

Korach the “Wicked”: The Annihilation of a Dissident

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In recent years, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have taught us the importance of paying attention to power dynamics in our institutions, our culture, our workplaces, and our society writ large.

Though earlier movements like feminism and critical legal theory have also highlighted the role of power, I don't think it's an overstatement to say that in the post-#MeToo-and-BLM world, any read on a given political or social situation that doesn't account for the power dynamics present in them would be rightly regarded as incomplete.

This is an insight that we Reform Jews—guided as we are by the wisdom of modernity—should bring also to our reading of the Torah. And this week's parashah is ripe for it. To borrow a phrase from the rabbinic literature, the story of Korach and his band of rebels cries out: “*darsheni*”—“interpret me.”

Not that there isn't already a rich interpretive tradition of this story; there is. But as in some other stories we've studied this year—like the saga of Jacob and Esau and the degrading treatment of a wife accused of adultery—the tradition's characterization of Korach is decidedly one-sided.

The consensus is that Korach is a bad dude, a demagogue who incites a revolt against Moses's leadership based on false pretenses, creating dissension in the community only to serve his own ego and thirst for power.

Without realizing it, we have been so conditioned to interpret Korach this way that we barely bat an eye when we read that Korach and his supporters were swallowed whole by the earth for their crime.

We readily quote the sages' statement in *Pirkei Avot* that while the famous, ongoing Hillel-Shammai dispute was a “conflict for the sake of heaven” between two well-meaning parties, Korach's dispute with Moses was an illicit one driven by malice and treason.

It's my contention, though, that when we read the story closely and take power dynamics into account, not only might we interpret Korach differently, but we might also gain insights into human political and social relations buried in the text that are both subversive and quite relevant to our own time.

Here's how the story begins:

“Now Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohat son of Levi, betook himself, along with Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, and On son of Pelet—descendants of Reuben—to rise up against Moses, together with 250 Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.

“They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, ‘You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Adonai's congregation?’ ”
(*Num.* 16:1-3)

The list of names is important. These men are reputable people, duly “chosen by the assembly” for their positions as community leaders.

So, their critique is understandable, at least. It reminds me of the English noblemen's protest against old King John: “You exercise too much power over us. We demand more authority over our own affairs.”

And we generally regard it as a positive development for humanity that they prevailed on him to sign the Magna Carta.

Interestingly and importantly, this is the full extent of Team Korach's "rebellion." They use no violence. They don't break the Mishkan windows or threaten to hang Aaron or even callously put their feet up on Moses's desk.

They just question why Moses and Aaron "raise [themselves] above Adonai's congregation," implicitly demanding more rights, not only for themselves but for every community member.

How dare they question the power structure?! Moses feels betrayed and outraged by this, and God is ready to annihilate them on the spot.

Moses (like Abraham before him) convinces God to hold off. But speaking in God's name, Moses challenges Korach and his supporters to a duel of sorts—a ritual fire-pan burn-off, as it were, that will demonstrate Moses's divine right of leadership and put Team Korach in their place once and for all.

And here's where the power dynamics really come into play. Remember, Korach and his supporters are powerful people, but they are not *in* power.

The institutional power lies with Moses and his vast bureaucracy, not with Korach and his comparatively paltry band of 250 protestors. Still, no threat to the divinely sanctioned power structure can be left unanswered.

As morning breaks and the parties arrive for the duel, the stage is set for the dramatic finale where the ground will open and swallow Team Korach into the belly of the earth, where they will churn for eternity like gyros on a spit.¹

But first, to make their fate not only palatable but also justifiable, the machine of institutional power kicks into gear.

As in our own time, one of the greatest tools those in power can use against people who threaten them is *language*—because it is with language that they create the narrative, and narrative creates reality.

In his profound and eye-opening book *Language & Symbolic Power*, the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu explains that one of the most potent weapons in the language arsenal is what he calls the act of "naming."

In simple terms, "naming" is when people with recognized social or political power label a person or a group in a way that signals to the community who that person or group is, what their motivations are, and how they should be treated by the mainstream of society.

This is exactly what Moses does to Korach and his supporters, and it has exactly the effect Bourdieu's theory suggests it would. Here's the key passage:

"Moses addressed the community, saying, 'Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins.' (Num. 16:26)

Note what Moses does here. He names them "wicked men." In Hebrew, the term is "*r'shayim*," "*rasha*" in the singular.

This is a significant term in the *Tanakh* and in Jewish law; its meaning extends beyond the simple "bad guy" suggested by the English "wicked." We can't understand the significance of what Moses is signaling to the community unless we understand the nuances of this term.

A "*rasha*" is someone who willfully violates not only the laws of the Torah, but also the norms of society.²

Included in this category are people who steal and commit fraud against the community and forge legal documents and have a track record of breaking commitments and lying under oath.

R'shayim are prohibited by *halakhah* from testifying in court because they are suspected of seeking to undermine the justice system and upend the social structure.

Perhaps most importantly, *r'shayim* are people who have severed their brotherly or sisterly bond with the community and who, therefore, have no right to participate in its civic life.

Think of the *rasha* (the "wicked" son) in the Pesach seder who asks, "What does this practice mean to *you* (not to *me*)?" The Haggadah says he would not have been redeemed from Egypt with the others because he doesn't consider himself part of the community.

So, when Moses calls Korach and his supporters *r'shayim*, he is signaling to the community that these people are out of bounds; they are not like you, they don't share the same commitments as you, they are toxic, and you shouldn't go near them.

And because Moses is, well, Moses, they listen to him. As it says in the very next verse, "[the people] withdrew from about the abodes of Korach, Datan, and Aviram." (v. 27)

By the time the earth opens up to swallow them, what else should the community think but that Team Korach got their just desserts?

This is not a story of a "rebellion" in the pejorative sense. It's a story about the use of institutional power to crush dissidents.

The classical rabbis may not have been able to see that in the story because they were so vested in justifying the Torah and Moses and God.

But that's precisely the point.

When we're so deeply committed to a given ideology or worldview or institution or political party, for example, we may be unable to see the power structure that holds it up or the power dynamics that are exploited to sustain it.

These power structures and dynamics are human constructs, but when we're so deeply in them, those power dynamics blend into the scenery, as it were, and what is actually an artificial construct feels to us like the naturally created order.

It's like Bruce Hornsby sang in those brilliant and timeless lyrics from the 1980s: "That's just the way it is / Some things will never change / That's just the way it is /

"Ah, but don't you believe them."

No, don't you believe them.

Our against-the-force-of-tradition reading of Korach teaches us to read situations closely and carefully, to listen to the language, and to understand that, so often, it's a power play designed to crush dissent, preserve the existing structure, and create and maintain a reality that isn't inherently real and doesn't have to be.

As Bourdieu explains, "naming" is a "socially based act" by a person with power—an act that "signifies to someone what his identity is but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone."³

"Naming" is thus a kind of "social magic," says Bourdieu, because the very act of pronouncement by the powerful defines the person or group being named and thus creates their social reality going forward.

But it doesn't have to.

Just because someone with social influence tries to define you by labeling you with a disparaging name—a radical, a rebel, a wacko, a loser, or worse—you don't have to *let* it define you. You can reject the premise. Because remember: It's not *real*; it's a power play by someone desperate to boost their status or their agenda at your expense.

Bourdieu's highbrow philosophical idea was echoed in layman's terms by the novelist and political commentator Walter Kirn, speaking about this phenomenon in American society. As he put it:

"The fact that [certain people] have been marginalized becomes proof of their radicalism in a self-reinforcing way like, 'We're going to make you an outsider. Then once you are, we're going to portray you as an extremist.

" 'We'll push you to the edge, and then once you're on the edge, we'll say that's where you want to be. That's where you chose to be, and that's where you plan to mount an attack on the middle from,' when in fact, 'We're the people who made you retreat. We were the ones who wouldn't let you be here in the center, and now you're an extremist because the center rejected you.' "⁴

Korach couldn't have said it better himself.

1 See Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 74a

2 The following descriptions of the "*rasha*" are culled from *Shulchan Arukh*, HM 34, which details all those "*r'shayim*" who are ineligible to testify in court due to various transgressions.

3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, 105, 121

4 "America This Week podcast with Matt Taibbi and Walter Kirn," Episode 43