

The Sons of Korah and Us: Thoughts for Parashat Korah

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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Korah and his fellow rebels were miraculously punished for their sinful rebellion against Moses. “And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that belonged to Korah, and all their goods” (Bemidbar 16:32). God deemed Korah’s demagoguery worthy of total extirpation from the nation of Israel.

And yet, when the Torah later recounts the fate of Korah and his followers, it informs us that “the sons of Korah did not die” (Bemidbar 26:11). Rabbinic tradition teaches that Korah’s sons repented; they realized that their father was guilty of treasonous and divisive behavior and they disassociated themselves from him. Thus, they were spared from the devastation that befell Korah and his associates.

Interestingly, the sons of Korah and their descendants rose to great heights among the people of Israel. In the days of King David, they were the gatekeepers, “keeping the thresholds of the tent, as their fathers had been in charge of the camp of the Lord, keepers of the entrance” (1 Chr.9:17-19). The heads of the families of the sons of Korah were accorded special honor: “These are the men whom David put in charge of the service of song in the house of the Lord after the ark rested [in Jerusalem]” (I Chr. 6:31-33; 9:33,34). The biblical book of Psalms includes a number of beautiful hymns ascribed to the sons of Korah—Psalms 42-49 and Psalms 84-88. In the Sephardic liturgy for the afternoon prayers, we open with Psalm 84, a Psalm attributed to the sons of Korah—thus, we mention them virtually every day!

How were the sons of Korah able to resist the designs of their father? After all, Korah was an effective demagogue. He had rallied many around him in his rebellion against Moses. He posed as the classic populist: all the people are holy, not just Moses. Even after Korah and followers were swallowed by the earth, the people blamed Moses for “murdering the people of the Lord,” i.e. they viewed Korah and his henchmen very positively.

A rabbinic tradition has it that the sons of Korah were profoundly influenced by the goodness of Moses. In spite of the negative propaganda spread by Korah's group, the sons realized that Moses was a humble man, not at all desirous of power over others. He was a leader not by his personal choice or inclination, but because God laid the responsibilities upon him. Moses lived simply; he did not use his position to become wealthy or for any personal gain. He did not lord over the people, but indeed was their humble servant and advocate. The sons of Korah were able to see through the falsehoods spread by the rebels; they had the strength of character to stand with Moses against the wicked designs of Korah.

If Moses was a genuine and self-effacing leader, Korah was a power-hungry egotist. If Moses did not seek control or wealth, Korah sought the glory and perks that are the hallmark of low-level, unscrupulous politicians. If Moses was willing to risk his life for the benefit of the people, Korah was willing to risk the lives of the people in order to promote benefits for himself. Moses was a spiritual leader. Korah was a demagogue.

If the sons of Korah were able to see the vast differences in quality between Moses and Korah, much of the public obviously was unable to do so. The public often falls prey to the blandishments and lies of the demagogues; the public can be manipulated to think that a Korah is actually better than a Moses.

The great virtues of the sons of Korah were their clarity of mind, their moral courage to resist the tide of rebellion and dissension, their commitment to truth over demagoguery.

The sons of Korah did not die. Their influence continued throughout the generations—and continues to this day. We read their story, we chant their Psalms...and we strive to be worthy heirs to the spiritual values they personified.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)