach said to them: “Look, if we get rid of this Moses, you can govern the whole nation, not just have influence in your own tribe. Why should Moses be in charge of everything?” Or he might have said to them: “Look, this Moses is leading us to destruction, so you have to save your own people.” And certainly the two appeals are not mutually exclusive.

Notably, Korach was a Levite. He was raised in a tradition that entailed a meaningful role and responsibility in the life of the nation, and the status that goes with it. He didn't reject all this in a constructive way, but instead became a rebel, using his position to recruit informal leaders to his cause. By choosing to reject his role as a Levite, he rejected what that role represented, no longer serving as a teacher of Torah and a model of ritual observance. But he didn't simply find a personal alternative, because his objective was to overthrow the system and use the opening for his own purposes.

As a gambit to recruit other informal leaders, and as self-justification, Korach asked rhetorically: Why do we need any priests or prophets?

But the Torah doesn't recognize priests and prophets as Korach was thinking of them. He saw the priestly profession as raising its practitioners above the people. Torah, however, casts the priesthood as servant of the people. Torah doesn't understand any particular specialty as higher than any

other, but all as necessary. There's an appreciation for every profession and the diverse strengths that are characteristic of the different tribes. Diversity is understood in the Torah as the basis for the unified strength of the whole people.

The prophet doesn't tell the people what the future is to be, but communicates the consequences of following or ignoring God's law. In that spirit the prophet Moses told Korach to act on the word of God. But Korach, who didn't accept the covenantal mission of the Jewish people, didn't accept the prophet of God and the Torah as the word of God. So, Korach, in effect, said to Moses and, presumably, to all those he sought to recruit as his allies: We're *all* holy, we're *already* holy, we don't need you (Moses) and we don't need the Torah.

But the men and women of the congregation, notwithstanding Korach's disingenuous theology, were *not* all holy, but rather had a holy calling. It's important not to confuse what they were with the potential for what they might become. And doubtlessly if the path by which one may become holy is abandoned, by declaring that holiness has already been achieved, then Torah as the means of that path has ipso facto also been rejected.

Then again, when Korach said that all the people are already holy, he was declaring in effect that they didn't need the Torah as a path to holiness; and if Korach didn't believe in the Torah, that is, in the law that enables holiness, then he didn't believe in the Jewish God who set out that law and which is its object.

Korach didn't want to be restricted and restrained by law. He was a harbinger of the contemporary obsession with personal freedom to do as one pleases at all costs. His religious mantra should sound familiar to us: I'm totally in control of what I'm going to do—I don't need or accept anyone or anything spiritual or religious exercising authority over me.

Korach was a consummate politician, a "cool alternator," sociologically speaking, who without affect alternated between two different realities, in a way that we might call two-faced. In fact, he might be considered a sociopath, without a conscience. He organized to overthrow established authority for his own private, selfish purposes. He was not an idealist, but cynically used the idea of "power to the people" to justify his own ambitions and recruit allies to serve those ambitions.

Certainly, Korach was no man of the people; he was envious of Aaron's priestly position. He challenged Moses' authority in order to undermine and then acquire for himself Aaron's high rank, which was invested by Moses authority.

Why might we imagine that Korach wanted the role of priest rather than prophet?

The prophetic role evaporates if the prophet has no authentic relationship with God. But as a

priest lacking such a relationship, one still has the benefits of elaborate ritual and all the perquisites of the office. Korach expected to be named Kohen Gadol (high priest). The anticipated ritual accoutrements would be attractive to such an ambitious man—the headdress, breastplate, and jewels, totally unlike a prophet's nondescript garb. The high office and priestly regalia would give Korach an extraordinarily compelling presence in national affairs, notwithstanding the absence of any spiritual substance.

The rebels thought that the people would be ripe for revolution or at least ready to go back to Egypt. But they weren't thinking that a return to Egypt would mean regressing to slavery, a circumstance in which they had little pride of person or as a people. Moses had led them through the transformation from a "mixed multitude" to a people having witnessed God, with whom they had made a covenant, and to whom they had said, "We will do and we will hear." It's not like they ventured into the wilderness and everything went wrong, so they had to go back. They had many inspiring and challenging experiences, which undoubtedly stimulated widespread feelings of individual worth and unified strength as a people.

Moses captained this sojourn of discovery. He was responsible for whatever happened. So, of course, when things went wrong, people asked: Who's responsible for bringing us out here? Who's responsible for getting us into this mess? And who's responsible for getting us out of it?

Moses didn't have to be the personal cause of all the problems to be held accountable for them. In fact, the people were mostly the cause of their own circumstances—but that didn't matter. Korach projected his ambitions onto Moses; a lot of what the insurrectionists said about Moses—that he acted like a dictator, for example—is seemingly what Korach had in mind for himself.

Rabbi Hirsch teaches that Korach's words to Moses, *rav l'khem* (רב-לכם), "You take too much on yourself" (Numbers 16:3), are essentially saying that, ". . . If individuals are required at the head of the nation for national affairs in relation to God, why just Aaron and Moses? Why not leave it to the nation to choose their leaders? What right do Aaron and Moses have to place themselves at the head of the nation?"

Thus, Korach directly challenged Moses' authority, asking: What gives you the right to play maximum leader? Moses saw through Korach's rhetoric, knowing that Korach had in mind to elect himself as a national leader. He might have reasonably replied: I'm the person charged by God, whom everyone has followed—out of Egypt, to Sinai, and into the desert. Who are you? What are your credentials? And, of course, when Moses led the people out of Egypt and to Sinai, no one called

for an election. His credential as a leader is the best of all credentials: he had a massive following—the whole people affirmed his Divine mission by following him, notwithstanding their grumbling.

Nonetheless, Moses didn't feel up to doing the job and didn't want it in the first place, although he couldn't prove to Korach that it was God who sent him. And it was the same with Aaron, because Moses appointed him as priest at God's direction.

Moses may have been thinking: I'm a failure, because I don't know what to do; maybe this is the end of my mission. So, he fell on his face to ask for God's guidance. He did what was needed to create within himself accessibility and communication to God—forming a sanctuary within. Thus, Korach ceased to be a distraction, allowing Moses to see more clearly that Korach was rebelling against God and Torah. If the rebellion were about him, Moses would have defended himself. However, he didn't argue about his role because it was not of his own making, but given to him by God, and he was open to the possibility that God was now going to give the role to Korach. He wouldn't presume to limit God's actions in the matter.

So, Moses says: God will decide, *tomorrow*, about the legitimacy of Korach, Aaron, and myself—which gave Moses time to talk the rebels out of their self-destructive course. He wanted to save everyone and everything. He didn't want to see any of God's creation destroyed, including Korach and the rebels.

Why, finally, should we assume that Moses is the legitimate leader rather than Korach?

The proof is in the demonstrated character of his leadership: Moses doesn't have the wherewithal to impose his will on anyone. He doesn't have a private army or police force; he only voices what God brings to pass, which is what an authentic prophet does, and he has a proven track record of such prophecy—which belies the idea that he's a pretender to prophetic leadership. At God's direction he leads the people out of Egypt, and they follow; he leads the people to accept the Torah, and they follow; he leads the people into the wilderness, and they follow—and he neither demands nor accepts anything for himself.

The story of Korach's rebellion teaches myriad lessons. But we want to focus briefly on what we can learn from it about contemporary congregational life.

Korach's revolt raises the question of how congregational communities survive and succeed, and the role of *informal* leadership in their development or downfall. A community doesn't spring into life full-blown. A population doesn't begin its life as a coherent people by holding elections. In the course of ongoing life-challenges, individuals emerge who make proposals for action, and they have followers. Moses led the people out of Egypt

and incrementally passed on to them a set of statutes and ordinances, the observance of which enabled them to become an organized and established nation. But no nation is ever completely formally organized, because openings for informal leadership always exist.

We understand that informal leaders do not occupy formal office, but nonetheless are chosen in two respects: Often when such individuals speak or act, others follow their lead. They're admired for their competence, commitment, character, or some other enviable quality—not because they say, “follow me,” but because they're a relevant model to which people respond. And often, such individuals are sought out for advice and support when someone is challenged or has a problem—again, because people resonate to their intelligence, caring attitude, or other relevant qualities.

Although informal leaders are invaluable in filling critically needed roles and responsibilities in community life, it's essential that formal leaders mentor and supervise them. Informal leadership, without training, guidance, and accountability, can become self-serving and destructive to communal interests.

The sine qua non of legitimate informal leaders is that they understand and respect the vision, strategy, particular tactics, and division of labor needed to achieve their community's mission. They take initiatives, acting informally, typically before others, who follow them. They do this without holding formal office, and thus they become a critical adjunct to formal officeholders.

The potential value of informal leadership can be seen when a large assembly begins to get out of control because of intense controversy. The person nominally in charge of the assembly—the formal officeholder chairing the meeting—often is not able to maintain order. Control can only be maintained then if there is a significant number of informal leaders present who are also pressing vocally to maintain order, calling for a return to the agenda, and actively supporting the chairperson.

Informal leaders are also crucial because they function as “trustees” and, in time, the best of them become formal leaders—not because they're angling for high office or because they want power, but because they're drafted on the basis of demonstrated contributions.

But when we fail to train, guide, and hold informal leaders accountable, we may unwittingly create a fifth column, rival faction, or insurrection that can threaten legitimate leadership. When that happens, we have to ask ourselves, how should we react to people who assume such destructive roles? Are our only choices to engage in destructive conflict with them or simply to ignore them?

Korach is paradigmatic, because inevitably we discover in congregational life individuals who, for

means and ends that are not legitimate, undermine the goals and methods of established, elected leadership. Of course, there's nothing wrong with challenging formal leaders, and there are many ways to do that *l'shem shamayim* (for the "sake of heaven" rather than for self-serving motives). But when informal leaders act illegitimately, which is not unusual in congregational life, the critical question is, how are we to meet that challenge?

It's a question that can't be answered in its particulars until there is a constituency within the community which is no longer willing to pay the price of acquiescing to destructive individuals and thus is ready to begin considering in earnest the question of how to meet the challenges posed by them.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)

© 2007-2025 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda Bat Sarah