

D'rash on Korach

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I find the Korach portion more confounding with each passing year, even as it becomes more relevant. The Torah clearly intends a story with a clear moral, but instead I find it just highlights a dilemma, albeit one that is as relevant today as it was when the portion was written.

One thing the text does succeed in conveying is a sense of almost ceaseless turmoil. For us, that mood may be exacerbated by the way the text apparently combines what were once two separate stories – one about Korach; one about Dathan and Abiram – and switches back and forth between them.

But textual history aside, the story is, I find, difficult on its face. For starters, Korach's complaint sounds perfectly reasonable – both in the context of the story of the exodus, and as a prototype of the language of revolutions. And on the surface, what Korach is saying is not all that different from what Moses himself says when confronted with Medab and Eldad prophesying in the camp a few parshiot ago.

The rabbinic commentary is at pains to explain why Korach is to be considered so deserving of execration and punishment. The rabbis invent many midrashim designed to illustrate that Korach was really just concerned about his own status or perhaps the status of his clan or tribe, rather than about any larger principle.

But most revolutions and other political advances have begun with uprisings from those who already had something to lose, not from the bottom. The nobles who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta, the patricians and merchants who led the American Revolution, the leaders of the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution (neither ending in democracy) all were, in part, pursuing their own class interests. They were operating in the “undefinable realm where altruism and selfishness meet” – to use a lovely phrase the historian of China Jonathan Spence applied to missionaries (if I recall correctly). So Korach's status and perhaps mixed motives (or even worse) don't automatically mean that his rebellion is so easy to shrug off, at least for me.

Dathan and Abiram's laments also sound valid on the surface, and hard to simply reject as irrational or ill-motivated rebellion.

Moses' response to the rebel leaders hardly helps persuade the reader – or at least, me – that there is nothing to their case. To Korach, Moses simply invokes G_d and says the rebels should be satisfied with the privileges they already have as Levites. He does not respond to their notion of the people being holy. To Dathan and Abiram, he grumbles that he has not been personally corrupt – has not taken a donkey or harmed anyone. But Moses says nothing about their complaint that he has not brought them to the promised land of milk and honey. Moses' evasions, as well as his resort to higher authority, are as prototypical as the rebels' complaints.

Perhaps it is the Korach story, at least as much as the exodus, that is the model of the way many revolutions occur – even if Michael Walzer’s interpretation is more elevating.

G_d’s actions hardly make the story easier to take. First, G_d leaves Moses in the driver’s seat to an unusual and surprising (and perhaps realistic) degree. Moses is the one that comes up with the fire pan idea. Moses is the one who calls on G_d to have the earth swallow up the rebels. And then after all that retribution, G_d causes a plague that is only stopped by Moses and Aaron interceding to ensure they have some followers left.

The result is a terrified and paralyzed people – again, often the fallout of actual revolutions.

And the end result of all this – again, following a common pattern of actual revolutions – is a much more conservative regime. The rules for the Levites – and the support the public is required to provide for them – are spelled out clearly and rigidly. In short, a hierarchy is solidified – a hierarchy that the rabbis eventually largely succeeded in displacing and that congregations like our own explicitly rebel against, as in the way we perform the priestly blessing.

All this leaves me impressed by the way the Torah acutely captures and anatomizes the nature of revolution, but leaves me queasy about accepting the Torah’s spin on it.

Thinking of contemporary parallels only compounds the problem. Biblical governance was basically theocratic. How would the Ayatollah interpret this portion? (I don’t know if the story is referenced in the Koran.)

In the U.S. context, maybe we can content ourselves that Trump is Korach, but that’s not the only way of seeing the analogy, and in any event, Trump has triumphed (at least for the time being). Nothing about our current predicament makes the story clearer for me.

And in the broader scope of U.S. history there is ambivalence about uprisings. Jefferson wrote in a letter – to the consternation of some of his friends – that a little rebellion is good now and then, as needed to clear out the political atmosphere as storms are to refresh the atmosphere meteorologically. Unlike G_d, though, Jefferson saw the political danger in putting down (theoretical) rebellions too harshly, at least in that one letter.

So this parsha leaves me in a quandary. I see it as a useful lens for analyzing revolution and understanding their rhetoric and arc. But with each year, I feel more uncomfortable with the Torah’s and the tradition’s take on the story. Even with G_d visibly selecting a side, and ultimately carrying through with His promise to deliver the Israelites to the Promised Land, the story can be hard to swallow. How much more so in a world where rebels and their antagonists are only too eager to invoke G_d, even though we can only presume which side is ultimately G_d’s or the side of virtue.

What is your take on the parsha?