

HEARACH KORACH

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Korach



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

NUMBERS 13:1-15:41

Parashat Korach / פרשת קורח

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

Rabbi Jason invites us to consider the motivation behind the terrible rebellion led by Korah—why would he do such a thing? And why would two hundred and fifty leaders follow him? Before we quickly condemn Korah and his cohorts, we might want to consider if there's any way we struggle with similar root issues.

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

Let's take a closer look at this week's antagonist, *Korah*. His initial claims about Israel seem to be valid ("biblical" even!), but he quickly erred and led others into his transgression. What factors contributed to that awful moment in Israel's history? If you've ever had issues with authority—either being *in* or *under* it—this article is going to be especially helpful.

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

In this week's article, we're going to unpack the word that sits at the very heart of this week's reading: "grumbling." If there ever was a universal human "issue," complaining has to be at the top of the list. This biblical and lexical analysis offers not only a deeper understanding of the topic, but a sobering challenge. May we learn this lesson sooner rather than later!



This portion is named after a prominent leader amongst the Israelites, *Korah*. The readings tell of his failed attempt to overthrow the distinct leadership of Moses and Aaron, insisting that "All the community is holy—all of them—and *ADONAI* is with them!" (Numbers 16:3). God supernaturally and devastatingly quashes the uprising and the passages which follow confirm Aaron's priesthood. Authority has always been a source of conflict amongst people, even the people of God. As we read this portion, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit sees the purity, humility, and trust in our hearts.

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Korach* / פרשת קורח | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Rabbi Jason Sobel

COMMENTARY

In Numbers 16:16, we read,

Now Korah...rose up against Moses and took 250 men from *Bnei-Yisrael* [Children of Israel], men of renown who had been appointed to the council. They assembled against Moses and Aaron. They said to them, "You've gone too far! All the community is holy—all of them—and *ADONAI* is with them! Then why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of *ADONAI*?" When Moses heard this, he fell on his face. Then he said to Korah and all his following saying, "In the morning *ADONAI* will reveal who is His and who is holy. The one whom He will let come near to Him will be the one He chooses to come near to Him. Do this, Korah and your whole following!"

In this week's *parsha*, we read about a disagreement that had disastrous consequences. At the root of Korah and his cohorts' dispute was a lust for honor. The inordinate desire for honor is the root cause of many conflicts and disagreements. Many people cannot give honor to others because they don't love and respect themselves.

A fundamental issue I see in people's lives, and even my own, is that of identity and self-esteem. We all struggle at times with liking ourselves and seeing the good within us. This battle can blur our vision and make it difficult to see our true worth to the Lord. This sort of failure can lead us to pursue significance and honor in unhealthy ways to boost our self-esteem.

All of us have a bit of Korah in us. Our "inner Korah" seeks honor by grabbing at positions of power, personal wealth, and success. We long for the praise of others, both in the world and even in the Body of Messiah. All these are external forms of honor that will never truly satisfy; on the contrary, they may harm us and our relationships with others significantly.

The rabbis warn, "jealousy, desire, and honor remove a person from this world" (Avos 4:8). Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. The generation of the Flood sinned because of an ungodly desire for material things. The sin of Babel was seeking their honor above God's ("Let's make a name for ourselves" in Genesis 11:4). Every person struggles with these same desires at different moments in their lives. These carnal pursuits will not truly satisfy us, but they will ultimately leave us feeling even more empty. Worse yet, the yearning for honor, power, and position—if left unchecked—will almost certainly enslave us.

Instead of trying to receive honor, we need to look for opportunities to give honor away with intention and joy. Why? Because God made every individual in His image and likeness. We need to lift up people by seeing the best in them. We need to recognize the treasure God has placed in them. When honoring other people becomes a higher priority than receiving it ourselves, we will not only bring great blessing but also be blessed. As one of the rabbis said, "Who is he that is honored? He who honors his fellow human beings. As it is said: 'For I honor those that honor Me, but those who spurn Me shall be dishonored.'"

Do not seek honor, but give it away zealously. Don't be a Korah—be a Moses. Like Moses and **Yeshua**, if you run from honor and glory, the Lord will cause it to pursue you in ways that are more excellent than you could ever imagine.

New Testament Tie-In

Korah—the primary antagonist in this *parsha*—based his accusation against Moses and Aaron on two fundamental claims. He claimed that “all the community is holy” (*kulam kedoshim*) and “*ADONAI* is with them!” (Numbers 16:3). The first claim is rooted in God’s words at Sinai, “*you will be to Me a kingdom of kohanim and a holy [kadosh] nation*” (Exodus 19:6 *emphasis added*). The second claim connects to God’s intended purpose for the creation of the Tabernacle: “*Have them make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell among them*” (Exodus 25:8 *emphasis added*).

So, what was Korah’s accusation? That Moses and Aaron had “[*exalted themselves*] above the assembly of *ADONAI*” (v. 3). His words were a severe indictment. To better understand the issue, it might be helpful to consider Israel’s history, specifically its cultural formation in Egypt.

If you were playing a word association game and someone said “Egypt,” there’s a good chance you’d reply, “pyramid.” The only surviving wonder of the ancient world, “the ‘Great Pyramid’ [at Giza] stands 481 feet high with a base of 755 feet. This was constructed by Cheops (Khufu) about 2580 B.C.”¹ Simply by observation, we know that the pyramid’s base is broad and narrows to a singular “point.” This detail symbolized Egyptian culture, with the social classes having a broad base of slaves and laborers working its way to the singular top: the Pharaoh. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes of those ancient edifices, “They were statements in stone of a hierarchical social order... This was believed to be not just one way of organizing a society but the only way.”²

What would you say if the next word tossed out in the word association game was “Israel”? The menorah is the national symbol of Israel and the Western world’s oldest continuously used religious symbol.³ Unlike the pyramids and ziggurats of the pagan world of the day, the menorah is narrow at the base and broad at the top. It physically demonstrates God’s desire that the people of Israel would be a “kingdom of priests” (rather than Pharaoh being *the* singular representative of the divine). Judaism pushed back against carnal, controlling hierarchies.

Yeshua demonstrated this radical concept in His reply to the disciples who were jockeying for positions near the “top” of what they assumed was a “Kingdom pyramid.” He said, “*You know those recognized as rulers of the nations lord it over them, and their great ones play the tyrant over them. Yet it is not this way among you. But whoever wants to be great among you shall be your servant*” (Mark 10:42-43).

Korah made a critical error. He operated with an Egyptian mindset. His was a “pyramid mentality” rather than a “menorah mindset.” He presumed that Moses and Aaron were lording over the “kingdom of *kohanim*” when they were actually serving them. Rabbi Sacks also remarked, “The highest accolade given to Moses was ‘the servant of the Lord’ (Deuteronomy 34:5). Moses is given this title eighteen times in [the Hebrew Bible] as a whole. Only one other leader merits the same description: Joshua, who is described this way twice.”⁴ The witness of Scripture testifies that Moses was a faithful servant leader—the very opposite of that which Korah accused him of being. And in this fact, we find a great warning: some of our most damaging errors occur when we project our brokenness onto others. Korah tried to condemn in Moses the carnal ambition that fueled his rebellion. *Selah*.

Hebrew Word Study

lun [לן] / “to grumble, complain”

Many people know the famous story of Korah and the rebellion against Moses and Aaron that ended with the earth opening up and swallowing up almost their entire family. However, a very sobering word in this portion reveals an underlying pattern: grumbling. It may seem like simple complaints, but **grumbling** can lead us to a rebellion that will destroy us.

Moses confronted Korah, “Therefore you and all your following are banding together against *ADONAI*! Who then is Aaron—that you are **grumbling** against him?” (Numbers 16:11 *emphasis added*). The Hebrew word used here is *lun* (לן), which can mean grumbling or even a murmur. But in other places, it is translated or related to “spending the night,” like in Psalm 30, which reads, “Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.” (Psalm 30:5 NASB). So, it seems that this word suggests not a quick complaint but a lasting whine or moan.

This nuance helps us understand the context of the leaders in this portion and the anger they had developed that led to an attempted coup. They were not just complaining; the people had developed a sustained murmur that infected the leadership, even the Levites. The first time this word appears in Scripture is at the water of Marah, where the people worried that Moses led them into the wilderness to die of thirst (*cf.* Exodus 15:24). Then, they “grumbled” again when manna (and the meat!) from heaven was insufficiently satisfying (*cf.* Exodus 16-17). Finally, the Israelites’ complaining continued and intensified when the people listened to the evil report from the ten spies leading them to rebel against Moses and Aaron (*cf.* Numbers 14).

This infection of discontent led 250 leaders—previously chosen by God!—to take rebellious action with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (*cf.* Numbers 16). The sickness of grumbling became a physical plague leading to the death of 14,000 people, for which the people blamed Moses and Aaron instead of their complaining (*cf.* Numbers 16:49). So, to end the plague, God instructed Moses to collect all the “grumblers” and have them write their names on rods representing their tribes. He would then reveal whose authority was valid before the LORD by having his respective rod bud with a flower. God revealed that Aaron’s authority was legitimate, as his rod alone budded. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumblings against Me, so that they will not die” (Numbers 17:10 NASB). This supernatural sign ended the grumbling, at least for the leaders.

The next time this word appears is in the book of Joshua, but the leaders reminded the people of their promise to God (*cf.* Joshua 9:18). It would appear that “grumbling” had ended until the Greek version of this word appeared in the New Testament. The Pharisees began to “grumble” at *Yeshua*’s disciples about eating with tax collectors and sinners (*cf.* Luke 5:30) or because *Yeshua* compared Himself to the manna from heaven (*cf.* John 6:41). Rabbi Paul later used Israel’s patterns of complaining to warn believers: “And let’s not grumble, as some of them did—and were destroyed by the destroying angel” (1 Corinthians 10:10).

The question is: will we take these warnings against grumbling seriously?

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Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

לון

לון / lun: v. **to grumble, complain.** *Expresses an unsubstantiated, stubborn, critical protest against someone.*

This verb is applied (13 times) exclusively with respect to the grumbling of Israelites during the exodus and as they entered the promised land. The complaints in these examples represent an obstinate stance against someone in terms of grumbling and murmuring. Sometimes these complaints are lodged against the leaders in general (Josh 9:18), though more commonly at Moses or Aaron (Num 14:36; 16:41). At other times the complaints are directed against God (Exod 16:7; Num 14:27). In some contexts, there is a sense that the complaints made against God's leaders are considered to be complaints against God (Exod 16:8; Num 16:11).

taken from the *Lexham Theological Wordbook*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- Rabbi Jason raised an intimate and universal issue: our sense of worth and self-esteem. Prayerfully consider if there are ways you may be acting out of personal insecurity—anger, criticism, fear, _____. Make time to **read Psalm 139** at least three times this week, inviting the Spirit to search you and heal you as you do.
- “Projection”—that (often unconscious) act of imposing our issues onto others—creates all sorts of problems for people. It seems as though Korah projected his desire for power onto Moses and Aaron while claiming altruistic intentions. Has anyone ever done this to you? How did you respond? What lessons did you learn through this experience? Take a moment to pray for those who may have wounded you that God would bring them *shalom and shleimut*.

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NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Chukat* / פרשת חקת

TORAH

Sunday / Numbers 19:1-17

Monday / Numbers 19:18-20:6

Tuesday / Numbers 20:7-13

Wednesday / Numbers 20:14-21

Thursday / Numbers 20:22-21:9

Friday / Numbers 21:10-20

Saturday / Numbers 21:21-22:1

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Judges 11:1-33

New Covenant Reading:

John 2:1-12

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

¹ Gary C. Huckabay, "Pyramids," ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1353.

² Jonathan Sacks and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Lessons in Leadership: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2015), 206.

³ Renee Ghert-Zand et al., "7 Facts about Menorahs, the Most Enduring Symbol of the Jewish People," *The Times of Israel*, last modified December 29, 2016, accessed June 22, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/7-facts-about-menorahs-the-most-enduring-symbol-of-the-jewish-people/>.

⁴ Sacks, 207