

The rebellion of Korah that dominates this *parasha* was the most devastating challenge to Moses' leadership. As Nahmanides points out, it could only have happened after the sin of the spies and the subsequent condemnation of the generation who left Egypt, told that they would not live to enter the land. Building on their unrest and shattered hopes, Korah assembled a heterogeneous group of malcontents—some from his own tribe, some from that of Reuben, yet others who had leadership positions elsewhere—and challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron.

The rebellion failed—ended by the ground opening and swallowing the chief rebels—yet the complaints of the people continued. They ended only when Aaron's rod, alone among the rods for each tribe, budded, blossomed, and brought forth almonds, a paradigm of peaceful conflict resolution. The *parasha* ends with a legal section detailing the duties of the priests and Levites and the offerings to be given to them by the rest of the people.

The Korah revolt was the most fraught and devastating assault on Moses and Aaron's leadership. For that reason, most of the essays are focused on it and the way it was understood within the rabbinic tradition. The first explains how Korah misunderstood the nature of spiritual leadership, **thinking it to be a matter of status rather than service**. The second looks at how rabbinic Midrash understood the revolt. The third examines the rabbinic understanding of argument in general. The fourth looks at the psychology of Moses' response to the crisis. The fifth **contrasts Moses' reaction here to his very different response to the prophecy of Eldad and Medad**. The sixth asks whether Korah was right or wrong to say, "All the congregation are holy."

Power and Influence

In this essay, we explore one aspect of the Korah rebellion, namely the seeming inconsistency between Moses' reaction here and in the episode, just a few chapters earlier, of Eldad and Medad. Moses, on that occasion, had reached the lowest point in his own emotional struggle with the burdens of leadership. The people had complained about the food. **Moses was devastated that they had not matured after the transformative experiences, first of the revelation of God at Mount Sinai, then of the construction of the Tabernacle and the knowledge that the Divine Presence was visibly in their midst**. So low were his spirits that he prayed to God to allow him to die rather than carry on (Num. 11:4-15).

God told him to choose seventy elders to share with him the burden of leadership. Evidently Moses had chosen six from each tribe, making seventy-two. Lots were cast as to which two should be left out, and they fell on Eldad and Medad, who remained in the camp while Moses and the seventy went to the Tent. When God caused Moses' spirit to rest on them, it rested also on Eldad and Medad, who started prophesying. We then read:

The youth ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' servant since his youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!" But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His spirit on them!" (Num. 11:27-29).

There is something magnificently generous about this response. Moses, anguished just a little while earlier, is now calm and untroubled. **He does not see any threat whatsoever**. To the contrary, he expresses the wish that everyone could wear the mantle of prophecy and experience God's spirit as he did. And that is the end of the episode.

His response to the challenge represented by Korah, Datan and Aviram, and the 250 "princes of the congregation," was quite different. First—as the prophet Elijah was later to do with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel—he proposed a test. Let all those who challenged him and Aaron offer incense and see whose offering is accepted. This was immediately confrontational.

Then, as we saw in the previous essay, he went further. He asked God not to accept any offering from Datan and Aviram, the most objectionable of the rebels. Then he invoked a miracle to prove the authenticity of his mission:

If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt. (Num. 16:29-30)

In effect, **Moses used his power to eliminate the opposition**.

What was the difference between Eldad and Medad on the one hand and Korah and his co-conspirators on the other? Why was Moses prepared to say, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets," while rejecting Korah's claim that "all the congregation are holy and the Lord is with them"? **Why was the first, but not the second, a legitimate sentiment?** Was Moses simply being inconsistent? Hardly. **There is a distinction to be made between the two episodes that made the latter but not**

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Numbers*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 219-225.

the former a challenge that Moses had to take seriously and stop in its tracks. What is it?

The sages, in one of their profound methodological observations, said that “The words of the Torah may be poor in one place but rich in another.”⁽¹⁾ By this they meant that **if we seek to understand a perplexing passage, we may need to look elsewhere in the Torah for the clue**. A similar idea is expressed in the last of R. Ishmael’s thirteen rules of biblical interpretation: “Where there are two passages **which contradict each other**, the meaning can be determined only when a third passage is found which reconciles them.”⁽²⁾

In this case, the answer is to be found later in the book of Numbers, when Moses asked God to choose the next leader of the Israelites. God told him to take Joshua and appoint him as his successor:

So the Lord said to Moses, “Take for yourself Joshua, son of Nun, a man of spirit, and lay your hand [*vesamakhta et yadekha*] on him. Make him stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and you shall command him in their presence. Give him some of your splendour [*venatatekha mehodekha*] so that the whole Israelite community will obey him’.” (Num. 27:18-20)

Moses was commanded to perform two acts over and above presenting Joshua to the priest and people. First he was to “lay his hand” on Joshua. Then he was to give him “some of [his] splendour.” What is the significance of these two gestures? How did they differ from one another? Which of them constituted induction into office? The sages, in Midrash Rabba, added a commentary which at first sight only deepens the mystery: “Lay your hand on him”—this is like lighting one light from another. ‘Give him some of your splendour’—this is like pouring from one vessel to another.”⁽³⁾ It is this statement that will enable us to decode the mystery.

1. Numbers Rabbah 21:15

“And lay your hand on him—**this is like lighting one candle with another**. Give him some of your authority—this is like emptying one vessel into another.”

a. Acts 6:1-6

³Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. **We will turn this responsibility over to them ...** ⁵This proposal pleased the whole group ...

⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed **and laid their hands on them**.

b. 1Timothy 4:11-14

¹⁴Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy **when the body of elders laid their hands on you**.

There are two forms or dimensions of leadership. One is power, the other, influence. Often we assume the two are intimately related. After all, those who have power often have influence, and those who have influence have a certain kind of power. In fact, however, **the two operate by quite different logics**.

We can see this by a simple thought experiment. **Imagine you have total power, and then you decide to share it with nine others. You now have one-tenth of the power with which you began. Imagine, by contrast, that you have a certain measure of influence, and now you share it with nine others. How much do you have left? Not less. In fact, more. Initially there was only one of you; now there are ten. Your influence has spread. Power operates by division, influence by multiplication. With power, the more we share, the less we have. With influence, the more we share, the more we have.**

2. Matthew 16:13-20 (cf. Mat 18:18)

¹⁸And I tell you ... ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; **whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**”

a. The words for “bind” and “loose,” **אַסַּר** (*asar*) and **הָתִיר** (*ha-teir*), each appear with more than one meaning in the Hebrew Bible.

1) **אַסַּר** can mean, *bind, tie, imprison, hitch* (a cart, etc.) and *tether*. **הָתִיר** can be the exact opposite of **אַסַּר** in each of these senses.

b. In Yeshua’s time, **אַסַּר** (*asar*) had acquired the additional meaning “forbid,” and its antonym **הָתִיר** (*ha-teir*) had acquired the meaning “permit.”

1) M. Sotah (One Who Goes Astray) 9:14

During the war of Vespasian⁽¹⁴⁾ they **forbade** the crowns of the bridegrooms and the [wedding] drum. During the war of Quinctus⁽¹⁵⁾ they **forbade** the crowns of the brides and that a man should teach his son Greek. In the last war⁽¹⁶⁾ they **forbade** the bride to go forth in a litter² inside the city; **but our Rabbis permitted** the bride to go forth in a litter inside the city.

(14) Roman Emperor, C.E. 69-79.

(15) Governor of Judea in C.E. 116-117.

(16) Bar Kochba’s revolt, C.E. 132-135.

2) M. Nedarim (Vows) 6:5

If he vowed to abstain from milk he is **permitted** whey. R. Jose **forbids** it. [If he vowed to abstain] from whey he is **permitted** milk. Abba Saul says: If a man vowed to abstain from cheese, he is **forbidden** it whether salted or unsalted.

2 The litter is a class of wheelless vehicles, a type of human-powered transport, for the transport of persons.

c. Acts 15:12-21

¹³When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "**listen to me ...**" ¹⁹**"It is my judgment**, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to **abstain** from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

3. John. 16:7 (CJB)

⁷... it is to your advantage that I go away; for **if I don't go away, the comforting Counselor will not come to you**. However, if I do go, I will send him to you.

a. John 14:12

¹²Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and **they will do even greater things** than these, because I am going to the Father.

So deep is the difference that the Torah allocates them to two distinct leadership roles: king and prophet. Kings had power. They could levy taxes, conscript people to serve in the army, and decide when and against whom to wage war. They could impose non-judicial punishments to preserve social order. Hobbes³ famously called kingship a "Leviathan" and defined it in terms of power. The very nature of the social contract, he argued, was **the transfer of power from individuals to a central authority. Without this, there could be no government, no defence of a country, and no safeguard against lawlessness and anarchy.**

Prophets, by contrast, had no power at all. They commanded no armies. They levied no taxes. They spoke God's word, **but had no means of enforcing it**. All they had was influence—but what influence! To this day, Elijah's fight against corruption, Amos' call to social justice, Isaiah's vision of the End of Days are still capable of moving us by the sheer force of their inspiration. Who, today, is swayed by the lives of Ahab or Jehoshaphat or Jehu? When a king dies, his power ends. **When a prophet dies, his influence begins.**

Moses occupied two leadership roles, not one. On the one hand, though monarchy was not yet in existence, he had the power and was the functional equivalent of a king.⁽⁴⁾ He led the Israelites out of Egypt, commanded them in battle, appointed leaders, judges, and elders, and directed the conduct of the people. He had power.

But Moses was also a prophet, the greatest and most authoritative of all. He was supremely a man of vision. He heard and spoke the word of God. As God Himself said of him: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal Myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. Not so My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. With him" I speak face to face, clearly and not in dark speeches" (Num. 12:6-8).

The epitaph the Torah gives him is: "No other prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face-to-face" (Deut. 34:10). The mystery of Moses' double investiture of Joshua is now solved. First, he was told to give Joshua his authority as a prophet. The very phrase used by the Torah—*vesamakhta et yadekha*, "lay your hand" on him—is still used today to describe rabbinic ordination, *semikha*, meaning, the "laying on of hands" **by master to disciple**. Second, he was commanded to give Joshua the power of kingship, which the Torah calls "splendour" (perhaps "majesty" would be a better translation). The nature of this role as head of state and commander of the army is made quite clear in the text. God says to Moses: "Give him some of your splendour so that the whole Israelite community will obey him ... At his command, he and the entire community of the Israelites will go out [to battle], and at his command they will come in" (Num. 27:18-21). **This is the language not of influence but of power.**

The meaning of the midrash, too, is now clear and elegantly precise. The transfer of influence ("Lay your hand on him") is "like lighting one light from another." When we take a candle to light another candle, the light of the first is not diminished. Likewise, when we share our influence with others, we do not have less than before. Instead, the sum total of light is increased. Power, however, is different. It is like "pouring from one vessel to another." The more we pour into the second, the less is left in the first. **Power is a zero-sum game. The more we give away, the less we have.**

This, then, is the solution to the mystery of why, when Joshua feared that Eldad and Medad (who "prophesied within the camp") were threatening Moses' authority, Moses replied, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets." Joshua had confused influence with power. Eldad and Medad neither sought nor gained power. Instead, for a while, they were given a share of the prophetic "spirit" that was on Moses. They participated in his influence. That is never a threat to prophetic authority. To the contrary, the more widely it is shared, the more there is.

Power, however, is precisely what Korah and his followers sought—and in the case of power, rivalry is a threat to authority. "There is one leader for a generation," said the sages, "not two" (Sanhedrin 8a). Or, as they put it elsewhere, "Can two kings share a single crown?" (Hullin [Non-Holy] 60b). There are many forms of government—monarchy, oligarchy,

3 Throughout his life, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed that the only true and correct form of government was the absolute monarchy. He argued this most forcefully in his landmark work, *Leviathan*. This belief stemmed from the central tenet of Hobbes' natural philosophy that human beings are, at their core, selfish creatures.

and democracy—but what they have in common is the concentration of power within a single body, whether person, group, or institution (such as a parliament). **Without this monopoly of the legitimate use of coercive force, there is no such thing as government.** That is why in Jewish law “a king is not allowed to renounce the honour due to him” (Kiddushim [Consecrations] 32b).

Moses’ request that Korah and his followers be swallowed up by the ground was, from this perspective, neither anger nor fear. It was based on the simple realisation that whereas prophecy can be shared, kingship cannot. **If there are two or more competing sources of power within a single domain, there is no leadership.** Had Moses not taken decisive action against Korah, he would have fatally compromised the office with which he had been charged.

4. 1Corinthians 11:17-19

¹⁸In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a (*kahal*), **there are divisions among you**, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.

a. 1Timothy 1:18-20

²⁰Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, **whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.**

1) Hymenaeus thought the resurrection had already come (2Ti 2:17-18; compare 2Th 2:3); Alexander was more likely to have been the metalworker who harmed and opposed Sha’ul (2Ti 4:14-15) than the Ephesian Messianic Jew of Ac 19:33.

Sha’ul has turned them over to the Adversary (that is, Satan), not for punishment alone but so that they will learn not to blaspheme. Satan is seen, then, not as an independent opponent of God but as a servant of God whose harsh methods can serve to train God’s people ... ⁴

b. Titus 3:8-11

¹⁰**Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.** ¹¹You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned.

Rarely do we see more clearly the stark difference between influence and power than in these two episodes: Eldad and Medad on the one hand, Korah and his fellow rebels on the other. **The latter represented a conflict that had to be resolved.** Either Moses or Korah would emerge the victor; they could not both win. The former did not represent a conflict at

all. Knowledge, inspiration, vision—these are things that can be shared without loss. Those who share them with others add to the spiritual wealth of a community without losing anything of their own. Hence the wonderful prophecy of Joel that at the End of Days, “I will pour out My spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28). Moses’ wish that “all the Lord’s people will be prophets”⁽⁵⁾ will be realised.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, the influence we have lives after us; the power is oft interred with our bones. Much of Judaism is an extended essay on the supremacy of prophets over kings, right over might, instruction over coercion, **influence over power.** For only a small fraction of our history have Jews had power, but at all times they have had an influence over the civilisation of the West.

People still contend for power. Perhaps they always will. That is the essence of politics. The Torah does not negate the significance of power. Without it, Jews as a nation would lack sovereignty, and thus the ability to carry out the central program of the Torah, namely the construction of a society on the principles of law, justice, righteousness, and compassion. But if only humanity were to realise how narrow are the limits of power if we genuinely believe in freedom. **It is one thing to force people to behave in a certain way; it is quite another to teach them to see the world differently so that, of their own accord, they act in that way. The use of power diminishes others; the exercise of influence enlarges them.** That is one of Judaism’s most humanising truths. **Not all of us have power, but we are all capable of being an influence for good.**

(1) Y. Rosh HaShana 3:5. See also Rabbi Meir Simha HaKohen of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Chokhma* (“The Prince of Wisdom”) to Deut. 12:13; 29:24.

(2) The *baraita* of R. Ishmael is part of the introduction to Sifra, the halakhic Midrash to the book of Leviticus. It is included in the daily morning prayers. —A *baraita* refers to teachings “outside” of the six orders of the Mishnah.

(3) Numbers Rabba 21:15.

(4) Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Beit HaBechira* (“The Laws of God’s Chosen House”) 6:11 rules that Moses had the halakhic status of a king. The rule that one who rebels against the king forfeits his life is derived from the case of Joshua; see Josh. 1:18, Sanhedrin 49a.

(5) See also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Melakhim* (“The Laws of the Kings”) 12:5.

4 David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Jewish New Testament Publications), p. 636.