

Korach's Rebellion: Real Intentions and Ultimate Motives

June 27, 2008

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What is the meaning of this Torah portion in our day and age? This Torah portion does not pertain just to rebels and revolutionaries. This Torah portion also relates to present-day politics. It suggests that we must pay careful attention to the difference between the words of our elected officials and their actions. Even more importantly, we must critically assess what are the true intentions and the ultimate motives behind the publicly stated agendas of our elected officials and candidates for their office. The story of Korach teaches that there is just about always a private agenda. Especially in an election year, it is very important for all of us to know what are those private agendas.

The Torah portion for this Shabbat is Parashat Korach. This Torah portion is underappreciated because it describes an event that defies rational explanation: the earth opens and closes, swallowing up the human beings standing upon it. But as Professor James Kugel argues in his newest book, How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now, modern biblical scholarship teaches us that not every detail of the Bible must be taken as literal truth. Since Kugel is personally an Orthodox Jew, that's quite a statement. So let's explore what goes on in this Torah portion and understand its non-literal and highly relevant message for us today.

This parashah describes not just one rebellion but four rebellions interwoven together. Let's separate them out: one is led by Korach and the Levites against Aaron. Another is led by the tribal chieftains against Aaron. The third is led by Datan and Aviram against Moses. and finally, for good measure, the fourth rebellion is everybody else against Moses and Aaron.

At first blush, we feel these rebels might actually have a case. Korach, Datan and Aviram, and 250 chieftains make their argument in Numbers 16:3. The rebels here reference a famous biblical teaching. What is it? It's Exodus 19:6 where God declares the intention that all Israel shall be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The rebels argue that every Israelite should be accorded the status and prerogatives of the priesthood and not just Aaron and his sons.

Through this line of argument, the rebels clearly wish to win over the support of the Israelite masses. This isn't about us, say Korach and company. This rebellion is for you. But not so fast. This Torah portion adds some crucial information. Until now, except for one instance, the rebellions against Moses and Aaron have been faceless. They were led by the people, the community, the riffraff.

But this time we have names. Look at Numbers 16:1. Who are these guys? Korach is the son of Yitzhar. That makes Korach the first cousin of Moses and Aaron. Datan and Aviram belong to the tribe of Reuben. These underlying familial connections reveal the underlying nature of the rebellion: 1) envy of Aaron's priestly privileges and 2) jealousy over Moses' political power. In other words, this rebellion is fueled by family resentment. Korach's father, Itzhar, and Moses and Aaron's father, Amram, were brothers. But Itzhar was the older brother. Why, then, demands Korach, is he not a priest? As a matter of fact, says Korach, why is Aaron the high priest and not me? Datan and Aviram are Reubenites. Moses is a Levite. Reuben was the first-born son of the patriarch Jacob, while Levi was only the third-born son. Why, then, demand Datan and Aviram, do they not hold political power as Reubenites? As a matter of fact, say Datan and Aviram, why is Moses the sovereign leader of the Israelites and not us?

So, what are we dealing with here? This Torah portion describes a purge against Moses and Aaron. It describes a coup d'état to wrest political and priestly control of the Israelite people. At this point, Moses declares that God will announce who are the rightful leaders of the Hebrew people. Moses and Aaron, Korach and the 250 chieftains wait at the entrance to the tent of meeting. At the same time, Datan and Aviram wait at the entrance to their tents. What happens? I'll bet you can figure it out. Look at Numbers 16:31-33.

Datan, Aviram, and Korach's people are swallowed up by the earth. Now look at Numbers 16:35. The 250 chieftains are consumed by fire.

How are we to understand these severe punishments? I don't believe, nor do I want you to believe, that these punishments actually occurred or that God operates in this manner. What the Torah is trying to convey is the belief that operating in the world is some form of poetic justice. Those who illegitimately sought the prerogative to make fire for God's offerings are themselves consumed by fire. Those who refused to come up to reasonably settle the dispute with Moses are sent down into the earth. Those who engage in wrongful conduct are done in by that very same conduct.

Now, what's missing from these two passages? They do not tell us explicitly what happened to Korach, the overall ringleader!

Numbers 16:16 and 19 place Korach at the tent of meeting, about to get scorched. But Numbers 16: 24, and 27 place Korach with Datan and Aviram, about to be swallowed up, Numbers 17:5 tells us that Korach perished in the fire with the 250 chieftains. But Numbers 26:10 tell us that Korach shared the same fate with Datan and Aviram, swallowed up by the earth.

So, we have two biblical traditions about what happened to Korach. What else could the existence of two traditions imply? Perhaps, Korach got away! If so, it would not be the first time that everyone else is punished while the ringleader of a dastardly plot is the only one to get away!

So what is this Torah portion really all about? This Torah portion hinges on the theme of real intentions and ultimate motives. Korach and company hid their true motives from the

people. They conned the people into believing their intentions were good ones, to bring every Israelite a share of priestly and political power. But their real intention was to take all the power for themselves and to manipulate the masses to help them do it. But because their motives and intentions were not pure, God did not let them succeed.

What is the meaning of this Torah portion in our day and age? Certainly, this Torah portion makes us think about our own intentions and motives and to be sure to raise them to the higher plane that God wants from us. Secondly, this Torah portion does not pertain just to rebels and revolutionaries. This Torah portion also relates to present-day politics. It suggests that we must pay careful attention to the difference between the words of our elected officials and their actions. Even more importantly, we must critically assess what are the true intentions and the ultimate motives behind the publicly stated agendas of both our elected officials and candidates for their office.

The story of Korach teaches that there is just about always a private agenda. Especially, in an election year, it is very important for all of us to know what are those private agendas.

And for your summer reading, I urge you have a go at Professor Kugel's book on How to Read the Bible. Kugel wrote this book to recapture the integrity of the Bible from fundamentalist literalists on the one hand and atheist skeptics on the other. Kugel argues there is a third way to relate to the Bible for people like himself, for people like you and me, who want to be simultaneously both believers in faith and believers in rational scholarship. Despite its 688 pages and almost 1,000 footnotes, take it from me, Kugel's book makes a great summer read at the beach!