

A Complex Crisis

No sooner has the crisis of the spies been resolved when Moses is confronted by two further rebellions among the Israelites. Korah (a cousin to Moses and Aaron) objects to the priesthood of Aaron. Meanwhile, Dathan and Abiram criticize Moses' civil authority. Here we will focus on Numbers 16:1-17:15.

With the guidance of the Jewish sages, we have been learning not to rush our reading of Scripture, to listen carefully to the sacred text, to ponder its subtleties in content and expression. As we do, we start to appreciate the timeless human and spiritual issues it raises. In this spirit, read 16:1-17:15, attentive to the specific characters, their statements and actions. It may help to imagine this portion as a piece of theatre... how would you divide it into a series of acts?

Distinguishable here are not only two rebellions, but various kinds of response. When Korah questions Aaron's right to priesthood, Moses replies by setting him and his followers a priestly task by which God will judge their claim to priestly office. Yet confronted by Dathan and Abiram's refusal to cooperate (and their mocking remarks which undermine Moses' integrity as well as the claim to the promised land), Moses does not appear to react. Instead he turns to Korah and repeats his original response. Likewise, God seems to distinguish among the rebels, applying different forms of punishment. How would you interpret these details?

Note, too, the altruism of Moses as he begs God to forgive the Israelites (16:22), just as he does in previous episodes: the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:11-14), the Spies (Num.14:13-19), and Miriam's affliction (Num. 12:13).

Further subtleties arise in the apparent contradictions and repetitions found in the text:

Commentators observe that despite the disappearance of Korah into the bowels of the earth (16:31-33), the name of Korah is in fact

preserved in the greater tradition. Turn to the Psalms and you will find those attributed to the 'sons of Korah' (e.g., Ps. 88). What lesson can be gleaned here? One traditional opinion says that while Korah himself acts from dubious motives such as personal ambition, the point he raises in 16:3 ('For all the community are holy') has enduring validity. Indeed, the whole community is holy, and this truth must always inform the specific priestly calling of a chosen few.

Further reflections arise from the observation that these rebellions follow so closely on the heels of the conflict with the spies (Numbers 13-14). There the people cried, 'Let us head back for Egypt' (14:4) and here we have the rebels referring to Egypt as 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (14:13). We may ask, have the Israelites learnt anything from previous crises? Did the treatment of the spies just make community tensions worse?

Continue to ponder the subtleties of content and expression in the text, allowing them to prayerfully fuel your powers of insight and imagination.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lambda, n.p.d.); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NJPS.

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