

Parashat Korach sermon June 2017

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We understand that *Tzaddik katamar yifrach*: a righteous person shall flourish like a palm tree (Ps 92:12). But who is counted among the righteous?

A song I learned in a childhood full of folksongs was the American spiritual “Ananias.” Collected by ethnomusicologists in the rural South, “Ananias” was introduced to us suburban New Jerseyites by Harry Belafonte. The verses tell of various New Testament miracles, and the refrain says “Ananias, won’t you tell me, what kind of man my Jesus is.” So who was Ananias? In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 5:1-10), Ananias was a member of the early Church, which was a commune. He and his wife defied the kibbutz rule of putting all their money into the common pot, withholding some funds for themselves. St. Peter somehow knew and called them on it, and Ananias and his wife were miraculously struck dead in front of the assembled people.

Now this has the lineaments of a conventional Jewish story, sort of a combination of Achan in the book of Joshua (Josh 7:1-25)—that one has the punishment for withholding funds—and Nadav and Abihu in Vayikra (Lev 10:1-2)—that one has the sinners being struck down by G-d in full public view. But what’s the idea of asking *Ananias, after his death*, to bear witness to the miracles of Jesus? Why ask Ananias instead of, say, St. Peter? Why Ananias, whom the Holy Spirit killed, instead of Lazarus, whom it brought back to life?

There is clearly a paradox here: someone is tweaking our categorization of good guys and bad guys, even as they are telling us a straightforward gospel story. It could be just a bit of folk perversity, asking a sinner like Ananias to tell about Jesus’s miracles, or it could be a bit of inspired folk wisdom—a backwoods theologian extending G-d’s grace beyond the bounds approved by the Apostles. Might it perhaps be a bit of Jewish tradition surfacing in a Christian context? But how does this intriguing shard of Christian midrash, which boils down to the clause ‘ask Ananias,’ correspond to anything in Judaism? Let’s look in today’s Torah portion and the extensive body of legend and story attached to it, and see if we can witness anyone ‘asking Korach.’

Today’s Torah portion is one of two named after “bad guys.” Korach led the rebellion against Moses, and the rabbis love to tell how wrong he was: he rebelled against divinely ordained authority; he rebelled for personal gain rather than ‘for the sake of Heaven’; and his exemplary punishment—being cast down to Sheol while still alive—serves as a *nes*, a miraculous example for all time. To understand Korach’s roots, let’s start with a selective genealogy of the House of Levi. Levi, the son of Jacob cursed for his violence but blessed with the honor of priestly status, had 3 sons, one of whom was Kehat. The Kehatites had

responsibility for the sacred appliances of the tabernacle--the lampstand, the basins, etc. Kehat's first 2 sons were Amram and Yitzhar (which means 'oil'). Amram's children were Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, and Yitzhar's eldest son was Korach. Thus Korach was the first cousin of Moses and Aaron.

When Moses, the second son of Kehat's first son, got a position that amounted to king, Korach reasonably expected that he, as the first son of Kehat's second son, would also get one of the top jobs—something like High Priest. By passing over Korach in favor of his brother Aaron, Moses broke the rule of primogeniture—the rule of giving valuable stuff to the first-born—in favor of nepotism, the rule of keeping good stuff close to home. Another position Korach thought he was in line for was that of tribal leader, or prince, of the Levites. But Moses appointed a younger cousin to that position, so Korach was twice passed over and twice resentful.

This isn't the only insult to primogeniture that Moses was charged with: two generations back, Jacob's first-born Reuben had been supplanted by his younger brother Judah, in the contest for primacy among the tribes. But when rebellion came to a head, it was led not only by Korach but also by Reubenite leaders who wanted their #1 first-born position back. So the whole rebellion was based on the hidebound principle of primogeniture, both among the Levites and among the tribes themselves.

In addition to an unsound principle to work from, the rabbis give Korach slick, superficial arguments to level against Moses. Korach dresses his followers in tallesim made entirely of blue *tchelet* cloth, and then asks Moses if they need *tchelet* in their fringes. Yes they do, says Moses, and Korach skewers him for a rule-bound pedant. Korach shows Moses a room and asks if it needs a mezuzah. Of course, says Moses. Korach throws open the door, triumphantly revealing a room full of Torah scrolls: what need for a tiny mezuzah scroll in that distinguished assembly? Moses wants to make the point that a full room might become empty someday, but he can't get a word in over the laughter of the rebels. And Korach shows Moses a bit of brown skin on a man's face and asks if he is cleared for priestly duties. Moses says no, sorry, that man has a skin disease. Korach now reveals that the entire man is brown, and Moses says Oh, an Ethiopian—of course he can lead services. My point exactly, says Korach, and the rebels snicker appreciatively.

Having lost the contest on rhetorical grounds, if not on the logical merits, Moses resorts to force, asking G-d to kill Korach. G-d knew this request was coming, and way back on the evening of the 6th day of Creation He prepared the "mouth of the earth" to swallow Korach. In Pirke Avot (Avot 5:6) we read "10 things were created on Shabbas eve at twilight: the mouth of the earth, the mouth of the well, the mouth of the donkey...", etc. The "mouth of the earth" is #1 on the list of Hashem's 10 secret weapons: this is an important showdown. G-d deploys the

weapon, Korach goes down to Sheol alive, and Korach is surprised and alarmed—it shouldn't be happening this way.

Why was Korach surprised? Because, according to midrash, in addition to being fabulously wealthy and phenomenally clever, Korach was a genuine prophet, and he used his prophetic gifts to look into his family's future. He could see that one of his descendants 16 generations later, Samuel, would be greater than Moses; arguably, since Samuel combined the functions of king and high priest, he was as great as Moses and Aaron put together. Korach could also see that his father's name Yitzhar, which means 'oil,' would be justified when Samuel used oil to anoint Kings Saul and David. Oil would always be king, and the maker of kings. Korach felt secure in his ability to challenge Moses, because he could see his own line flourishing in the future, while Moses's line would die out or sink into obscurity. So imagine the shock and awe when Korach found himself dumped into Sheol. There must be some mistake: doesn't Hashem always either punish or elevate individuals and their genealogies together?

This was Korach's great error, not to mention the story's contribution to modernity, but it was an understandable mistake. Before and largely since, ties between parent and child included legacies of divine reward and punishment: every Amalekite is evil, kingship runs forever in the line of David, and the descendant of a *mamzer* can't enter the holy congregation, even unto the 10th generation. But in the case of Moses and Korach, Hashem broke the links between fathers and sons in two different ways. First, He trashed primogeniture, and second, He allowed Korach's sons to chart their own course. How could Korach's sons escape their father's fate? After all, the text says that the earth "swallowed them up with their households, all Korach's people and their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them..."(Num 16:32). It is said that even a borrowed pin that belonged to a Korachite would detach itself from a non-Korachite's garment and roll down into Sheol. So surely Korach's sons were doomed.

But, as we'll read three weeks from now, "*oovnay-Korach lo-meytoo.*" This terse pasuk reads like a software patch: "and by the way the sons of Korach, they did not die" (Num 26:11); but the Midrash fills in the details: as all the families and possessions of the Korach cabal tumbled down to Sheol, Korach's sons petitioned G-d wordlessly to save them. Hashem heard and caused platforms and then columns to rise up beneath them, so that while the unrepentant Korachites went on falling, the sons of Korach found themselves like the latter-day stylites, sitting on top of towers, rising high above their hellish surroundings. And those towers kept rising, past the roots of the trees and the thickness of the earth, until the sons of Korach were back on the surface, among the people, blinking in the copper-colored sunlight. This experience made a lasting impression, and henceforth the sons of Korach tended to write about having 'been to Hell and back.'

The canonical example of Korachite verse is the prayer of Chanah, which we hear in the haftarah for Rosh Hashanah (I Sam 2:6): “*Hashem meymiyt oomchayeh, morid sh’ol v’ya’al*—Hashem deals death and gives life, casts down into Sheol and raises up” ...literally, in the case of Chanah’s in-laws, because she married Elkanah, a lineal descendant of Korach through his son Eviashaph, who actually was cast down into Sheol and then raised up. The other Korachite verses are Psalms 42-49, explicitly attributed to the sons of Korach, including this line from Psalm 49: “But G-d will redeem my soul from the hand of Sheol...” (Ps 49:15). And 4 other psalms attributed to the sons of Korach, including this line from Psalm 88: “I was reckoned with those who descend into the pit...” (Ps 88:4).

So we have gotten very close to a Jewish precedent for Ananias, using the sons of Korach as our informants: want to know what Hashem is really like, you can ask the sons of Korach, who were ‘reckoned with those who descended into the pit,’ but lived to tell the tale. But the analogy isn’t yet perfect—after all, the sons of Korach did not stay in Sheol. What about Korach himself, stuck in Sheol for the duration? One sympathetic midrash says that the Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans, went underground, and Korach and his fellow rebellious Levites in Sheol became the ghostly officers of this ghostly Temple. When the Temple arises again in Jerusalem, those Levites, including Korach, will be there to help with the sacred vessels. Now there’s an implication of *teshuvah* in that story. Did Korach have a change of heart in Sheol, as Ananias must have done in his own context, to warrant his becoming an authority on Jesus?

The Talmud, in tractate Bava Batra, takes the final step in providing the Jewish precedent for “Ananias” when it allows us to hear the repentant voice of Korach (74a). Rabbah bar bar Chana is a tourist in the Holy Land, he is shown the crack in the ground, still hot and smoking after all the centuries, where the rebels were swallowed up by the earth. Rabbah puts his ear to the ground and hears voices saying “Moses and his Torah are true, and we are liars.” This is the evidence of *teshuvah* we have been waiting for, and, as Rabbah’s wily tour guide, just called “the Arab,” surely knew, a satisfying end to Korach’s rebellion. So 1,500 years later, when an anonymous American, possibly a generation or two off the slave plantation, asked the rhetorical question of Ananias: ‘what kind of man my Jesus is,’ it wasn’t either rustic ignorance or fresh theological invention; rather, it was a Christian recasting of Rabbah’s question to Korach: what kind of man my Moses is—of all people, Korach should have had the time to think, and Korach ought to know. And the answers of Korach and Ananias are of course the same, affirming orthodoxy.

But we can go a little further than Rabbah did in our quest to hear the voice of Korach. We talked about the 12 psalms attributed to the sons of Korach. But many psalms are unattributed, allowing commentators to comb their text for signs of authorship. No less an

authority than the ARI, the 16th-century Kabbalist, pointed out a telestich—an acrostic of last letters—in an unattributed psalm, #92. Now 92 is no ordinary psalm: it's the designated Psalm for Shabbat, and it also features in the Psukei d'Zimra of Shabbat and Yom Tov. It's on page 94 of the Siddur, and you know much of it by heart: *Tzaddik katamar yifrach* (Ps 92:12). And there is the telestich in question: *Tzaddik* (the last letter is kuf) *katamar* (there's the resh) *yifrach* (the chet). Kuf-resh-chet spells...Korach.

Names and hidden words routinely appear in acrostic or telestich form in zmirot and piyyutim; you can see one in L'Cha Dodi, whose author signed it acrostically. So let's accept for a moment the ARI's implication that Psalm 92 was authored by Korach, and let's look for the expected Korachite themes in it. The unnamed psalmist says, "I am anointed with fragrant oil" (Ps 92:10)—remember the role of oil in Korach's prophetic understanding of the line of Yitzhar. "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; they shall grow tall like a cedar" (Ps 92:12)—imagery of trees, anchored by roots in the underground (Sheol) but penetrating through to the world of light, and striving toward the heavens. "They shall bear fruit even in old age" (Ps 92:14)—after millennia of dwelling in Sheol, the undying Korach may yet emerge to proclaim, with the authority only Korach, or in another setting Ananias, could muster: "Adonai is just—my rock, in which there is no flaw" (Ps 92:15) That from a man who had seen the solid rocks crack, as the mouth of the earth opened.

Sure, it's an idiosyncratic reading based on a three-letter coincidence, pointed out by a kabbalistic miracle-worker 500 years ago. But humility is in order here. We all aspire to be tzadikim, who will be, as it says in Psalm 92, *sh'tulim b'veit Hashem*—planted in the house of Hashem. *B'chatzrot elohaynu yafrichu*—they will flourish in the courts of our G-d (Ps 92:13). Lord, I want to be in that number—don't you? But which of the bad guys will be there with us? Perhaps we should ask Korach?