

In recent years, there has been a groundswell of support to rehabilitate the more often maligned characters in Tanakh. Korah is no exception to this. In a world in which people are drawn to the little guy fighting the big guy, it's no shock that Korach in all of his rabble rousing ways, fighting back at the establishment of Moses and Aaron. is put on a pedestal.

At face value, his words to Moses and Aaron might make us want to run to his side. "You have too much!" "You elevate yourselves above God!" "We're all equally holy!" For a person who often wants to side with those seeking to combat injustice, everything about this screams for allyship. But the key word that changes everything is the opening word of the Parshah, *Vayikah*, "Korah took."

It's not the word you'd expect when learning about a person fighting a revolution. There is something nefarious, selfish, and devious about taking. That is how the Rabbis portray Korah, all based on this one little word.

One of the more powerful ways they do this is unexpectedly through a teaching on the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms starts

“happy is the person who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked. Who has not stood in the way of sinners and has not sat in the seat of scorners.”

I quote you their Midrash in full because it is so damning of the power of someone like Korah, a person who cherry-picks to take advantage and wields words in order to dupe.

“In the seat of scorers ...; this refers to Korach who made scorn of Moses and Aaron. What did Korach do? He assembled all the congregation as it said: "And Korach gathered all the congregation against them;. He began to speak to them words of scorn, saying: 'There was once a widow in my neighborhood who had two fatherless daughters and one field. When she came to plow, Moses said to her: "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together; (Deut. 22:10)." When she came to sow, he said to her "Thou shalt not sow thy field with divers seeds;" (Leviticus 19, 19). When she came to reap and stack the corn, he said to her, "Leave gleanings (leket) the forgotten sheaf (shikhehah) and the corner of the field (pe'ah) for the poor." When she came to thresh, he said to her, "Give tithes,

priestly dues, the first and second tithes." She justified heaven's pronouncement and gave him.

What did this poor women do? She went and sold her field, and purchased with the proceeds two lambs, to clothe herself from its shearing and enjoy its products. As soon as they gave birth, Aaron came and said to her: "Give me the firstborn, since the Holy One has said: Every firstborn that shall be born of thy herd and flock, the male one, shalt thou consecrate to the Lord thy God." She justified heaven's pronouncement and gave him the offspring.

The time came for shearing and she sheared them - came Aaron and said to her, "Give me the first of the shearing since the Holy One blessed be He said (Deut. 18:3): The

first of thy grain, thy wine and oil and the first of the shearing of thy flock shalt thou give to him". Thereupon she said: "Since I have no more strength to withstand this man, I shall slaughter them and eat them." As soon as she had slaughtered them, Aaron came and said to her: "Give me the shoulder, two cheeks and maw." (Deut. 18:3)

Whereupon she said: "Even after I have slaughtered them I am not delivered from his hand. Let them then be forbidden (herem) my use." Said Aaron to her: "In that case it is all mine since the Holy One said: 'Every devoted thing (herem - expression of prohibition, exclusion from ordinary usage) in Israel shall be thine.'" (Num. 18:14)

He took them, departed and left her weeping with her two daughters. Such was the lot that befell this unfortunate woman! So much they do in the name of the Holy One!

Every step of the way in this story that Korah tells, the widow is framed as being on the tail end of an unjust system. Appealing to the audience in front of him, the Rabbis imagine Korah as a swindler of the highest caliber. He tugs at the heartstrings, giving them what they want, all the while driven by ulterior motives, namely to seek out personal glory. As Professor Nechama Leibowitz notes:

In the above excerpt, the Torah, whose ways are the ways of peace is seen through distorted spectacles. All Korah's ranting contains the familiar rabble-rousing ingredients of demagoguery.

Korah leaves out the really crucial point of this whole narrative. The same oppressed and wronged widow, together with the orphan and the stranger is the subject of very special concern and protective legislation. Those very gleanings that she owes when she owns property are also promised to her when she is entitled to them. It's an act of obfuscation in not telling the whole story in order to advance your own agenda.

This is what a demagogue like Korah does. In the eyes of many commentators, he specifically chose this time because he knew the people were vulnerable. He knew that he could exploit their prejudices and their anger. It's why the Rabbis seize on the opening lines of the portion when we are told Korah took. It wasn't a physical act of bringing the people. It was a taking of words, of seducing people into complicity of his devious plan.

The ways in which words can be wielded and marshaled to harm others has always been relevant in our world but certainly has been felt more acutely in these last two weeks. When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe vs. Wade*, it sent many in our country into deep fits of rage for what it meant for the loss of bodily autonomy for people that can get pregnant. So much of how we got here has to do with words too.

In 1993, at Justice Ginsberg's confirmation hearings, she stated the following:

“A judge sworn to decide impartially can offer no forecasts, no hints, for that would show not only disregard for the specifics of the particular case, it would display disdain for the entire judicial process.”

This quote has formed the bedrock of the Ginsburg Doctrine.

This applies to a nominee for the Supreme Court in that they may withhold from commenting on topics or cases that could come up before the bench in the future.

The problem with the use of this doctrine is that it doesn't accurately reflect Justice Ginsberg's hearing where she actually did address key issues during her hearings, including touchy topics ranging from abortion, to the right of privacy, to gender discrimination, to free speech. How she ruled in the past mattered and she spoke to it because words matter. How and why we use them affects our legacies deeply.

When the justices that penned last week's ruling went through their own confirmation hearings, many of them adhered to this very doctrine. When asked about *Roe v. Wade* during these hearings, while none of them explicitly said they would never overturn it, they all admitted to its place as settled precedent, with one even noting its protected status. Legal experts argue that in a nuanced way, they did not lie under oath, as they carefully crafted their answers in a way that would leave wiggle room for the decision that we later saw.

In my eyes, there was a smoke and mirrors aspect to their answers that reflects some of what the Rabbis retrojected back into Korah's words. In what ways can I manipulate my words to give myself the chance to take advantage of vulnerable people?

There is something untruthful about the ways they used those words. In the short run, it was within the letter of the law and it got them confirmed to the highest court of the land. In the long run, it seems to have lessened the legitimacy of the court in the eyes of many and will cause unimaginable harm to so many people.

And it all comes back to words. Korah took with them. Many of us feel taken by them now. We feel enraged and wonder how we can channel our rage into words and ultimately into action, which brings me to a particularly meaningful aspect of the Parshah this week. After Korah's band of followers are consumed by the Earth, their fire pans with which they appealed to God are left behind. Instead of them being burned or left there, the Torah tells us they need to be removed

“for they are sacred...and let them be made into hammered sheets as plating for the altar.” 1

It is baffling. How could this object, attached to a cause that was so negative and toxic, be used for something as holy as the altar? Two answers from the realm of chassidut offer a powerful answer. The first comes from the Shem Mishmuel, the 2nd Rebbe of Sochatchov who argues that this act is one that transforms something from the category of a transgression into a mitzvah. The second answer, from the Bnei Yissaschar, the Rebbe of Dinov points out that the word for “raising” the pans up *vayarem* when flipped backwards is *meri*, the word for rebellion. When you elevate and transform this transgressive thing, you change its very essence from something that tears down into something that builds up.

Many of us are now looking at this event as cataclysmic. People will die as a result of this ruling. Yet, we can't just ignore it or let it remain. It can be transformed. It can activate us. Perhaps the depths of its lowliness can one day be flipped upside down through our collective response, much in the same way as the fire pans.

This is a moment for that in our world. There have been a great many resources shared (some below) in the week since the ruling from organizations like The Rabbinical Assembly, the National Council for Jewish Women, Jews for Abortion Access, and many more. Thankfully, there have been folks on the ground preparing for this reality for some time. If you are interested in some of these resources, please reach out to me.

In the meantime, please remember that you are not alone in your disappointment and anger. As we learn from Korah, how we wield our words has an immense impact on how we are remembered. May we all merit to act on this lesson with haste, channeling words into sacred action.

Shabbat Shalom,

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