

# **Korach's Rebellion: A Revisionist Dvar Torah Stan Fleischman, June 16, 2007**

As we inexorably segue into the 2008 Presidential Election Campaign, we become increasingly confronted by professional spinmeisters and the candidates themselves offering “spins” to cast in the best light their statements, misstatements, and contradictory voting records.

Thinking about Korach's rebellion in the context of today's political jockeying does not seem irrelevant to me. Simply put, the rebellion is about the pursuit of power. Further, the overwhelming consensus in the Jewish tradition is that Korach is the prototype of the demagogue: one who speaks in the name of “the people”, but who, in actuality, is really concerned with promoting himself and amassing personal power. Politics is in the air throughout this parsha!

Nevertheless, I wondered if there was a more positive way to understand today's parsha about the rebellion of Korach and his followers. I was intrigued by a note in Etz Hayim on the verses about the fire pans (Bamidbar 17:1 – 17:5, Etz Hayim P. 865), which I will get to later. The note hints at an alternative interpretation more sympathetic to Korach which enables us to understand the rebellion in a more positive light. This appealed to my perverse nature. So, I delved further.

Before exploring a revisionist interpretation of Korach's Rebellion, let's first review the parsha [Bamidbar16:1-19, Etz Hayim P. 861].

*I Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with  
Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of  
Reuben, took men;*

*2 and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown;*

*3 and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them: 'Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and HaShem is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of HaShem?'*

*4 And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face.*

*5 And he spoke unto Korah and unto all his company, saying: 'In the morning HaShem will show who are His, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near unto Him; even him whom He may choose will He cause to come near unto Him.'*

*6 This do: take you censors, Korah, and all his company;*

*7 and put fire therein, and put incense upon them before HaShem tomorrow; and it shall be that the man whom HaShem doth choose, he shall be holy; ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi.'*

*8 And Moses said unto Korah: 'Hear now, ye sons of Levi:*

*9 is it but a small thing unto you, that the G-d of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of HaShem, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them;*

*10 and that He hath brought thee near, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee? and will ye seek the priesthood also?*

*11 Therefore thou and all thy company that are gathered together against HaShem--; and as to Aaron, what is he that ye murmur against him?'*

*12 And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; and they said: 'We will not come up;*

*13 is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, but thou must needs make thyself also a prince over us?*

*14 Moreover thou hast not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards; wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? we will not come up.'*

*15 And Moses was very wroth, and said unto HaShem: 'Respect not thou their offering; I have not taken one ass from them, neither have I hurt one of them.'*

*16 And Moses said unto Korah: 'Be thou and all thy congregation before HaShem, thou, and they, and Aaron, to-morrow;*

*17 and take ye every man his fire-pan, and put incense upon them, and bring ye before HaShem every man his fire-pan, two hundred and fifty fire-pans; thou also, and Aaron, each his fire-pan.'*

*18 And they took every man his fire-pan, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon, and stood at the door of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron.*

*19 And Korah assembled all the congregation against them unto the door of the tent of meeting; and the glory of HaShem appeared unto all the congregation.*

The parsha begins with Korach “*taking*” himself with Datan and Aviram and 250 leaders of the community to “*a different side*”, or “*separating himself*” in opposition to Moses and Aaron (according to Rashi). What is the rebellion all about<sup>1</sup>? The answer is more complicated than I originally imagined. In fact, there are two independent groups of malcontents, each with a different agenda, egged on by Korach in the middle, playing power politics and manipulating them into a coalition. The parsha is further complicated by the action switching back and forth, sometimes very abruptly, between scenes depicting Moses’ confrontations with the two groups.

Group One consists of Korach himself (a Levite and first cousin of Moses), along with the 250 leaders of the community, all from the Tribe of Levi, who argue: “*Why do you, Moses and Aaron, raise yourselves above us in keeping for yourself the priestly function? The entire congregation is holy and Adonai is in our midst.*”

In fact, this viewpoint is based on the Levites’ jealousy that their assigned roles in **assisting** the High Priest, or *Cohen Gadol* (Aaron), while allowing them to be “close to

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis inspired by Tanach Study Center <http://www.tanach.org/korach.htm>.

Adonai”, are, in their eyes, still inferior to that of the High Priest, who alone is permitted to offer sacrifices (*korbanot* – **to come closer**) to Adonai. Group One seeks *spiritual equality*.

Group Two consists of Datan and Aviram and their followers from the Tribe of Reuven. Because they are descendents of the first born son of Jacob, this group believes that they, not the Levites Moses and Aaron, should hold political leadership of the community. The Reuvenites hold this belief despite the fact that Jacob, on his death-bed, pronounced Reuven as “*unstable as water*” and foretold that his line will not be preeminent among those of his sons (Genesis 48:3-4). Group Two seeks *political leadership*.

In response to the challenge, Moses proposes a burning incense test (k’toret test) [Bamidbar 16:5, P 861] He asks the rebels to bring their fire pans to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and burn incense in them. He who’s offering Adonai accepts will be established as worthy to offer the sacrifice. This test is accepted by the Levites (Korach and the 250), who believe that they, not only Aaron and his sons, should be allowed to offer the sacrifice. But the challenge is not accepted by the Reuvenites, Datan and Aviram, who insist that they will sit tight in their camp and not “*come up*.” Instead they use the opportunity to berate Moses for “*lording it over them*” and taking them out of a “*land of milk and honey*” (they are talking about Egypt where they were enslaved!!!) to “*die in the desert*.”

Moses responds to this verbal abuse by indignantly and defensively insisting that he has not abused his power by accepting gifts (i.e. “*Not a donkey of theirs have I carried off, nor have I harmed any of them*.” – the biblical equivalent of “*I haven’t taken a penny of the taxpayers money*”). In fact, we know from other stories about Moses that he is indeed ready to share power—in last week’s parsha, he begged God for other leaders to help him with the burden of leadership.

I believe that by throwing back in his face Moses’ promise to deliver the Israelites to a “*land of milk and honey*”, Datan and Aviram are employing political rhetoric,

manipulating language for political ends, a sure tip-off of the Reuvenites true intentions. They do so in a way, sadly, familiar to us in 2007, for instance when politicians name legislation with weakened provisions for reducing air pollutants “*The Clear Skies Act*”<sup>2</sup>, or when political advocates casually toss around, and misapply terms such as *Nazi*, *holocaust*, and *apartheid*.

As George Orwell concludes in his famous essay *Politics and the English Language* (1946) “*Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and make murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to the pure wind.*”

So, how did this all play out?

Group One (the Levites) accepts the challenge, shows up at the Mishkan with their fire pans and incense, and fails the test! As punishment for protesting that the entire community is holy and priests are therefore not required, the 250 leaders of the community are destroyed by fire. [Bamidbar 16:18-22 P. 863 and 16:35, P. 865 Etz Hayim]

The rebel’s claim that the entire community is holy and doesn’t require priests, makes the tacit assumption that “*holiness*” is a static condition conferred upon the Israelites as a gift rather than an ongoing process that the community needs to constantly work towards, perhaps with the spiritual guidance of priests. As Leviticus 19:2 commands, “**You shall become holy.**”<sup>3</sup>

Group Two (the descendents of Reuven) refuses the challenge and stays in their camp (described in the parsha as the “*Mishkan of Korach, Datan, and Aviram*” – opposition headquarters perhaps?) where the ground opens up (an earthquake perhaps?) and swallows them, all their family, and their followers as punishment for challenging

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<sup>2</sup> Sierra Club [http://www.sierraclub.org/cleanair/clear\\_skies.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/cleanair/clear_skies.asp)

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin

<http://www.birthrightisrael.com/bin/en.jsp?enDispWho=Features%5E1255&enPage=BlankPage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enVersion=0&enZone=Features&&channel=JewishLife>

Adonai's plan for Moses' leadership. [Bamidbar 16:12-14 P. 862 and 16:23-34, P. 863 Etz Hayim]

However, the parsha leaves us with a conundrum. It doesn't make clear what became of Korach. Clearly, he led Group One which called for spiritual equality, but his name also appears first in the name the parsha gives to the break-away "*Mishkan of Korach, Datan, and Aviram.*" The Gemara suggests that Korach (*impossibly!*) received BOTH punishments [Sanhedrin 110a].

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Now that we have reviewed the parsha, let me attempt to address the question that I raised at the beginning: can we understand the story of Korach, Datan, Aviram, and the 250 Levites in a more positive light? Were their "crimes" so severe that they required this level of punishment, even leaving aside the question of the killing of innocent onlookers – worthy of a dvar Torah in itself? What exactly did Korach and friends do or say that was wrong? Is it so wrong to challenge the restriction of the priesthood to the family of Aaron, or to challenge the political leadership of Moses?

The answer, I believe, is: there is nothing wrong with challenges in the Jewish tradition! The Torah contains many examples, starting with Abraham arguing with Adonai not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and its inhabitants. The problem with Korach's challenge in this parsha is that he presents an argument ostensibly "*For the sake of Heaven*" that in actuality is for self-aggrandizement, and "*NOT for the sake of Heaven.*"

Further motivation for a more kindly interpretation of Korach and the Levites is provided by a consideration of the events that took place after the Levites are consumed by fire. Bamidbar 17 [1-5, P. 865 Etz Hayim] begins with Adonai requesting through Moses that Elazar, the son of Aaron, retrieve the fire pans of the Levites and hammer them into plates that will be used for plating the alter as a *SIGN* ("*ot*" in Hebrew) to the children of Israel because they were used in front of Adonai and have become holy.

*1 And HaShem spoke unto Moses, saying:*

*2 'Speak unto Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, that he take up the fire-pans out of the burning, and scatter thou the fire yonder; for they are become holy;*

*3 even the fire-pans of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, and let them be made beaten plates for a covering of the altar--for they are become holy, because they were offered before HaShem--that they may be a sign unto the children of Israel.'*

*4 And Eleazar the priest took the brazen fire-pans, which they that were burnt had offered; and they beat them out for a covering of the altar,*

*5 to be a memorial unto the children of Israel, to the end that no common man, that is not of the seed of Aaron, draw near to burn incense before HaShem; that he fare not as Korah, and as his company; as HaShem spoke unto him by the hand of Moses.*

Etz Hayim translates “*ot*” negatively as “*warning*.” However, Rabbi Neil Gillman, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, points out<sup>4</sup> that elsewhere in Torah “*ot*” usually appears as a *positive* reminder, such as Shabbat, the mark of circumcision, and the rainbow in the Noah story.

Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, also known as Ha-amek Davar, [cited in a note to Bamidbar 17:2-3 in Etz Hayim] comments that the fire pans are sacred because Korach and the 250 community leaders were not really rebels and sinners but were people with a love for Adonai who yearned to get closer. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate for Palestine, [also cited in this note], takes this thought a step further and teaches that “*the holiness of the fire pans symbolizes the necessary role played by skeptics and agnostics in keeping religion honest and healthy. Challenges to tradition are necessary because they stand as perpetual reminders that religion can sink into corruption and complacency. Plating the altar with the fire pans of the rebels is meant to remind us of the legitimacy, indeed the potential holiness of the impulse within each of us to rebel against religious stagnation and complacency that can infect religion.*”

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kolel.org/pages/5763/korach.html>

Finally, now that I have attempted to explain the *spiritual rebellion* of Korach and the 250 leaders of the community in a more positive light, can we also understand the *political rebellion* of Datan and Aviram in a more positive light? I set out attempting to find a positive alternative to the explanation that these descendents of the first-born son of Jacob were motivated by sheer jealousy and feelings of being denied the leadership roles that, in their eyes, should be theirs. Alas, I have failed to come up with a plausible positive explanation, so I am going to ask for your help.

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As we think of the presidential election campaign and spinmeisters, I offer three questions for discussion:

1. Can any of you come up with an explanation that places in a more positive light the political challenge of Datan and Aviram to the leadership of Moses?
2. Bamidbar 17:3 says “*Remove the fire pans of those WHO HAVE SINNED at the cost of their lives---*.” Yet, Ha-amek Davar states that the men consumed by fire were NOT sinners, and Rav Kook states that the impulse within each of us to rebel against religious stagnation and complacency is holy. What do you think? Was there something not holy in the way these men attempted to get closer to Adonai?
3. How are we to reconcile the hammered fire pans as a positive symbol (“*ot*”), a reminder of the need to question, with the complete text of Bamidbar 17:5 which seems to indicate that the pans are meant as a warning never to repeat Korach’s rebellion?

I would like to close with this final thought:

There is a Midrash [Sotah 13b] that suggests that Moses and Korach suffered from the same sense of dissatisfaction with their lot. At the same time, this Midrash also looks at Korach and the 250 Levites more sympathetically, imagining them yearning to get closer to Adonai and suggesting that it was wrong of Moses to hold them back, despite their use of the wrong methods for which they ultimately paid with their lives. Moses responded to Korach and his cohorts, in the parsha that we have just read, saying that as Levites they had already been granted a distinguished position. “*Why are you seeking more? It’s enough for you – Rav Lachem*” [Bamidbar 16:7].

The Midrash explains that Moses should have been more compassionate. Forty years later, when Moses pleaded to be allowed into the Promised Land, Adonai refused him with the deliberate use of the same expression – “*Rav Lecha*” [Devarim 3:26, Etz Hayim P. 1005] implying “*it is enough for you to be the leader here. You don’t have to go to the Promised Land.*” Adonai uses the same expression to teach Moses the dual lesson that it is wrong to hold back *anyone* from striving higher. Yet, at the same time, one must come to peace with the hand dealt to him or her.