



Destruction and Rebirth
Torah Reflections on Parashat Korach
Numbers 16:1 – 18:32
23 Sivan 5774 June 21, 2014

In this week's *parashah*, Korach organizes a rebellion that attempts to overthrow the leadership of Moses. Korach and his assembly accuse Moses and Aaron of taking too much power. They claim that each and every Israelite is holy, and they ask Moses why he and Aaron lift themselves above everyone else. When Moses hears this, he falls upon his face, perhaps out of despair, or possibly in an act of prayer for guidance. Ultimately, the earth opens its mouth and swallows up Korach's followers and their households, and then closes over them, leaving no visible trace that they had ever existed. Interestingly, the Torah also tells us that the sons of Korach escaped this destruction and survived to become the founders of a family of Psalmists.¹

The Torah also tells us that Moses and Korach were cousins, and with this in mind, from their confrontation we can learn about political and familial struggles. Even though the Torah presents Korach as a destructive force and traditional commentaries expound on how Korach's demise was justified, important lessons about hope and transformation can be found in this biblical narrative. This story of confrontation, rebellion, and resultant cataclysm offers up rich interpretations that can give us emotional and psychological support in times of conflict. For instance, we can think of the Moses-Korach confrontation as a metaphor for some of the internal conflicts we experience as human beings, with Moses and Korach representing different states in a person's physical and spiritual life.

Just as Korach separated himself from the community and rebelled, when we face an illness or disability it can feel as if parts of our body have separated and are working against us instead of with us. The poignant image of Moses falling upon his face after he hears the words of Korach gives us a visual reference for the anguish and grief one can feel when faced with a diagnosis that threatens our well being or that of a loved one. It may be a source of hope that Korach and his followers, those elements that tried to destroy the stasis of the larger body, were erased from the face of the earth. And it is comforting to know that Korach's offspring, the seeds that he had planted within the body of Israel, were of a totally different nature and grew up to write praises about God.

When we face psychological anxieties, traumatic memories, or addictions, we can draw on a totally different metaphor from Korach's life: the manner in which Korach, as we know him, ceased to exist. Korach the rebel did not drown in a flood and was not struck by a lightning bolt; he was swallowed up and absorbed by '*aretz*', the earth. This is the same *aretz* that in Genesis (1:11-12) sprouts herbage yielding seed and trees yielding fruit, each containing its seed after its kind. From this perspective, Korach did not die, but rather, disappeared from the face of the earth to become a part of the world hidden deep under the earth's surface where germination and growth take place. Despite the preponderance of Torah commentary that assumes that Korach died, the Talmud allows for the possibility that Korach was not killed: "he was neither of those who were swallowed up nor of those who were burnt".² When viewed through this lens, we can think of Korach and his followers as having been transformed from a destructive energy into an energy that had the potential to fertilize and nurture future life. On a more personal level, when we know that aspects of our illness may always lurk in the shadows, living through and beyond their destructive periods can transform and rebirth us into beings of great strength and sensitivity, giving us characteristics that might have eluded us had we not faced a crisis.

It can be difficult to accept that Korach was killed just because he asked legitimate questions and challenged authority. The world of Jewish scholarship encourages us to question and to debate our holy texts, and the secular world urges us to seek out second and third opinions on issues ranging from buying a car to accepting our doctor's prescriptions. How are we to make sense of Korach's death when we believe that it is good and healthy, and sometimes necessary, to question the system, be it practices in health care, environmental issues, or political situations? Our sages tell us that it was not the act of questioning that caused Korach's downfall, but rather his motives. We are told that Korach was motivated by envy and

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resentment; that his questioning of Moses' authority was tantamount to his questioning the authority of God, and that he wanted to encourage fragmentation within the Israelite nation.³

For an individual, the experience of feeling “split in two” can stem from a variety of sources. It may be due to anger or frustration because what we are able to do is less than what we want to do, result from feeling fragmented or not quite like ourselves because of grief or worry, or it may be the result of looking and feeling strong and healthy while knowing that we are living with an illness or a disability. Regardless of the cause, whenever we sense a split within our inner being, it can feel as if we are at war with ourselves.

According to Rav Kook, “Whoever said that my soul is torn, spoke well. It is certainly torn. We cannot imagine a person whose soul is not torn. Only an inanimate object can be whole. A human being is filled with conflicting aspirations, and an inner war rages within him continuously. Man's true mission is to fuse the torn fragments of his soul by means of an all-inclusive concept, an idea whose magnitude and eminence encompasses everything else, bringing it to complete harmony.”⁴

Some of these inner conflicts and splits, the Korachs within us, erupt and are absorbed into our greater self as our fields of vision and understanding widen with each life experience. We may become our own rebellious Korach to our stable Moses when we challenge and re-examine our notions about how we perceive and judge our world. This process of confronting and resolving conflicting interpretations of experience is an essential part of spiritual and intellectual growth. Every time that our mind engages in reasoning of any kind, Korach may challenge Moses and our mind and emotions participate in a metaphysical dance of destroying and constructing perspectives and opinions.

Whether we choose to believe that Korach died, or that he was transformed, depends on our personal situations and challenges. As we each engage in our private internal dialogues, and address our personal inner divides, may we have the faith to allow our challenges to transform, re-emerge, and to feed us in the future.

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¹ Commentary on Numbers 26:11 by J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p. 688, Soncino Press, 1965

² Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin, Folio 110a

³ Various commentaries on *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, 5:20

⁴ Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, quoted in *An Angel Among Men*, Simcha Raz, p. 501, Kol Mevaser Publications, Israel, 2003



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