



THIRTY-EIGHT

Torah and Its Discontents
Parashat Korach (Numbers 16:1–18:32)

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I sit in the retro-modern kitchen of a suburban Los Angeles home, the off-avocado appliances proclaiming distress in almost equal volume to that of my twelve-year-old cousin Adam struggling to master tropes and write his drash as he prepares for his bar mitzvah. According to my aunt, he needs some help, and I, the family rabbi, have been summoned to the rescue. This is pretty funny, because it is a well-known family “fact” that I cannot carry a tune or sing on key. But the rabbinic mojo is powerful, and it is hoped that perhaps my general familiarity with the Torah might do the trick. Indeed, as soon as my aunt and uncle retire to the sunken dual entertainment and rumpus room, I reach over and press the stop button on Adam’s cassette-tape player. “Let’s just talk about the portion,” I suggest.

Adam looks guiltily at the kitchen door, as if expecting the Torah police to burst through and place him under religious arrest. He fidgets a bit, sizes me up, glances at the door again, and says, “I hope you won’t get upset, but I like Korach. I think he’s in the right. He is being very reasonable. Moses is a big bully, not to mention God.” My young cousin Adam is the first, but not the last, bat/bar mitzvah student to hesitantly disclose to me an inner personal dissent from the object lesson intended in this parasha—a disclosure I hear not only from the mouths of twelve-year-olds; adults as well often tell me of their discomfort with the dramatic struggle for power and brutal resolution recounted in the tale.

The tense showdown in *Parashat Korach* is presented in high relief. Moses is both the symbol and substance of authority, chosen and favored by God. Korach is the rebel, challenging the existent chain of command. The parasha opens with a dramatic description of the confrontation; Korach and his co-conspirators accuse Moses: “You have gone too far! All of the people are holy. . . . Why do you raise yourself above Adonai’s congregation?” (Num. 17:3). Moses responds in kind, using similarly aggressive language: “The man who Adonai chooses, he is the holy one. You have gone too far!” It is high noon in the *midbar* (Sinai): the terms set out, pistols drawn; a duel to the death.

This clash over authority has its paradoxes, even in the Torah’s own terms. Moses is leader of the Hebrews by virtue of having led a successful rebellion against Pharaoh, the supreme political authority figure of Egypt. Moses’s previous encounters with human authority show anything but restraint. In a fit of rage, he kills an Egyptian slave

overseer, and he repeatedly overtly threatens Pharaoh. Moses—to his core—represents the virtue of resistance against arbitrary power and domination. Yet, in the eyes of Korach, now Moses himself has become the seemingly willful and arbitrary leader. Korach envisions himself as the idealistic rebel. No wonder young cousin Adam is confused; the Torah has gone too far!

The Pharisaic Sages, in their approach to this text, are aware of the complexity of their interpretive task. Like Moses, the ancient Rabbis do not have a simple relationship to authority. Though they are the Jewish authority figures of their times, in terms of Jewish religious history, the Rabbis are profoundly revolutionary. If anything, Rabbinic Judaism is the fulfillment of Korach's claim that "all of the people are holy." In the period of its emergence, Pharisaic Judaism—the precursor of Rabbinic Judaism—was but one sect of many. Its core practices stemmed from the religious strategy of relocating worship from the ancient Temple into the home and synagogue. As a result, study, prayer, and good deeds replaced showy public sacrifices, and religious leadership shifted from the hereditary priesthood to the populist rabbinate. Rabbinic literature justifies this profound change by citing prooftexts from the Torah, which it understands as the direct word of God. The Rabbis often cite Exodus 19:6, "You are a kingdom of priests," to illustrate the rightness of their way. That sounds very close to Korach's accusation against Moses.

In addition, during the time of the Rabbis, the real political authority and power lay with the much-hated Roman occupation force. The Sages were morally incensed by the cruel and arrogant nature of the Roman government. The Rabbis have not only a natural tendency to support the righteous rebel but also a vast political and religious context for the support. But, unlike my modernist cousin Adam and his ilk, the Rabbis are constrained from siding with Korach the rebel against God/Moses. For the Rabbis, God is the unquestionable ultimate source of truth, and the Torah is God's direct revelation. So, just as the Rabbis reinvent Jewish theology, they recast the nature of Korach's conflict to suit their moral sensibilities and resolve their dilemma.

The Rabbis view Korach as a villain. They debate whether Korach and his followers will have a portion in the world to come or will be condemned to eternal oblivion (*Sanhedrin* 109bff.). The Sages explore Korach's sins in great detail, including the wrongdoings of his wife (who is not mentioned in the Torah). The Korach of rabbinic midrash is not the Korach of the Torah.

The Sages' midrashic re-creation of Korach emerges from three key suppositions. The first is that God is always good and right and that God is ultimately on the side of the Rabbis. The second is that the Torah is the word of God. The third is that Korach's basic argument about universal holiness is correct. Thus, according to rabbinic midrash, Korach's transgression cannot be rebellion against authority. So then, what is it?

The Sages paint Korach not as an idealistic conscientious dissenter but as a manipulative greedy hypocrite. The midrashic Korach is a man of extreme wealth: "the keys of Korach's treasure house were a load for three hundred white mules" (Rabbi Levy on *Sanhedrin* 110). He cynically and disingenuously stages the confrontation

with Moses in order to replace Moses with himself. This midrashic Korach is creating spin about equality and universal holiness, but in actuality he is a power-hungry corrupt politician.

The Rabbis are at pains to show that it is Moses who is actually looking out for the welfare of the masses. The midrashic Moses is humble, conciliatory (hearing that some of the Levites have concerns, he goes out to look for them to discuss the problems), responsible and fair. He is anything but authoritarian or arbitrary. He is a true populist whom the Sages call Moshe Rabbeinu. If anything, the Talmudic persona "Moshe Rabbeinu" is even holier than the Torah's Moses. The midrashic Korach, on the other hand, is avaricious and scheming. No wonder God chooses Moses and dooms Korach! The Rabbis use midrash to change the sacred record and thus reframe the nature of the conflict from one about authority to one about values.

This is a moral strategy worthy of some comment. Ostensibly, it seems that the Rabbis could have found a way to support the Moses of the text. They might have justified Moses by making an argument of ethical relativism. They could have said that Moses's situation excused totalitarianism in order to maintain security. The Sages could have acknowledged that Korach might have had a good point about equity during times of political stability, but in a situation of transition and chaos, Korach and his followers were straining the social resources. But the Sages do not make this argument, because they simply do not support that perspective. For them, Korach's claim is not relative to a certain social situation but is absolute. The Sages agree with Korach's assertion that "all of the people are holy" whether the social order is solid or whether times are chaotic. Therefore, the problem cannot be in Korach's claim of universal holiness. Nor is it his power position relative to Moses; the Rabbis are sympathetic to those with less power. The Rabbis resolve the conflict by asserting that the transgression must be one of unethical personal character.

What is the queer lesson in all of this? We tend to look at the Torah from a modernist "realistic" perspective; that is, we tend to take the story at face value and move on from there. In the showdown between Korach and Moses, our queer identification tends to favor Korach. Korach represents the (relatively) disenfranchised. Korach seems the less violent, though to be fair, the savagery seems more at the hand of God than of Moses. Lastly, Korach makes a very appealing moral argument, the same one that queers make—that holiness resides in everyone. One possible interpretive strategy is for us to follow young cousin Adam's approach, counterread the Torah and side with Korach.

The Rabbis employ another hermeneutic methodology. They feel perfectly comfortable interpreting the "truth" of the Torah by adding material in a way that we might initially define as rewriting history. But the Torah is not history; it is sacred mythos. The approach of the Sages is similar to that of renowned feminist theorist Monique Wittig: "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter. . . . You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent" (*Les Guérillères*, trans. and ed. David Le Vay [Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007], 89).

Discontent with the face-value narrative, the Sages dehypostasize the Moses and Korach presented in the parasha to "invent" two new opponents, a different kind of dramatic conflict, and thus a new ethical teaching. In the Torah, Moses and Korach fight over authority; in the midrash, their dispute is over moral integrity. This rabbinic teaching is a powerful one for contemporary queers. The Rabbis teach that the core issue is not power but ethics.

What does this teaching mean to the queer community? Some contemporary gay people frame our struggle as one of equal access to power and to social institutions. Can we get married? Can we join the army? Can we make a decent living without job discrimination and harassment? These are important questions. But the Rabbis use *Parashat Korach* to ask a deeper question: do I want equality just for me and mine or for everyone? The former concerns are about power, the latter about moral values. The rabbinic teaching on *Parashat Korach* asks the gay rights movement to think seriously about the depths of inclusion. Do we really mean it when we say that everyone has a spark of holiness, or do we want to supplant one privileged class with another? Does "everyone" include the less socially acceptable members of our community: trannies, butches, queens, the leather clubs, and AIDS survivors? And beyond our community, the broader world: what would it mean politically to believe that every single person has a spark of holiness?

If the Talmud's message emphasizing ethical leadership and universal holiness is profound for the queer community, its methodology is even more so. Beyond the substance of the rabbinic teaching, the rabbinic (Wittig) process opens opportunities to queers. Reading the Torah on its own creates a dichotomy: either we affirm the text as it stands or we counterread it in dissent. But the Rabbis created a system of ongoing revelation through creative interpretation. The Sages give queer people (and all the unvoiced) an opportunity to enter the mythos and thus change it. We are not so much rewriting history as amending it. Thus, as the Jewish people grow and change through maturation over time, the Torah can as well.

There in the suburban Los Angeles kitchen, sitting on red-vinyl-covered dining chairs pulled up to a drop-leaf, oddly patterned Formica table, I explain all of this to my cousin Adam. Initially he seems unconvinced. "Pretty hard on Korach," Adam tells me. "First the Torah has him swallowed up by the earth, and then the Rabbis diss his character. But I like that Wittig quote. Could you say it again?" I repeat the part about inventing. "Yeah," says Adam, "that makes sense. About using your imagination and own moral values to find the meaning. I think I'll write my own midrash, in which Moses and Korach reunite in the World to Come, make peace, and become friends."

"That's great," I reply, "and I think I'll write a drash that ends with your tone-deaf cousin Jane helping you chant Torah." I reach over and punch the start button on his cassette player.