

5) In chapter 18 we are told about the payments that the Kohanim and Leviim will receive in exchange for their work in the Mishkan. What will the Leviim receive (18:21-24)? Why is this necessary? What will they, unlike the rest of the nation, not receive?

\* A challenging question.



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The weekly Haftarah Commentary  
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## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Korach

### Shabbat Rosh Hodesh

June 18-24, 2017 • 30 Sivan 5777

Annual (Numbers 16:1-18:32): Etz Hayim p. 860-875; Hertz p. 639-648

Triennial (Numbers 16:1-17:15): Etz Hayim p. 860-868; Hertz p. 639-644

Maftir (Numbers 28:9-15): Etz Hayim p. 930-931; Hertz p. 695

Haftarah (Isaiah 66:1-24, 23): Etz Hayim p. 1219-1223; Hertz p. 944-947

## Korach and the Dark Side of Holiness

**Dr. Shaiya Rothberg**, CY Faculty (Bible and Jewish Thought) and  
Chairperson of Haqel – Jews and Arabs in Defense of Human Rights.

In this week's portion Korach challenges Moshe and Aharon: "You take too much on you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them..." (Bemidbar 16:3). And he is right: the covenant at Sinai established Israel as "a nation of priests and a holy nation" (Shmot 19:6) and thus, in fact, "all the congregation are holy." But why then did Korach arouse the wrath of God?

Perhaps because *holiness*, which stands at the center of the Korach story, is like electricity, powerful and dangerous. Without holiness religion loses its color, its drama and allure. But with holiness, dangers abound. Korach made a crucial error in his understanding of holiness, transforming it from good to evil. Korach thus symbolizes a fatal flaw inherent in holiness; one that should haunt all who seek it.

One meaning of holiness in Jewish tradition involves *separating* from the world to *draw closer* to God. In this sense, holiness is movement characterized by where it's coming from and where it's going to: *away* from the mundane, *closer* to God. For example, "You shall be holy for I am holy" (Lev. 19:2) is understood by Rashi and Ramban to mean "separate yourselves from sin". That is, *separate* yourself from sins and *draw close* to God. Holy also means *consecrated* to the Temple (like a sacrifice), so that it is a sin to derive personal benefit. Here too: *separate* (from personal benefit) and *close* (to God's Temple).

I identify holiness with an aspect of my experience. It is the ultimate liminal space, like the way you feel when you encounter the vastness of the sky or ocean. It's a place where you reach the borders of who you think you are, see just how small that is, and glimpse how you fit into the big picture. This involves powerful feelings that frame the meaning of my life and motivate me to action. And holiness can be absorbed into words and places. For me, the words of Jewish prayers, the walls around the Temple Mount, and Eretz Yisrael altogether, are infused with holiness: something in their ancientness, in how they look and feel, can ignite in me that sense of being *separate* from the mundane, and *close* to God, and so orient me towards ultimate meaning.

The passion that Jewish rituals and Eretz Yisrael arouse in millions of Jews demonstrates that my experience is common. Torah tradition has discovered and imbued these things with the electricity-like power of holiness. I believe that power was at work in the national awakening which returned us to Eretz Yisrael; and in the vitality of our religious lives. But like the fire that consumed Aharon's sons, holiness can also destroy. In my opinion, when state Rabbis use their podium to denigrate women, or when ultra-nationalist leaders evoke Judaism to justify unfair discrimination, we encounter the darkness of holiness, its shadow.

In my reading, Korach tapped into the electric holiness of Israel. But he mistook it for a justification of privilege. He twisted God's gift into a tool for self-aggrandizement. And hence his abysmal end. But we can learn from his example. We may begin by internalizing the wisdom of R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsch in his commentary to Shmot 19:6: **"A holy nation...does not live for her own glory, her own greatness or her own majesty... [and does] not seek greatness in power, but rather in the absolute rule of law – divine morality – for this is the meaning of 'holiness'."**

## A Vort for Parashat Korach

*Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty*

Korach and his wealth (traditionally considered extreme) were swallowed up by the earth (16:32). The Talmud (Sanhedrin 110a) says: "Three treasures did Joseph hide in Egypt: one was revealed to Korah; one to Antoninus the son of Severus (V. p. 610, n. 7.) and the third is stored up for the righteous for the future time." The *Imre Shefer* says that wealth serves as a means – some, like Korach, use it to achieve power and prominence. Others, like Antoninus (the Roman emperor, 138-161, known for his gluttony), to pamper themselves; and the third, and smallest, group – who share their wealth through *tsadaka* and use it for good deeds.

## Table Talk

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty*

*Moshe finds himself facing a rebellion which seems to be perceived also as an offense to God. By the end, the rebels are punishing in a unique manner, proof is given to the people about God's chosen leader, and the position and salary of the Kohanim and Leviim is detailed.*

- 1) Korach, from the tribe of Levi, takes with him people from the tribe of Reuben and another 250 important people from within the nation and get up in front of Moshe to complain (16:1-3). What are they arguing? What might be their motives? (Reminder: Reuben was Jacob's first born son, the Levites are put to work in the Mishkan under Aaron.)
- 2) God seems inclined to wipe out the evil group, but Moshe and Aaron intercede (16:20-22). What is their argument? What does it tell us about how they understood the situation?
- 3) None the less, Korach, Datan and Aviram get a special punishment (16:26-34). What happens to them? What is unique about this punishment (v.30)? What is the reaction of the people?
- 4) To solve future arguments of this sort, God instructs Moshe to conduct a test that will visually demonstrate who God chose (17:16-26). How will the text be conducted? What are the results? Where is the proof kept? \*Another person saw an almond branch (Jeremiah 1:11-12). Can you find any connection to the case here in Bamidbar?