

PARASHAT KORAH

Numbers 16:1–18:32

Parashat Korah tells of the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. With 250 respected leaders of the community, they accuse Moses and Aaron of acting “holier” than the other Israelites. Hearing their complaint, Moses instructs them to bring offerings to the sanctuary on the next day and tells them that God will demonstrate who is to be trusted as leader of the community. The next morning the leaders of the rebellion and their followers are punished. Some are swallowed when the earth opens; others are killed by fire or plague. The community then accuses Moses and Aaron of bringing death upon the people. God threatens to destroy the entire people, but Moses orders Aaron to place an offering on the altar, which is meant to save the people from harm. Moses then organizes the priesthood to be headed by Aaron and his descendants. They, along with the tribe of Levi, are to be responsible for managing all gifts donated to the sanctuary. Unlike other tribes of Israel, Levites are not given any territory. They are given offerings as payment for their work in the sanctuary.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Korah, the great grandson of Levi, along with Dathan, Abiram, and On, descendants of Reuben, and 250 elected leaders of the community organize a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. “All the people are holy,” they complain. “Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?”

Stunned by their accusation, Moses challenges Korah and his followers to bring fire pans and incense with them to the sanctuary the next morning. “God will make known who is holy and who is not,” he says.

Turning to Korah, Moses questions his motives. “You have been given special duties in the sanctuary and opportunities for leadership. Why do you now seek the priesthood that God has given to Aaron?”

When Moses asks Dathan and Abiram to meet with him, they refuse. "For what reason should we meet with you?" they say. "You have brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to die in this wilderness. Do you now also need to demonstrate your power over us? We will not come." Stunned, Moses prays to God, "Pay no regard to their words. I have never taken anything from them nor wronged them."

·2·

The next morning Moses and Aaron meet with Korah and his followers in front of the sanctuary. Each is carrying a fire pan with red hot coals and incense on it. By that time Korah has organized the entire community against Moses and Aaron.

God speaks to Moses and Aaron, telling them to withdraw from Korah and the community because they are about to be destroyed. Moses and Aaron plead to God on behalf of the people, asking, "If one person sins, will You be angry with the whole community?"



God tells Moses to order the people to withdraw from the area around the tents of Korah,

Dathan, and Abiram. Then, as the people look on, Moses announces, "If these people die by a natural death, it will mean that I have not been designated by God to lead you. If they are swallowed by the earth opening up, that will be a sign that God has sent me to lead you." At that point, the earth opens and swallows Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families, as well as their 250 followers.

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Moses orders Aaron's son, Eleazar, to collect all the fire pans and beat them into sheets to be used as plating for the altar. The bright plating is to remind all Israelites that only Aaron's descendants may serve as priests.

·4·

The day after Korah's rebellion, the Israelites bitterly accuse Moses and Aaron of bringing death upon their community. Hearing the accusation, God tells Moses and Aaron, "Remove yourselves from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant." Seeing that a plague is breaking out among the people, Moses tells Aaron to place a fire pan on the altar to gain forgiveness for the people. When the plague ends, 14,700 are dead.

·5·

Moses asks the chief of each of the twelve tribes to deposit a staff inside the sanctuary. Each chief is to write his name on his own staff. Aaron's name is to be inscribed on the staff of Levi. The next day, upon entering the sanctuary, Moses notices that Aaron's staff has sprouted blossoms and almonds. After the staffs are returned to the tribal chiefs, Moses returns Aaron's staff to the sanctuary as a warning to those who might in the future rebel against God.

·6·

Aaron and his sons are commissioned as *kohanim*, or "priests," to oversee all rituals of the sanctuary. The Levites are to help them, but the Levites are to have no contact with the altar or other sacred objects. All offerings are to be given to the priests for their use, and tithes (a tenth of the products

harvested) are to be designated for the Levites as payment for their service to the sanctuary.

Neither the *kohanim* nor the Levites are to be given land holdings.

THEMES

Parashat Korah contains two important themes:

1. The difference between just and unjust disputes.
2. Magic and miracles in Jewish tradition.

PEREK ALEF: *Korah's Rebellion: A Deadly Dispute*

Appearances can at times deceive us into believing we understand what we see or read. This seems to be the case with the data we are given about the rebellion led by Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On against Moses and Aaron. At first, this appears to be a single story about a protest organized by these leaders and 250 followers. However, as most modern biblical scholars point out, the truth may be that the Torah report is an edited version of at least two different stories.

Untangled, there is first the report of Korah, the son of Izar, son of Kohath, who was the son of Levi. Korah protests the appointment of Aaron and his family as priests, suggesting that Moses is unjustly singling out his brother for privileges that belong equally to other descendants of Levi, including Korah himself. Mocking Moses, Korah publicly denounces him with the accusation: "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and *Adonai* is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?"

Clearly, Korah's intent is to undercut Moses' authority and gain the priesthood for himself and his family. In response, Moses asks Korah, "Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access . . . to perform the duties of God's Tabernacle . . . ? Yet you seek the priesthood too!"

Woven into this battle over the priesthood is a second protest led by Dathan, Abiram, and On against Moses. They accuse him of promising the people a land flowing with milk and honey but instead exposing them to death in the desert.

Like Korah, they seem intent on stirring up a rebellion against Moses' leadership.

In both stories, Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On are joined by 250 chieftains, "respected leaders." These chieftains are not identified by name, nor are we given any reasons for their rebellion against Moses and Aaron. As participants in the protests, however, they are put to death by fire at the same time that Dathan, Abiram, and Korah are swallowed up by the earth.

Several questions remain unanswered about the protests led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. What were these protests really about? For example, the author of Psalm 106, after making the observation that "those who act justly and who do right at all times are happy" (Psalms 106:3), then offers a judgment about Dathan's and Abiram's rebellion against Moses and Aaron: "There was envy of Moses in the camp, and of Aaron, the holy one of God./The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan, closed over the party of Abiram./A fire blazed among their party, a flame that consumed the wicked." (Psalms 106:16–18) Is the Psalmist correct? Was it "envy" that fueled the dispute or were there other more significant motives among the ancient Israelites?

Unfortunately, the Torah text leaves us guessing as to the real causes of the rebellions led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. That absence of information, however, does not inhibit later commentators from developing their own theories. As we have seen previously in our studies of Torah, the absence of details and descriptive facts is often an invitation to imaginative speculation and invention. Faced here with the need to explain the dramatic punishments and the deaths of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, commentators offer us a rich variety of explanations.

Early rabbinic interpreters suggest that Korah draws support from the 250 tribal chiefs by using “persuasive words.” He is a clever and effective public speaker, arguing his cause in a compelling way. People are moved by his soothing tone of voice and the convincing ways in which he presents his claims and arguments. His style, inflections, and rich vocabulary sway the people into believing that his claims against Moses and Aaron are just.

Other rabbinic commentators add that Korah’s attack on Moses and Aaron grows out of frustrated ambition and the claim that he has been robbed of privileges guaranteed by family position. How is this so? Interpreters point out that Amram, father of Moses and Aaron, was the brother of Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel. Korah was the eldest son of Izhar. Yet, when leadership appointments over the people of Israel are made, Korah sees Moses and Aaron receiving high appointments as sons of his eldest uncle. He also watches Elizaphan, the eldest son of Uzziel (the youngest brother of Amram) elevated to prince of the Kohathites. Angered that, as the firstborn of Izhar (the second eldest brother after Amram), he is being bypassed by Moses’ appointment of Elizaphan, Korah raises an angry voice of public protest. “I am the next in age!” he claims. “The appointment is rightfully mine. Moses is acting unjustly. Should the son of the youngest of my father’s brothers be superior to me?”

Korah misleads the people

To foment his rebellion, Korah spends all night going from tribe to tribe accusing Moses and Aaron of wrongdoing. He carefully crafts his speech for each audience, but his message always makes the same point: “I am not like Moses and Aaron, who want to attain fame and power for themselves. I want all of us to enjoy life.” He wins the support of the people by misleading them. (Numbers Rabbah 18:10)

Many commentators sympathize with Korah’s argument. They maintain that in bypassing Korah, the eldest son of the second eldest brother of Amram, and elevating Elizaphan, the eldest

son of the youngest brother of Amram, Moses breaks with the tradition of appointing the eldest before the youngest, setting off a deeply emotional family dispute. Korah’s pride is hurt; his expectations are shattered. Feeling cheated of his rightful inheritance, he is justified in leading a rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

Other interpreters disagree, pointing out that, while Korah’s disappointment may be understandable, his public repudiation of Moses and Aaron is irresponsible. For his behavior he deserves the punishment he receives. On the basis of the Torah’s claim that Korah publicly impugns the authority of Moses, these interpreters offer some creatively inventive examples. They claim that, to embarrass Moses, Korah waves his finger at him and asks, “Since the Torah claims that *tzitzit* must be made with a blue thread, does it mean that a person wearing a shirt made of blue threads need not wear *tzitzit*?” On another occasion, Korah asks, “If a house is filled with Torah scrolls that contain all the words inside a *mezuzah*, does the house require a *mezuzah* on the door?” By raising apparent contradictions within the Torah, Korah seeks to ridicule Moses and Aaron. Korah’s ultimate target, say these interpreters, is the Torah itself. In mocking Moses over inconsistencies within the Torah, Korah derides not only the Torah but God, the source of Torah. (*Numbers Rabbah* 18:1–4)

Other commentators claim that Korah goes further than scorning the Torah. He actually distorts its meanings. Walking among the Israelites, he points out that the Torah laws are difficult, suggesting that they are even unjust. Seeking to stir the emotions of the people against Moses and Aaron, Korah tells them about a poor widow and her daughter who have been harassed constantly by Moses and Aaron with one legal claim after another. She is about to plow, and they tell her, “According to the Torah you cannot plow. . . .” When she is ready to cut the wool of her animals, Aaron claims that the Torah gives him the right to collect his priestly tax on the first of the wool. Smiling cynically, Korah concludes, “You see they are exploiting our poor and needy.” (*Midrash Shocher Tov* on Psalms 1:1)

These imaginative interpretations by rabbinic commentators seek to explain why Korah was

punished with death for his rebellion. But what of Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 leaders of the community? How do we account for their being swallowed alive by the earth?

Some of the early rabbinic interpreters argue that it was a matter of association with the wrong neighbor. Dathan and Abiram happen to pitch their tents near Korah and his family. They hear Korah's constant criticism of Moses and Aaron and are convinced that Korah's cause is just. As a result of their friendship they join his rebellion and, in the end, are punished along with Korah. From the experience of Dathan and Abiram we are taught, "Woe to wicked people, and woe to their neighbors."

Other commentators argue that they are punished for much more than simply "associating with bad neighbors." Dathan and Abiram "invite punishment with their mouths" and with their "stubbornness." When Moses asks them to join him for a discussion about their differences, they refuse. As he approaches their tents, hoping that his show of humility will convince them to change their minds, they rebuke him and seek to humiliate him. In doing so, they foment rebellion among the people. For their "insolence" and "contentiousness" they are destroyed along with Korah. (*Numbers Rabbah* 18:4,5,12; also *Midrash Tanchuma* on Korah)

Unlike the early rabbinic interpreters who invented a background of events to explain why Korah, Dathan, and Abiram deserve their punishment, other commentators seek the reasons for their deaths within the Torah account itself.



Ibn Ezra

Abraham ibn Ezra explains that the whole episode is an ugly political dispute over the changes Moses initiates concerning the rights of firstborn males. Moses alters those rights when he appoints the Levites, in place of the firstborn, to care for the sanctuary sacrifices. Many of the people, argues ibn Ezra, believe that he introduces this change to benefit his own clan. Afterwards, explains ibn Ezra, Moses appoints his

brother, Aaron, and Aaron's sons to preside over the Levites. This upsets the Levites who had assumed they would control the sanctuary, without taking orders from others.

Ibn Ezra explains that Dathan and Abiram join the rebellion because they feel that Moses is taking privileges away from their tribe (Reuben) and giving more power to the tribe of Joseph. Korah, who is also firstborn, organizes all this discontent into the rebellion against Moses and Aaron, telling them: ". . . all the community are holy, all of them. . . . Why then do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?" This rebellion, ibn Ezra concludes, is fueled by the anger of the firstborn. Korah accuses Moses of discrimination and of robbing the rights of the firstborn in order to take those rights and privileges for himself and his family.



Ramban (Nachmanides)

Many commentators disagree with ibn Ezra's conclusions. Nachmanides, for instance, notes that Korah's mutiny does not occur at the time when Moses appoints the Levites or confers special responsibilities upon Aaron and his family for service in the sanctuary.

Rather, says Nachmanides, Korah organizes his protest when the spies return from the Land of Israel with their troubling and divided reports and after the people bitterly complain about the difficult conditions of life in the desert. "Korah," Nachmanides points out, "finds the opportune moment to pick his quarrel with Moses and his policy. He assumes that the people will side with him because of their frustration and discomfort."

According to Nachmanides, this emphasis on the psychological readiness of the people to attack Moses and Aaron also explains the defiant behavior and accusations of Dathan and Abiram. They not only refuse to meet with Moses for a discussion of their grievances, but they distort historical fact to inflame the people against him. Lies become stepping stones to personal advantage. Publicly Dathan and Abiram ask Moses, "Is it not enough that you brought us from a land

flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness. . . ?”

Cleverly they distort the past. Suddenly Egypt, which is associated with oppression, slavery, and starvation, is glorified as “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Because they take advantage of the confusion and fears of the people, perverting the truth and misleading them, Dathan and Abiram are punished. (Commentary on Numbers 16)

Two different views on “holiness”

Philosopher Martin Buber suggests that “both Moses and Korah desired the people to be . . . the holy people. But for Moses this was the goal. In order to reach it, generation after generation had to choose again and again . . . between the way of God and the wrong paths of their own hearts; between life and death. . . . For Korah, the people . . . were already holy . . . so why should there be further need for choice? Their dispute was between two approaches to faith and to life.” (Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant, Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., New York, 1958, pp. 189–190)



Leibowitz

On the basis of the discussion in *Pirke Avot* 5:17, Nehama Leibowitz reaches still another conclusion about why Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the company of 250 leaders are punished so severely for their rebellion. *Pirke Avot* states that there are two kinds of disputes: one that is pursued for a “heavenly” or good cause and one that is pursued for selfish reasons. As an example of the first, the rabbis cite the arguments between the great teachers Hillel and Shammai, which were always over matters of ethical or ritual principle. On the other hand, the chief example of “selfish” and unworthy controversy is that of Korah and his followers.

Leibowitz writes that Korah and his followers “were simply a band of malcontents, each harboring [individual] personal grievances against authority, animated by individual pride and ambition, united to overthrow Moses and Aaron, hoping thereby to attain their individual desires.” Eventually, “they would quarrel among themselves, as each one strove to attain selfish ambitions. . . .” They deserve their punishment, argues Leibowitz, because all their motives were self-serving, meant to splinter and divide the Jewish people. (See *Studies in Bemidbar*, pp. 181–185.)

Rabbi M. Miller agrees with Leibowitz’s views on Korah and the 250 leaders. However, citing a sixteenth-century commentary of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, known as the Maharal from Prague, Miller maintains that Dathan and Abiram had no justifiable, legitimate grievances for joining Korah’s rebellion. Rather, they “split the people out of sheer delight in mischief.” They enjoyed “degrading the great, in denying value to any other human being. . . .” What drove them was “a love of evil for its own sake . . . the unadulterated joy of hearing the denigration of others.” (*Sabbath Shiurim*, Feldheim, New York, 1979, pp. 245–252)

The importance of law

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin suggests that “the conflict between Moses and Korah reflects a tug of war within the human spirit. . . . Korah denies the importance of the laws. He says, ‘Who needs this system of do’s and don’ts, you shalls and you shall nots? We’re holy already.’ Certainly this perspective was attractive to every Israelite who wanted to be left alone. Who wants to be told what to do and what not to do? If I want to commit adultery, who are you to tell me I shouldn’t?” (Jerusalem Post, July 1, 1989)

One other interpretation of Korah’s rebellion and God’s destruction of all its participants ought to be considered. Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the other leaders make the claim that “all the people are holy.” In doing so, they call into question the authority of Moses and Aaron to make com-

munal decisions. While they advocate the holiness of each person, they do not take the next step. They do not call for a vote of each person or anything resembling democracy. Their dispute is over *who* will lead and who will make decisions for the community and is meant to put those powers into their hands.

Their mutiny raises a significant tension that is both political and religious. When Korah attacks Moses and Aaron with the claim "all the people are holy" and with the question "Why do you raise yourselves above God's congregation?" he is focusing on the common confusion between individual freedom and the limits to individual freedom that living in society imposes. As an individual, I would like to be free to walk anywhere I wish; as a member of society, I must restrict my wanderings at the fence of my neighbor's property. But living within a community demands that I must often sacrifice personal liberty, comforts, pleasures, and possessions for the well-being of others.

This dispute between Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 leaders on one side and Moses and Aaron on the other is about who will decide what is right for the community and who will define the accepted law and practice of society. Will it be left to the designated interpreters of Torah (Moses and Aaron) or to the whim of rabble-rousers (Korah and his followers)? Will it be a community ruled by the loudest voice with the most might or by the laws of Torah, publicly open to all?

It seems apparent from the punishment of Korah and all the followers of his rebellion that the Torah tradition promotes a rule of law even when it curbs the absolute freedom of the individual to pursue self-interest. Korah's rebellion is condemned, not only because it was self-serving, but also because it perpetuated a false and dangerous notion that society can exist without any limitations on individual liberty. For society to function, the rights of individuals must be limited, and leaders must be given special powers and responsibilities within the context of law.

Rav Huna, a leader of Babylonian Jewry for forty years during the third century, underscores this bias when he comments that, if one listens to the earth at the place where Korah and his

followers were swallowed, one hears them saying over and over again, "Moses and his Torah represent the truth. We are liars." Individual rights are guaranteed and protected by law. They crumble when society lapses into a tyranny of individuals claiming, as Korah did, "I am holy, so I have the right to do whatever I wish." (See *Baba Batra* 74a.)

Jewish commentators are critical of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers. All agree that their rebellion grew out of evil, self-centered motives and that they deserved the punishment they received. For modern readers, the ancient tale and its interpretations remain a valuable source of lessons about the differences between a just and an unjust dispute and about the definition of a just and free society.

PEREK BET: *Magic and Miracles in Jewish Tradition*

After Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their followers publicly question and criticize the leadership of Moses and Aaron, Moses challenges them to bring pans of fire and incense to the sanctuary. Moses commands the people to separate themselves from the rebels. He declares that God will make known who has the authority to lead the people. "By what happens in the morning," Moses says, "you will know that it was *Adonai* who sent me to do all these things."

The next morning the people assemble. According to the Torah, they watch as the earth miraculously opens, swallowing Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families, households, and possessions. All is lost inside the smoldering earth. Soon a fire blazes forth killing all 250 of Korah's followers. The entire community witnesses this gruesome scene.

Later in our *parashah*, Moses commands each of the twelve tribal chieftains to bring a staff for deposit in the sanctuary. The next day he discovers that Aaron's staff has miraculously sprouted, producing blossoms and almonds! Despite the wonder, however, the people of Israel continue to complain about their conditions.

Miraculous events are reported in many different places within the Torah. Ten plagues are sent

to punish the stubborn Pharaoh. The Red Sea apart before the fleeing Israelites and drowns the pursuing Egyptians. Manna is sent to feed the wandering Israelites on their journey through the desert. Water flows from a rock when Moses strikes it. In *Parashat Balak* a donkey speaks to her master.

How are we to understand such incidents that defy the known laws of nature? Are Jews expected to accept such wonders on faith? If one rejects as "impossible" or questions the reliability of such miracles, are the authority of Torah and its meaning diminished? If the Torah contains miracle stories like the earth opening and swallowing up Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, can we conclude that it is more a work of fiction than of profound religious truth?

It should not surprise us that Torah interpreters have struggled with such questions for many centuries. Early rabbinic commentators accept the descriptions of miracles within the Torah as a matter of faith. They take for granted that, if the Torah reports them and they were witnessed by others, such incidents are credible.

Yet, how can events like manna falling from heaven, an animal speaking, a sea opening, the earth swallowing Dathan and Abiram possibly be *rationalized* within the scheme of the laws of nature? How can one account for such miracles?

Facing that question, early Jewish interpreters suggest that such miracles were planned by God at the very creation of the heavens and earth. These events described in the Torah are not interruptions of natural law. Rather, they are *programmed* into creation to occur at precisely the historic moment when they are necessary. We can understand miracles, therefore, as pre-programmed "natural" events. (*Avot* 5:6)

However, the rabbinic acceptance of this theory about miracles is combined with blunt skepticism. "Miracles cannot be cited as proof for any argument," say the rabbis. "In danger, one must not rely on a miracle." Similarly, Yannai warns that one should "never depend on a miracle." Nachman ben Jacob teaches, "Miracles occur, but food is rarely provided by them." (*Yevamot* 121b; *Kiddushin* 39b; *Shabbat* 32a,52b)



Rambam (Maimonides)

Philosopher and commentator Moses Maimonides actually bases his proof of God's governing power over all nature on the reality of miracles. Taking the Torah as a reliable source of information about the world, Maimonides argues: "We might be asked, 'Why has God inspired a certain person and not another?' 'Why has God revealed Torah to one people and not another?' 'Why has God's power been revealed through one prophet and not another?' We answer all such questions," explains Maimonides, "by saying: 'That is God's will. That is God's wisdom . . . and we do not understand why God's will or wisdom determined any of these things.'" In essence, Maimonides contends that, while the miracles reported in Torah raise questions, they also demonstrate God's mysterious and wonderful power over all nature. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, pp. 199–200)

Nachmanides suggests that great miracles like the parting of the Red Sea teach human beings to appreciate "the hidden miracles" around them. He explains that "everything that happens in our affairs, private or public, is miraculous." Life itself is a wonder-filled gift! (See comments on *Balak*.)

Seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher and interpreter Baruch Spinoza offers a very different view on biblical miracles. Believing that nothing can violate the laws of nature, Spinoza rejects miracles as ignorant "prejudices of an ancient people," who believe that God intervenes in nature for their benefit. This accounts for the way in which stories like the punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram are presented. They are distorted, says Spinoza, by the innocent but false assumptions and opinions of events that the early Hebrews could not understand or explain. (*Theological-Political Treatise*, R.H. Elwes, translator, Dover Publications, New York, 1955, pp. 82–93)

Spinoza's rejection of miracles is disputed by

modern philosopher and commentator Martin Buber. He writes that “the concept of miracle” described within the Torah “can be defined at its starting point as an abiding astonishment.” Such “astonishment” is a natural occurrence. Furthermore, says Buber, “the great turning points in religious history are based on the fact that again and ever again an individual and a group attached to [that individual] wonder and keep on wondering at a natural—or historical event—at something that intervenes fatefully in the life of this individual and this group.” The point of “astonishment” comes in the realization that one grasps the “cause” of the miraculous event and is permitted “a glimpse of the sphere in which a sole power, not restricted by any other, is at work.”

Placed in the context of our Torah portion, the earth opening up to swallow Korah, Dathan, and Abiram is an astonishing miracle in which one sees the “power” of God “at work.” Experiencing the miracle, one knows the certainty of God’s existence and “power.” The miracle is a window into God’s presence. (See *Moses*, pp. 74–78.)

Belief in miracles

*Every miracle can be explained—after the event. . . . Every miracle is possible, even the most absurd, even that an ax floats. . . . In fact nothing is miraculous about a miracle except that it comes when it does. The east wind has probably swept bare the ford in the Red Sea hundreds of times and will do so again. . . . But that it did this at a moment when the people in their distress set foot in the sea—that is the miracle. (Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, William H. Hallo, translator, Beacon Press, Boston, 1972, pp. 93–94)*

Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, the philosopher who inspired the creation of the twentieth-century American movement of Reconstructionist Judaism, disagrees with Buber and also rejects most traditional explanations of biblical miracles. “In our day, when humanity has achieved marvels of control over nature by a technology that assumes

the uniformities of natural law, belief in miracles that contravene natural law is a psychological impossibility for most people.” Kaplan dismisses the arguments of those who point out that the miracles of the Torah did not occur privately but were witnessed by many people. Today’s science challenges “the credibility of miracles,” he writes, repudiating them as factually inaccurate. (*Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers*, Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1956, pp. 155–156)



Peli

Pinchas Peli does not argue for the “credibility of miracles” but maintains that each one mentioned within the Torah contains an important lesson. “Korah’s spectacular downfall,” for example, “was to serve as a warning. It was meant to call our attention to the differences between authentic, responsible leadership and illusory, appealing rhetoric.” The report of the miraculous process of growth of the blossoms and almonds on Aaron’s staff is meant “to teach us that true leadership is not necessarily demonstrated by the ability to produce immediate results . . . with instant cures to all problems. Even the leader chosen by God in a miraculous act cannot skip the several stages in the growth of an almond. The orderly sequence must be followed. First sprouts, then blossoms, and only then the finished product.” (“Torah Today” in the *Jerusalem Post*, June 29, 1985)

It is apparent that Jewish interpreters approach the subject of miracles from varying points of view. Some are skeptical; others find profound symbolic and spiritual meanings; still others dismiss miracles as figments of primitive imagination, unworthy of contemporary consideration. “Miracles,” Nehama Leibowitz comments, “cannot change human minds and hearts. They can always be explained away.” (*Studies in Bemidbar*, p. 231)

There can be no doubt, however, that the Torah’s miracle stories are intriguing. The mys-

tery they embody seems to attract our attention and underscore their importance. We read them with fascination, wondering about their meaning and sensing that they contain secrets we should try to fathom. It is, after all, nearly always the extraordinary, not the ordinary, that captures our attention, challenging us to unravel its hidden, illusive code and message. Could this explain the miracles mentioned in the Torah? Are they meant as powerful invitations—bait for tempting, bending, and stretching the human mind, imagination, and heart—into new realms of reasoning and faith?

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Is there a difference between the rebellion of Korah and that of Dathan and Abiram? Are there modern parallels to their protests? What did they do, according to our interpreters, to justify such serious punishment?
2. Korah claims that Moses and Aaron are acting as if they were more “holy” than others among the Israelites. How do the various interpreters explain this accusation? What do individuals and societies learn today from their points of view?
3. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, once said: “In Israel, to be a realist, you must believe in miracles.” What did he mean? How does such an observation apply to some of the stories about miracles in the Torah?