

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Korach

Revolt in The Wilderness: Korach as Populist Demagogue

Chapter 16 of the Book of Numbers describes a political revolt against the leadership of Moses and Aaron during the 40 years' wandering in the desert. The leader of the revolt is a man named Korach, a cousin of Moses and Aaron. The Torah gives no direct explanation of the causes behind the revolt, but in confronting Moses, Korach says, *You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the rest of God's community?* (Num. 16:3). In the midrashic passage below, the rabbis imagine how Korach encouraged others to join his revolt:

What did [Korach] do? He assembled the entire community, and in their presence, he said: "In my neighborhood there was a widow with two daughters. The widow had only one field, and when she was about to plow it, Moses said to her, 'You must not plow with an ox and an ass together.' [Deut. 22:10]. When she was about to sow, Moses said to her, 'You must not sow the field with two kinds of seed.' [Lev. 19:19]. When she was about to reap the harvest and stack the sheaves, Moses said to her, 'Do not harvest the gleanings, the overlooked sheaves, or the corners of your field.' [Lev. 19:19 & Deut. 24:19]. When she was about to bring her harvest into the granary, Moses said to her, 'Give the priest's portion, the first tithe & the second tithe.' [see Numbers 18:8-31 for a full review of the portions due to the Levites and priests]. She submitted to the law and gave them to him.

What did the poor woman do then? She sold her field and bought two sheep, so that she might clothe herself in the wool shorn from them and profit by the production of lambs. As soon as the sheep brought forth their young, Aaron came to the widow and said, "Give me the firstling males, for God said: 'All the firstling lambs that are born of your herd and your flock, you must dedicate to Adonai your God.' [Deut. 15:19] Again, she submitted to the law and gave the firstling lambs to Aaron.

When the time for shearing arrived, she sheared her two sheep. Aaron came again and said to the widow, 'Give me the first portion of the shearing, for the Holy one said: 'You shall give him...the first shearing of your sheep.' [Deut. 18:4]. She said, 'There is no strength in me to withstand this man; behold, I will slaughter the sheep and eat them. After she slaughtered them, Aaron came once more and said, 'Give me the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach.' [Deut. 18:3]

The widow said, 'Even after I have slaughtered my sheep, I am still not free of his demands! Behold, I donate my sheep to the Temple! But Aaron said to her, 'In that case, they belong entirely to me, for thus said the Holy One: 'Everything donated by the Israelites shall be yours.' [Num. 18:14]. Aaron picked up the sheep, went his way, and left her weeping – here and her two little daughters."

"This is what happened to that poor woman," said Korach. "All of these acts Moses and Aaron do on their own, and they hang the blame on God!"

-- Midrash on Psalms 1:25

Questions: What political strategy is Korach employing against Moses and Aaron? What are the merits of this strategy? The liabilities? Imagine yourself as someone who believed in Moses and Aaron and their policies. If you wanted to defend the legitimacy of their leadership, what strategy would you use to respond to Korah in front of the crowd? Do Korach's arguments convince you? Should Moses and Aaron have been deposed?