



## Korach

*Numbers 16:1 – 18:32*

*The Torah is premised upon acceptance of authority and the key to the continuity of the nation is the requirement to accept righteous leadership and to listen to their instruction.*

This week's portion tells the story of the rebellion of Korach. The portion begins with two verses that set forth exactly who is part of the rebellious group:

*Now Korach the son of Izhar, son of Kobath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. (Numbers 16:1-2)*

The rebels consisted of Korach and his group of Levites, Dathan and Abiram and On, from the tribe of Reuben, and 250 representatives of the rest of the tribes.

Throughout the conversations with Moses, the actual charges of the rebels reflect their differing backgrounds. Korach's main complaint, which is essentially a Levite complaint, is that the entire nation is holy, so why are Moses and Aaron raising themselves above the rest. Moses' response to this claim is directed at the Levites – is it not enough that the Levites have been given special positions in the service of God, that they also demand the priesthood, that very special position reserved only for the children of Aaron? (Numbers 16: 8-11)

The next claim is voiced by Dathan and Abiram. They accuse Moses of taking them out of Egypt and, rather than bringing them to a wonderful land, they are brought to the desert. In an ironic twist of the Biblical vision, Dathan and Abiram refer to Egypt as a land of milk and honey, and refute Moses' claim that the Children of Israel will enter a land of milk and honey. Furthermore, Dathan and Abiram attack the leadership of Moses and Aaron by refusing to come when he calls them (Numbers 16:12-14). Moses' response to this addresses the leadership challenge only, not the accusation regarding the Exodus itself: *"I have not taken even one ass from them!"* (Numbers 16:15) Moses has been so honorable in his dealings with the people, totally lacking in self-interest, devoting himself only to the good of the people. He seems personally hurt by this attack.

But the attack on the very Exodus from Egypt remains unanswered. This claim is actually reminiscent of the complaints lodged by the Children of Israel just after the spies returned with their evil report from their reconnaissance mission in the Land of Israel (Numbers 14:2-3). In fact, at the conclusion of that incident, God punishes the entire generation, declaring that they would all die in the desert, that only their children would enter the Land. So when Dathan and Abiram complain that Moses has taken them from Egypt only to die in the desert, they speak a certain truth. They just leave out the fact that this was the result of sin, not of original design.

The 250 men don't make a specific claim of their own but they are dealt with separately – they are commanded to bring an incense offering and are killed in the process. These individuals are leaders of the various tribes, as they are referred to as "men of renown" and their claim is also a challenge to the hegemony of Moses and Aaron's leadership. In response, they are given the opportunity to perform a priestly task, the incense offering, and God Himself reveals the fraud of their claim to leadership, as they are killed by a fire from heaven. All of this points to the fact that the claims raised by the rebels were not substantive in nature. They were excuses. The key to the rebellion is the rejection of the authority of Moses and Aaron, which ultimately entails the rejection of the

authority of God. For it is God who appointed Moses and Aaron as leaders. And, perhaps, for that reason, the death of Korach's faction was so supernatural – the ground opened up and swallowed them alive!

The entire Torah is premised upon acceptance of authority – God's authority and the authority of those whom He has appointed as our leaders. *“And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.”* (Deuteronomy 17:9-11) God took the Children of Israel out of Egypt and established them as a nation, providing them with their first leaders, men of righteousness and generosity. But key to the continuity of the nation as God's people, in obedience to His word, is the requirement to accept the righteous leadership and to listen to their instruction.

In responding to Korach's rebellion as swiftly and decisively as Moses does, and as God does, God sets the stage for a nation who will be able to obey God, with the help of its leaders. But Moses' statement in response to Dothan and Abiram's challenge establishes a guideline for all future leaders – they must be devoted to the people, without self-interest or dishonesty of any kind.

Perhaps if our current leaders were honest, selfless and totally devoted to the people, we would all have an easier time serving God.