



**Parashat Korach**

**Modern Midrash: Korach Retold**

by Noach Dzmura on Friday June 27, 2008

24 Sivan 5768

Numbers 16:1 - 18:32, PRIDE!

Please note that there are TWO Torah Queeries this week. One (below) is about the *parasha* of the week, *Korach*, and the other is about the annual Pride celebration. To access the PRIDE essay, "Chant Hallel for Pride," written by Howard Steiermann, click the link above.

Coming soon: an essay about getting legally married in San Francisco.

The *parsha* of *Korach* is about challenging authority and confronting injustice. It is about exposing wrongdoing, pointing out the fact that the emperor is wearing no clothes, and it is about the victory of democratic ideals over tyranny.

Would that it were! Instead, alas, *parashat Korach* is about what often happens to those of us who ask troublesome questions of tyrants who have "God on their side," and it is about the victors who compose the stories we call scripture. This is clearly Aaron's story, written by a scion of the priestly caste, but wouldn't it be different if Korah were doing the telling? In the modern midrash below, I have composed a new version of the story in *Korah's* own words.

I hated to leave the tents today, since we're in the middle of pulling up stakes to find a new camp-site. Those last little tremors that went down a couple of days ago—well, that and the rumors of a nasty stomach virus on the East side of camp—spooked my tent-mate. His favorite soup tureen fell off the shelf and broke in the last aftershock, which he says means seven years bad luck, and on top of that the Teitelman's son fell ill yesterday, so our little Avi has to stay in the tent. They all play together, so the kids are all bound to come down with it. And my tent-mate worries. Also according to Jonah (my tent-mate), Moses borrowed our ass again and hasn't given him back. So I have to bring that up with him too, Mr. High-and-Mighty Moses, or we won't be able to move the tent.

I had already planned to hike down to the Tent of Meeting with some of my buddies to protest Moses' latest move; I just added the ass to my list of things to complain about. It took us about an hour to hike out there, over some quite passable dessert hills. Looking back across the



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terrain, my neighborhood of tents was hidden behind two rows of hills by the time we got to the Tent of Meeting.

I love Moses, but he is having delusions of grandeur again. Those stories they tell the kids around the campfire, about Moses being responsible for the plagues in Egypt? Give me a break. Yeah, we left because of the plagues, but not because Pharaoh gave credence to our tribal deity! Hey, the domestic situation in Egypt was clearly so bad they couldn't give us a second thought! Go after a band of slaves with anything like the force that would be required to retrieve them? Forget about it! Everyone was trying to get out of Egypt!

But that's ancient history. While we were walking along the path toward the Tent of Meeting, there was another quake, not more than a 3.2, so we kept on walking. These things happen. Little did I know the 'narrative use' to which this event would be put.

So what am I protesting today? Well, some of the neighbors have been grumbling because Moses wants to set his buddy Aaron and his sons up for life, in a hereditary priesthood. I am already the beneficiary of a hereditary role of temple service as a son of Levi. I understand the desire to help out your friends. They're tight, Aaron and Moses, and Moses can certainly stand to share the burden of leadership with capable people. It's also right that priests should receive some compensation for their labors. But get this: priests won't be able to farm, they won't be able to herd animals. Slaughtering is tough work, this I grant you. But the rest of it, the rigmarole associated with the rituals? I'm a Levite and even I don't have much use for it. I resent the fact that Moses is asking the people to give a tenth of what little they earn to support this foolish enterprise. The people are upset already about we Levites being on top of the heap. When my self-importance swells because of my "Levitical duties," Jonah always reminds me that everyone was present for the revelation. I just want to point the same thing out to Moses. I'm a Levite, so my neighbors think I have influence and asked me to speak for them. So I stood there with my disgruntled neighbors and threw down the challenge to Moses.

"You have gone too far!" I say to Moses. "For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why do you raise yourself above the congregation of the Lord?"

Moses stutters a bit about the pot calling the kettle black, and that angers me. I'm about to retort that this isn't about being supplanted as a Levite, and then Aaron whispers in Moses' ear. Aaron, always Aaron. Once upon a time Moses and I were tight, but now it's always Aaron. While I was throwing down my challenge, a message runner had come up to Aaron from back over the hills, the direction from which we had come. Since messengers were coming into the Tent of Meeting all the time from every corner of the widely disbursed camp, I paid it no mind. After Aaron listened to the message runner for a while, he turned to Moses and whispered again.



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Then Moses asks all 250 of us to bring our fire pans to the Tent of Meeting tomorrow, and God will tell us who is right, and who is dead. I am wondering why he says “two hundred and fifty” when there are only ten of us, and then I see the scribe marking away and a cold fear grips me by the nethers. This is PR. This is spin. I’m being set up to take a fall and to establish the authority of Heaven. I know because I’ve seen it happen before, with Nadab and Avihu.

When I got back to my tent that night, I found a disaster: the quake shifted the landscape. Our tent and the neighboring tents were now about 14 feet underground. You could see the faultline. It was horrifying. Thank God, Jonah and Avi and all of our neighbors were a little bit shaken up, but otherwise fine. Jonah called up to me, laughing, “I guess they tried to take us alive down to Sheol!” With a little work, we were able to construct a ramp to haul everybody and all of our stuff out safely. So we moved from that nice centrally located but now subterranean spot to a place on the North side of our neighborhood, along the margins of the camp, and I forgot about protesting Aaron’s priesthood. Whatever, I had to deal with my family.

Later that summer Avi came back from a camp-out with the other kids. He told an amazing story about an uprising, an earthquake, a fire from Heaven, and a plague that Aaron singlehandedly stopped. That night in bed, Jonah helped me see the humor of the situation. All summer long the kids in the neighborhood were pretending they were mighty Korah, whom God destroyed. Avi does great death scenes when he plays Korah.

Avi recovered nicely from the stomach virus even though some others had not been so lucky. Aaron got away with pulling another Nadab and Avihu on my ten disgruntled neighbors. But what could I say? I had no proof, and the burden of evidence in such a claim was mine. And so for now, we have priests. But I have a feeling it won’t be that way forever. It’s really interesting to me that the story they tell about Nadab and Avihu contains the line, “And Aaron remained silent.” One wonders what he might have said.



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