

Not for the Sake of Heaven

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Parashat Korah, a poignant ancient exploration of conflict and leadership, remains frighteningly current. Korah challenges the authority of his cousins, Moses and Aaron, accusing them of elevating themselves above the community they serve. The biblical narrative communicates the palpable tension of contrasting intentions behind this dispute and the qualities that distinguish servant leaders from those whose primary motivations are attention and power.

Korah is a populist whose language is defined by what Michael Milburn and Sheree Conrad term “the politics of anger” (*Raised to Rage*, 2016). He confronts Moses and Aaron, not with constructive criticism nor a strategic vision for the community’s betterment, but rather with a clear desire to agitate and disrupt. Their challenge, cloaked in the language of equality and justice, is fundamentally self-serving. Korah’s question, “Why do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” (Num. 16:3), seems on the surface to advocate for communal equity, but it is in truth only a facade for his underlying ambition. After all, Moses repeatedly refused God’s call at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13, 4:1–13), and Aaron was only thereafter called by God to serve as Moses’s spokesperson (Ex. 4:14–16). Not only did the brothers not chase power, they attempted to escape it entirely.

In a fanciful midrash, Korah’s attempt to denigrate Moses and Aaron’s authority is expanded to include an additional facet: antinomianism, the rejection of law itself.

“And Korah took (Num. 16:1)—What is written right before this? “Let them place a cord of *tehelet* (blue) to their *tzitzit* (Num. 15).” Korah jumped on this and said to Moses, “Is a tallit that is made

entirely of *tehelet* exempt from the mitzvah of *tzitzit*?” Moses responded, “It requires *tzitzit*.” Korah responded, “An all-*tehelet* tallit is insufficient but four attached threads of blue suffice?!” [Korah then asked.] “Is a house full of Torah scrolls exempt from the mitzvah of *mezuzah*?” Moses responded, “It requires a *mezuzah*.” Korah said to him, “A house that holds all 275 sections of the Torah is insufficient, but one section in the doorway is sufficient?!” Korah said to Moses, “These matters, you were not commanded about them by God. From your own mind you added them.” This is why the Torah writes, “And Korah took.” This kind of language is always about divisions. (Bemidbar Rabbah 18:3)”

By framing tradition in this way, Korah sought to divide the community. He wasn’t truly asking meaningful questions, not in the biblical example of Moses’s and Aaron’s authority, and not in the midrashic cases of *tzitzit* and *mezuzah*. He was attempting to tear traditional structures down, all the while garbing his intentions with shallow claims of pursuing justice.

In our text, Korah taps into intense societal anxiety and “gaslights” the community, misdirecting them for the purpose of the very self-elevation with which he distorts Moses and Aaron’s leadership, recasting the beauty of mindful practice as a perversion of sanctity. Arguments motivated by ego are inherently destructive. Such disputes, driven by a need for recognition, at best undermine communal cohesion and stifle growth, at worst fracture societal bonds. Korah’s argument is not for the sake of heaven; it is a power play, a bid to usurp Moses and Aaron’s positions without regard for the well-being of the

community. This is a stark contrast to arguments that are *l'shem shamayim* (for the sake of heaven), characterized by a genuine desire to improve community, to be of service to others.

In contrast, consider the Talmudic model of the debates between Hillel and Shammai. Though often passionate, the disputes of their competing schools of Jewish tradition were rooted in a shared commitment to discover divine truth and enhance communal life. Their arguments were constructive, aiming to clarify and deepen understanding rather than to dominate or embarrass. This approach to disagreement fosters growth and development, benefiting the entire community.

When faced with Korah's rebellion, Moses does not respond with immediate condemnation nor defense of his own record. Instead, he falls on his face (Num. 16:4) in an act of humility and distress. Moses's leadership is marked by his willingness to bear the burden of the people and his constant intercession on their behalf—even when they turn against him.

True leaders are those who see themselves as servants. They lead not for personal glory but out of a sense of duty. Such leaders prioritize the needs of the community over their own prominence.

These leaders model a divine quality the mystics call *tzimtzum*, the way they envision God having contracted God's Infinite Light to create space for the world, a cosmic act of self-limitation. This notion of Divine Humility is a powerful counter-model to the human tendency towards ego, all too often the case in today's complicated worlds of religion and politics where individuals conflate their own ambitions with the sacred obligations of powerful communal positions. *Tzimtzum* is the decentralization of one's own authority, empowering and encouraging growth and development in others. This model contrasts sharply with those who seek to dominate and control and shows that true leadership lies in humility and the empowerment of others.

As the ancient sages of Pirkei Avot taught:

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven, will in the end endure; But one that is not for the sake of Heaven, will not endure. Which is the controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is the controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his council. (M Avot 5:17)

Arguments for the sake of heaven, like those of Hillel and Shammai, foster understanding. Leaders who see themselves as servants, following the humble model of Moses and the Divine example of *tzimtzum*, create spaces where others can thrive and where true communal growth can occur.

In the end, Korah's rebellion and its tragic outcome serve as a cautionary tale. They warn against the dangers of ego-driven disputes and self-serving authority figures. They remind us that true leadership requires humility, self-sacrifice, and a commitment to the greater good. And they call us to strive for arguments and to seek out leaders who consider service the highest value and the best use of power.