

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Korach* Numbers 16:1-18:32

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### *Parashat Korach* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Who Elected You? A Challenge to the Leadership of Moses and Aaron

Theme 2: God Reelects the House of Aaron—Priestly Powers, Responsibilities, and Perks

## Introduction



Who has the authority to lead the Israelite community, and what is the source of that authority? *Parashat Korach* addresses these critical questions. The answers come in God's response to the rebels who challenge Moses' leadership and Aaron's religious authority. While the Israelites question Moses' command repeatedly in the book of Numbers, this parashah represents the first direct challenge to Aaron's authority over religious ritual. Groups from two different tribes lead the uprisings in *parashat Korach*, posing a threat to the existing tribal leadership structure presented by Moses and Aaron. In addition, this rebellion also speaks to the waning influence of the clan system over both civil and religious matters in ancient Israel. The reluctance of the tribes to cede power and their willingness to challenge Moses and Aaron leave God no choice. In spectacular and terrifying demonstrations of divine wrath, God establishes where ultimate authority resides.

## Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 893–94 and/or survey the outline on page 894. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

## Theme 1: Who Elected You? A Challenge to the Leadership of Moses and Aaron



Tribal leaders challenge the right of Moses and Aaron to put themselves above a community in which everyone is holy and in whose midst God resides. The ironic and pointed dialogue in this parashah heightens the sense of drama and emphasizes the real danger to Moses' and Aaron's leadership. Moses responds by giving the rebels a test, one that only a leader with God's endorsement can pass. The punishment meted out to the rebels demonstrates that their offense is against divine, not earthly, power.

1. Read Numbers 16:1–3, which introduces the leaders of the insurrections and their reasons for rebelling against Moses and Aaron.
  - a. How are the leaders of the rebellion described in verse 1? What are the tribal identities of these men? How might these tribal affiliations give the rebels standing in their claims against Moses and Aaron?
  - b. What do we learn in verse 2 about the others who rise up with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses and Aaron? Why is it significant that they are described as “chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, with fine reputations”?
  - c. What grievances do the rebels outline in verse 3?
  - d. In her comment on the Hebrew *rav lachem* in verse 3 (“You have gone too far!”), Shawna Dolansky notes that a more literal translation of this idiom is “It is more than enough for you.” What does this translation suggest about the rebels’ view of Moses and Aaron?
  - e. According to the commentary on verse 3, on what grounds does Korah challenge the priestly hierarchy?
2. Read Numbers 16:4–11, which describes Moses’ response to Korah’s rebellion.
  - a. Moses reacts to the rebellion by prostrating himself. How does this physical action contrast with the behavior of the rebels?
  - b. In verse 5, Moses tells the rebels that God will determine who is holy and therefore entitled to direct access to God. The same form of the verb *k-r-b* (to bring near) is used twice in this verse. What is the effect of the repetition of this verb in the same verse? What, according to Dolansky, is the purpose of the test Moses proposes?
  - c. In verse 7, after issuing the challenge to the rebels, Moses repeats the same phrase used by the rebels in verse 3: *rav lachem* (“You have gone too far” or “It is more than enough for you”). What is the impact of Moses’ use of this idiom? How does it differ from the way in which the rebels use it? In verse 9, Moses echoes these words (“Is it not enough for you . . .”). How, in Moses’ view, have the rebels gone too far?
  - d. How have Korah’s tribe, the Levites, been “set apart from the community of Israel” (v. 9)? How, according to Dolansky, does the holiness required of the congregation differ from that of the Levites and priests?
  - e. In verse 11, how does Moses reframe the stated object of Korah’s rebellion? What is the significance of this restating?

3. Read Numbers 16:12–15, which describes Dathan and Abiram’s rebellion against Moses’ leadership.
- What is Dathan’s and Abiram’s response to Moses’ summons in verse 12? How does the use of the verb *alah*, according to Dolansky, hint at the fate of the rebels (vv. 31–33)?
  - What are the bases of Dathan and Abiram’s rebellion?
  - What does the phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey” (v. 13) reveal about the rebels’ complaints?
  - In verse 13, Dathan and Abiram accuse Moses of bringing them to die in the wilderness. Dolansky writes that the verb “to have us die” literally means “to kill us.” What do the rebels thus imply about Moses’ true intentions? What is the relationship between the rebels’ complaint in this verse and the complaints of the Israelites in Numbers 14:2?
  - Dathan and Abiram complain that Moses “would also lord it over us” (16:13). A more literal translation of this verb is “you continue to act as a prince over us.” Compare the use of the word *sar* in this verse with the same word in Exodus 2:14 (translated there as “chief”). How does this word emphasize Moses’ perceived failures as a leader, in Dolansky’s view?
  - What do the ironic twists of phrases and barbed exchanges in these verses tell us about what is going on between Moses and the rebels? It may be helpful to read this section out loud, with different people taking the part of Moses, Dathan, and Abiram.
4. Read Numbers 16:16–24, which describes the test Moses requires of Korah and his followers.
- What is the test, and who is required to participate?
  - In verse 22, Moses and Aaron react to God’s wrath against the rebels by falling on their faces. How does this compare to Moses’ reaction in verse 4? To what extent does Moses’ plea to God on behalf of the innocent in the community echo Abraham’s plea to God in Genesis 18:23–25? What can we learn from these verses about how the Hebrew Bible views God’s justice?
5. Read Numbers 16:25–35, which describes the punishment of the rebels.
- Who is to receive punishment for the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram? What, according to Moses, are the rebels—and the community—to learn from this punishment?
  - The punishment of the families of Dathan and Abiram would seem to contradict Deuteronomy 24:16, which states that people can be put to death only for crimes that they themselves commit. Why, in Dolansky’s view, are the offenses committed by Dathan and Abiram in a different category? Against whom is their offense? How does the punishment of the rebels’ families emphasize the type of offense that they have committed?
  - In verse 32, Dathan and Abiram, along with their families, are “swallowed up” in a

sudden earthquake, immediately after Moses' pronouncement that this might occur. In verse 35, Korah's followers die in a fire that "went forth from YHVH." What, according to Dolansky, accounts for the differences in these two punishments?

- d. What is your reaction to the punishments received by each of these groups?
6. Read *Post-biblical Interpretations* by Alyssa M. Gray on pages 909–10.
- a. What is the dilemma for translators and commentators in Numbers 16:1?
  - b. How do Midrash *B'midbar Rabbah* 18:4 and the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a address this dilemma?
  - c. Why, according to Gray, do these rabbinic sources portray Korah's wife in a negative manner?
  - d. How do the Rabbis explain what might have motivated Korah's wife to support his mutiny?
  - e. How is the view of Korah's wife representative of the way women's motives are frequently portrayed by the Rabbis?
  - f. What proof text does the author of *Etz Yosef* use to suggest that the wives of Dathan and Abiram shared their rebellious sentiments?
  - g. What prompted the Rabbis to construct a narrative for the wife of On, son of Peleth (Numbers 16:1)? How do the Rabbis portray her?
  - h. What is your reaction to the way these post-biblical texts portray the rebels' wives?
7. Read *Contemporary Reflection* by Rachel Cowan on pages 911–12.
- a. How does Jewish tradition view Moses? How does *parashat Korach* support this view?
  - b. What is the view of Korah in Jewish tradition? How does Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer's understanding of "and Korah took" (Numbers 16:1) inform our view of Korah?
  - c. What guidance does this parashah provide to help us examine the conflicts between our "inner Moses" and our "inner Korah"?
8. Read "Korach" by Laurie Patton in *Voices* on page 913.
- a. What does Patton suggest about the thoughts of Moses and Korah during the night "Moses gave Korach"?
  - b. How does the poet's image of a line "thin as a flame in a fire pan" amplify your understanding of Korah's test? How does this serve as a metaphor for the difficulty we sometimes have in distinguishing between "arrogance and righteous anger"?
  - c. How does Patton shift the narrative of the parashah to our own lives?
  - d. In the fifth stanza of the poem, Patton writes that after a night of feeling righteous anger and remembering arrogance, we "quietly beg to hear God—for when the dawn comes. . . ." How does this tie the power struggle in *parashat Korach* to our internal conflict between humility and arrogance? What, in your view, is the role of God in this internal conflict?
  - e. Can you think of a time when you experienced the kind of "sleepless night" that Patton describes? How did you resolve the internal conflict between arrogance and righteous anger?

## Theme 2: God Reelects the House of Aaron —Priestly Powers, Responsibilities, and Perks



The election of the House of Aaron to the priesthood, as well as the priests' designation as those with direct access to God, is something the people cannot accept. In *parashat Korach*, God creates a test to establish, once again, that miracles—and priestly authority—come from a divine source. The priests and their associates, the Levites, have sacred responsibilities that flow from this authority. In turn, the community must support the priests and Levites through a system of gifts and tithes.

1. Read Numbers 17:16–28, which describes the test God devises to demonstrate the divine origin of Aaron's priestly powers.

- a. What does God, speaking through Moses, instruct the Israelites to do in these verses?
- b. What is the role of Aaron's staff in Exodus 7:9? How does this prior reference to Aaron's rod add to your understanding of these verses?
- c. How does the test God establishes reflect the tension between the Israelites' clan-based system of authority and the priestly, centralized system of authority (see Another View by Amy Kalmanofsky on p. 909)? What does God hope will be the result of this test?
- d. The word “mutterings” (from the root l-v-n, “to murmur”) is used twice in this section (Numbers 17:20 and 17:25). Against whom are the mutterings directed in each verse? How does verse 25 emphasize the legitimacy of Moses' leadership and Aaron's election to the priesthood?
- e. What is the significance of the almonds that sprout from the staff of the house of Levi (Aaron's staff) in verse 23 (see *Vayak'heil*, Contemporary Reflection, p. 540)? How do almonds reinforce the election of the House of Aaron to the priesthood?

2. Read Numbers 18:1–7, which describes the responsibilities of the priests and Levites.

- a. To whom does God speak in verse 1? What is unusual about this, according to Dolansky? How does this reinforce the election of the House of Aaron to the priesthood?
- b. What are the responsibility and burden God places on Aaron and his descendants in verse 1?
- c. What is the role of the tribe of Levi, according to verses 2–7? How do the responsibilities of the Levites differ from those of Aaron and his sons?
- d. How, according to Dolansky, does the word *yillavu* (v. 2) inform our understanding of the role of the Levites in relation to that of Aaron and his sons?

3. Read Numbers 18:8–20, which details the sacrificial portions designated for the priests.

- a. Of which gifts are Aaron and his sons to take charge (v. 8)? How do the sacrificial laws divide the priestly portions, according to Dolansky? Where, and by whom, can these priestly portions be consumed?
- b. Who may consume the “most holy” portions of the meal, purification, and reparation offerings (vv. 9–10)?
- c. According to verse 11, who may consume the gift offerings and the elevation

offerings? Why, according to Dolansky, might daughters, rather than wives, be designated in this verse? What is the basis for translating *l'cha* (the masculine form of “to you”) to include “your wives” (see *Mishpatim, Another View*, p. 445)?

- d. What are the offerings presented to God that are to be given to the priestly class?
  - e. Why, in your view, are the best, the first fruits, and choice parts presented to God?
  - f. Why do you think the “first [male] issue of the womb of every being” (v. 15) is presented to God? What should be done, according to this verse, with the male first-born?
4. Read Numbers 18:21–32, which discusses laws regarding tithes.
- a. What do the Levites receive from God in return for the work that they do in caring for the Tent of Meeting? What do the Levites not receive from God?
  - b. Why do you think the Levites do not receive a land holding from God? What might this mean for the Levites, as well as for the Israelite community as a whole?
  - c. How does the role of the Levites in caring for the Tent of Meeting protect the Israelites who are not of the priestly class?
  - d. What must the Levites do with the tithes they receive from the Israelites?
  - e. Who is entitled to eat the food offerings tithed to the Levites? How does this differ from the hierarchy of who may eat offerings in the family of Aaron and his descendants?
  - f. The concluding verse of this parashah seems to offer reassurance to the Levites. Why do you think this might be necessary?
5. Read *Another View* by Amy Kalmanofsky on page 909.
- a. What function did clan heads play in early Israelite history? What role did women have in the clan system?
  - b. How did the role of women change with the shift in authority from the clan system to a society in which authority was centralized in the sanctuary and its priests?
  - c. How does the story of Dathan, Abiram, and their wives illustrate the tensions between a system of authority rooted in clans and one based on a centralized system of priestly authority?
  - d. How does the test God establishes in Numbers 17:16–28 reflect the tension between the Israelites’ clan-based system of authority and the priestly, centralized system of authority? What does God hope will be the result of this test?
  - e. How do the place of the clan leaders’ deaths (the doorway to their tents) and the method of their deaths (being swallowed by the earth) symbolize the dominance of the authority of the priesthood in this narrative?
6. Read “A Box of Clementines in the Maternity Ward” by Jessica Greenbaum in *Voices* on page 914.
- a. The poet describes the clementines resting in their crate on a table, “glowing like embers.” To what might this refer in the parashah?
  - b. How does the poet compare the gift of the clementines she receives after the birth of her child to the gifts to which the Levites are entitled?

- c. In Numbers 18:13, we read that “everyone of your household who is pure” may eat the first fruits brought to God. What does the poet suggest about the relationship between the holy responsibilities of taking care of the Tent of the Pact and the sacredness of birth?
- d. When, in your own life, have you felt that you were bringing the best of what you have to offer to a sacred responsibility?

### *Overarching Questions*

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. What are the differences, in your view, between arrogance and righteous anger? How might your studies of this parashah assist you in distinguishing between the two?
2. The priests and Levites in this parashah benefit from a system of rewards for the performance of their sacred responsibilities. In our own lives, we often do not receive tangible rewards for responsibilities that are sacred, such as rearing children and caring for elderly parents. What are the rewards, for you, in fulfilling these sacred duties? What are the challenges and difficulties in fulfilling these responsibilities when we do not feel rewarded?

### **Closing Questions**

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today’s study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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