

The Sons of Korah did not Die
Parashat Korah
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You do not know me

My name is Abiasaph. You probably do not remember me, or my name. Although I did have a small role in the portion you are studying, my name is not mentioned there. It is mentioned once in Exodus, and again, much later, in Chronicles. Both references are in genealogies, those lists of unfamiliar names that most of us are likely to skip over.

My full name is Abiasaph ben Korah. Yes, that Korah. I am the youngest son of the man who lent his name to this portion.

The meaning of my name in Hebrew might give you a hint as to the role I played in my family, and the role I play in this portion—it means my father is a gatherer. It's a strange name to give to a baby—it says nothing about the attributes that the parents hope for in their new child. It's simply a reference to a father, my father, and to one of his qualities.

About my Father

One possible meaning of my name is to suggest that my father was very wealthy. There is a saying in modern Israel—when someone is very, very well off, you might say that he is as rich as Korah. There is even a story that my father had several donkeys heavily loaded with keys, and that each key opened a box that contained a treasure.

Any truth to that? None that I know of. When I lived with my father, our household traveled with the other Levites, fairly close to the Reubenites. I helped load our donkeys—I don't remember any keys.

Besides, it would be pretty hard to be wealthy when you are trekking through the Judean desert, even if you were approaching the promised land. Wealth is signified by your dwelling, your clothing, and by the food you eat and share. When everything is periodically loaded onto livestock, it is hard to improve, let alone magnify, your tent. We didn't have a lot of time when we left Egypt, so despite the stories about the trinkets we borrowed from the Egyptians, we didn't really have that much. And for food, well, we all had manna. In many times, you are wealthy if you have enough to eat, and poor if you are usually hungry. We all had enough to eat, and we couldn't even gather a surplus of manna if we wanted to—what we didn't eat immediately would rot in a day or two. Wealth is mainly important as a differentiator, and we could not differentiate ourselves with food.

But my name is correct—my father was a gatherer, but not of wealth. He was a gatherer of people.

He was a genius at quickly knowing who was important in a group—not by their wealth, but by who they could influence. He could reach beyond his family, even beyond his tribe, and gather around him those people who might someday be important. Many people considered my father a friend, but I don't think he actually thought of them as friends. They were potential, they were resources to be hoarded for use at some later time.

My father chafed under the authority of Moses and Aaron. He was too clever, too influential to be ignored, and at the same time his cousins—did I mention that Moses, Aaron and Miriam were his first cousins?—seemed too busy to spend much time with him. He wanted more influence than he had.

The deaths of two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were a tragedy for the family. My father was very moody for a while after that. I do not know what he was thinking, but I fear that my father saw the beginnings of an opportunity.

As we approached Canaan, spies were sent out from the various tribes to investigate what we hoped was our future land. They returned with horrible news. The land was very good, but its inhabitants were very powerful. The scouts we heard from said that if we attempted to settle there, the land would devour us.

You know what happened next. There was a lot of grumbling, a lot of talk about mutiny, and finally a dreadful punishment—the generation that left Egypt together would wander in the wilderness for forty years, until they died off. Their children might reach the promised land, but they would not. For over a year we had been united by our close escape, and by our common goal. Now we had no goal. The first reaction of the tribes was to put together an army and quickly attack the hill country. We did not go, as Levites were needed to protect the ark. The ark did not move. The battle was lost.

In the disheartening times that followed, my father made his move. He gathered the men around him and talked. They gathered more men. Soon there were 250 of us, ready to confront Moses.

My role in all this? The youngest son? I was very quiet.

I've had years to think about what I did not do, and what my father did. I wish we had learned from an event that occurred earlier. A group of men had complained to Moses that they had been unable to participate in Pesach, the anniversary of our leaving Egypt. They had had to bury a close relative and were ritually impure when the feast day came. It seemed unfair to them. Moses considered their complaint carefully, had a quick talk with God, and came back with Pesach Sheni—another feast day, invented just for them. There was a lesson there for my father—Moses could be influenced, if the cause was just. My father had many skills, and I have never understood why he didn't seek a larger role in Moses tent.

On that Day

The gathering, in response to Moses' challenge, was right where the deaths of my second cousins had occurred. I was frightened. I was also, though, near my father and 248 other men. We took strength from each other, reinforced each other. Maybe we were also a little afraid of each other—it was not really possible to back down.

I remember suddenly losing my footing, as though I was running along a broken track on a hill. I fell. I don't remember anything after that, until I woke up in someone's tent, days later, recovering from my injuries. Everyone asks me about that day—it is a little embarrassing, but I have nothing to say because I don't remember what happened.

I was told by my rescuers that they would not have found my brothers and I except for our singing. Singing? I asked. Yes, wonderful singing—songs of praise and thanksgiving.

Singing

I don't remember singing.

I sing, of course. When I was alive, everyone sang, alone or in gatherings. It is how we entertained ourselves and each other. It was also how we remembered things. You have the Ten Commandments in books - but we had them in song.

I do not regret that I have no memory of that day, of the quake and fire that followed. But I do regret that I don't know what my brothers and I were singing in the cavern. I have tried for years to remember. Sometimes I wake up in the morning with a hint of the song, but it disappears before I can grasp it.

I can't take any credit for this, but my descendants recovered the song, or many songs, for me. One of my children's children's children...—seventeen generations after me, was put in charge of music in the tabernacle by King David. He later led music in King Solomon's Temple. There are ten psalms that are attributed to b'nei Korah—the sons of Korah.

B'nei Korah

Kind of ironic, isn't it? My father attempted to make a name for himself by grasping power. His craving destroyed him, and I think his craving was for the wrong thing. Power can magnify the immediate effect of what you do, for good or for ill, but it does not last. The sound of your name when your life speaks it will be louder, but the echoes will fade quickly. If his soul had to crave something, I wish it had been memory. Memories can last, the sound of your name can come again as generations repeatedly say it. You cannot, of course, control what people will remember about you. That is the task of your friends and of your children.

I have no influence or ability to control your memories about my father, but I do have one request. When you next study the portion that bears my father's name, take a moment to look past his spectacular failure. Remember that his children lived. And remember that his children, and mine, included the prophet Samuel, and the composers of ten wonderful psalms.