

Leib Zalesch

NOT

A Short Vort

Torah Studies for the Inquisitive Mind

Death By a Thousand Cuts:

Retracing the Final Steps of Korach

In the pantheon of difficult questions on the Torah, “How did Korach die?” would not seem to rank very high. Most schoolchildren would probably be able to report that he was swallowed up by the earth (see Bamidbar 16:31-33). Yet a more careful examination, stemming in part from a recounting of the incident by Moshe later in Parshat Ekev, reveals some ambiguity on this score.

The trouble begins when Moshe adds in a detail about the story amidst a seemingly irrelevant backdrop:

ספר דברים פרק יא פסוקים ב-י

פסוק ב - וידעתם היום כי לא את בניכם אשר לא ידעו ואשר לא ראו את מוסר יהוה אלהיכם את גדלו את ידו החזקה וזרעו הנטויה.

פסוק ג - ואת אתותיו ואת מעשיו אשר עשה בתוך מצרים לפרעה מלך מצרים ולכל ארצו ...

פסוק ה - ואשר עשה לכם במדבר עד באכם עד המקום הזה.

פסוק ו - ואשר עשה לדתן ולאבירם בני אליאב בן ראובן אשר פצתה הארץ את פיה.

פסוק ז - ותבלעם ואת בתיהם ואת אהליהם ואת כל היקום אשר ברגליהם בקרב כל ישראל.

פסוק ח - כי עיניכם הראת את כל מעשה יהוה הגדל אשר עשה.

פסוק ט - ושמרתם את כל המצוה אשר אנכי מצוה היום למען תחזקו ובאתם וירשיתם את הארץ אשר אתם עברים שמה לרשתה.

פסוק י - ולמען תאריכו ימים על האדמה ...

(Devarim 11:2) You should know today that it was not your children, who did not know, and who did not see, the chastisement of Hashem, your God, and His greatness, and His strong hand and outstretched arm, (11:3) And His signs and His actions that He did in the midst of Egypt, to Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and to his whole land ...

(11:5) And what He did in the Wilderness before you came to this place—

(11:6) And what He did to Datan and to Aviram, sons of Eliav, son of Reuven, that the ground opened up its mouth,

(11:7) And swallowed them and their families and their tents and everything alive that they had, in front of the entire Jewish nation—

(11:8) But it was with your own eyes that you saw all of the great things that Hashem did.

(11:9) You should guard all of the commands that I command you today in order that you will be strong and come to and inherit the land that you have passed into there to inherit it.

(11:10) And in order that you will have lengthened days on the land ...

Two questions to consider: First, why is the ringleader Korach absent from the account of the ground swallowing up the perpetrators (Pesukim 6-7)? Second, what does the account of Datan and Aviram have to do with the surrounding passage about Egypt and the Land of Israel?

Ramban answers the first question by informing us that Korach's death is not recorded here because he was not in fact swallowed up by the earth at all—he was killed in the fire that consumed his 250 followers (Bamidbar 16:35):

פירוש רמב"ן לספר דברים פרק יא פסוק ו

והזכיר "ואשר עשה לדתן ולאבירם", ולא הזכיר קרח ועדתו, ש"יצאה אש מלפני ה' ותאכל אותם", בעבור כי איש זר הקרב להקטיר קטורת, הוא מלאני התורה (במדבר פרק יז פסוק ה), ולעולם הוא נענש לדורות, כאשר קרה גם לעזיהו (דברי הימים ב פרק כו פסוק יט), על כן לא מנאו באותות המדבר.

It mentions "what was done to Datan and Aviram," and it doesn't mention Korach and his group, about whom "a fire went out from before Hashem and consumed them," because a non-Kohen who comes close to bring incense is the subject of a negative commandment (Bamidbar 17:5), and this would be a longstanding source for punishment, as happened also to Uzi'ahu (Divrei Hayamim II 26:19). Therefore, it is not counted among the wonders in the wilderness.

By presuming that Korach was burned in the same conflagration as

his cohort and was not swallowed by the earth with Datan and Aviram, Ramban is taking a stand on an issue debated in the Talmud, namely in which of the two concurrent punishments—sinkhole or fire—Korach was included.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף קי עמוד א

ואמר רבי יוחנן, קרח לא מן הבלועים ולא מן השרופין. לא מן הבלועין, דכתיב (במדבר פרק טז פסוק לב), "ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח" - ולא קרח. ולא מן השרופים, דכתיב (במדבר פרק כו פסוק י), "באכל האש את חמשים ומאתים איש" - ולא קרח. Rabbi Yochanan said, "Korach was not among those who were swallowed (by the earth) or those who were burned in fire. He is not among those swallowed, as it says (Bamidbar 16:32), "All the men who were *with* Korach" - but not Korach himself. And he was not among those burned, as it says (26:10), "When the fire consumed the 250 men" - but not Korach.

How could Korach, the ringleader of the rebellion, cheat death entirely? Rashi on the Gemara suggests that Korach met his end in the plague later in the Parsha (17:9-15) in which 14,700 people died.

The Gemara continues:

במתניתא תנא, קרח - מן השרופין, ומן הבלועין. מן הבלועים - דכתיב, (במדבר פרק כו, פסוק י), "ותבלע אתם ואת קרח." מן השרופין, דכתיב (במדבר פרק טז פסוק לה), "ואש יצאה מאת ה' ותאכל את חמשים ומאתים איש, וקרח בהדיהו." In a Beraita it is taught, "Korach was among both those who were burned *and* those who were swallowed. Those who were swallowed, as it says (Bamidbar 26:10), "And it swallowed them and Korach." Those who were burned, as it says (16:35), "And a fire went out from before Hashem and consumed the 250 men;" and Korach was among them.

This second half of the Gemara presents what seems to be a solid proof (Bamidbar 26:10, from Parshat Pinchas) that Korach was swallowed. Rashi explains that the earlier opinion would respond by parsing the Pasuk differently, as follows:

ספר במדבר פרק כו פסוק י

ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת קרח בקמות העדה באכל האש את חמשים ומאתים איש ויהיו לגס.

(Bamidbar 26:10) ■ **AS EXPLAINED BY GEMARA OPINION 1:** The

ground opened up its mouth and swallowed them—and Korach was among those who died in the group, when the fire consumed the 250 men, and they became a memorial.

■ **AS EXPLAINED BY GEMARA OPINION 2:** The ground opened up its mouth and swallowed them and Korach as the cohort died, when the fire consumed the 250 men, and they became a memorial. (This translation matches the *trop* [cantillation notes].)

How can the Gemara say that Korach was among the 250 who were burned, if he gathered 250 *other* men at the beginning of the Parsha (16:2)? Commenting on the Gemara, Rashi explains that Bamidbar 16:17—*אִישׁ וְאֶהָרֶן מִהֶחֱתוֹ הִמְשִׁים וּמֵאֲתֵימִם מִהֶחֱתוֹ וְאַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן*, *each man with his firepan, 250 firepans, and you (Korach) and Aharon*—seems to imply that Korach also brought incense and thus would have been included in the punishment of burning.

This idea that Korach was both burned and swallowed up is picked up on by other commentaries, among them Rabbeinu Bachye:

פירוש רבנו בחיי לספר במדבר פרק כו פסוק י

וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת קֹרַח בְּמוֹת הָעֵדָה בְּאֹכַל הָאֵשׁ - הַכְּנִיס הַכְּתוּב קֹרַח בְּאִמְצָעוֹ, בֵּין וְתִבְלַע “בְּאֹכַל הָאֵשׁ,” וּמִכָּאן שֶׁהָיָה קֹרַח נִבְלָע וְנִשְׂרָף.

And swallowed them and Korach as the cohort died when they were consumed by fire - The Pasuk puts Korach in the middle, between “they were swallowed” and “when the fire consumed,” and from here we see that Korach was both swallowed and burned.

If you are wondering how it is possible to be both swallowed by the earth and burned, there are two approaches to that question. The first is in Rashi on the Gemara cited earlier (Sanhedrin 110a):

שְׁנֵי שְׂרָפָה נִשְׁמְתוּ וְגוֹף קָיָם, וְאַחַר כֵּן נִתְגַּלְגַּל עַד מְקוֹם הַבְּלוּעִין, וְנִבְלָע.
His soul was burned but his body remained intact, and then he rolled to the place where the earth was opened, and he was swallowed up.

And there is the approach of the Midrash:

מדרש במדבר רבה פרשה יח סעיף יט

קֹרַח לָקָה יוֹתֵר מִכֻּלָּם, שְׁנֵי שְׂרָפָה וְנִבְלָע. לְהִטּוּ הָאֵשׁ תַּחֲלָה לְעֵין כָּל הַשְּׂרוּפִים, וְקִפְּלָתוֹ הָאֵשׁ כְּכַדּוּר, וּמִגְלָגְלָת בּוֹ עַד שֶׁהִבְאֵתוֹ לְפִי הָאָרֶץ עִם הַבְּלוּעִים.

Korach was punished more than anyone else, because he was burned and swallowed. He was burned on fire first in front of all the burned peo-

ple, and the fire enveloped him like a ball and rolled him until it had brought him to the opening of the earth with the other swallowed up people.

* * *

In order to understand the Gemara's all-or-nothing approach to Korach's demise, we need to understand why there are so many different punishments in Parshat Korach, and what each one was for. Let's take a more granular look at the interwoven storyline of the Parsha.

FRAME NARRATIVE

- 16:1-4 Korach, Datan, Aviram, Ohn, and 250 others complain that Moshe and Aharon have too much power
 16:5-7 Moshe proposes **firepan/incense test** for next day
 16:8-11 Moshe tries to persuade Korach he is being pretentious

EMBEDDED NARRATIVE

- 16:12-15 Moshe tries to speak with Datan and Aviram, who respond intransigently; Moshe responds in kind

RETURN TO FRAME NARRATIVE

- 16:16-17 Moshe repeats the **firepan/incense test** for next day for the 250, Korach, and Aharon
 16:18-19 **Firepan test** begins with Korach, 250, Moshe and Aharon

RETURN TO EMBEDDED NARRATIVE

- 16:20-22 Hashem proposes **instant death** for all; Moshe and Aharon intercede, implying only Korach should die
 16:23-27 Hashem warns 250 to separate from **Korach**, Datan, and Aviram; Moshe tells the 250 to separate from Datan and Aviram; they separate from **Korach**, Datan, and Aviram; Datan and Aviram leave their tents
 16:28-30 Moshe proposes **sinkhole challenge**
 16:31-34 **Earth opens up and swallows** "them" (Datan and Aviram and their families and wealth)

END EMBEDDED NARRATIVE

RETURN TO FRAME NARRATIVE

- 16:35 **Fire** burns the 250 doing the **firepan/incense test**
END FRAME NARRATIVE

At the time that the earth opened up (16:34) in front of Datan and

Aviram's tent (16:27), Korach was in the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting) (see 16:19). Why would Hashem tell Moshe to warn the group of 250 men to separate from the tents of *Korach*, Datan, and Aviram (16:23) if Korach was not in his tent at that point? And why, given that command, does Moshe only go to Datan and Aviram (16:25)? Korach's tent reappears in 16:27, where it seems that he shares a domicile with Datan and Aviram. This is strange because the latter two brothers were from the tribe of Reuven, not Levi. Why did Korach live with Datan and Aviram?

A careful look at the wording of 16:23-27 reveals that whenever the three perpetrators—Korach, Datan, and Aviram—are couched together, they are referred to as being in a *מִשְׁכָּן*, literally a Tabernacle. Whenever Datan and Aviram are referred to as a unit, they live in an *אֹהֶל*, a simple tent. This is the first step in understanding the difference between the argument of Korach and that of the two brothers. Korach was waging a religious fight, creating a new religious order, a cult, based around himself on the fabrication that the existing leadership was in it for themselves. Datan and Aviram, on the other hand, were invested in promoting themselves simply for gratuitous gain. Korach's Mishkan is not a place that anyone lives but a new site of religious worship.

We don't know a lot about Datan and Aviram, but their being from the tribe of Reuven is telling. Did these two involve themselves in his conflict in the first place because, being from the tribe of Ya'akov's eldest son, they were convinced of their rightful place as leaders of the Jewish people and so served an object lesson by Korach as to the unfairness and randomness of the aristocracy? Perhaps this explains their diatribe (16:13-14) about the failure of leadership which had purportedly resulted in the Jews' leaving the pristine land of Egypt en route to the moribund land of Israel, as if to say that leadership by their tribe of Reuven would have had better results.

This read computes with several Midrashic accounts of the brothers' earlier activities. One Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 5:20) pegs them as the ones who met Moshe and Aharon at the end of Parshat Shemot (5:20) to com-

plain that their leadership had failed the Jewish people and, according to that Midrash, went on to rail against them to Pharaoh. A famous Rashi (to Shemot 2:13) identifies these two as the ones who reported Moshe to the authorities after he killed the Egyptian. A chilling Midrash (Shocheh Tov Tehillim 106:5) reports that during the spies story when the Jews declared (Bamidbar 14:4) *נְתַנָּה רֹאשׁ וְנִשְׁבְּרָה מִצְרַיִם*, *we will appoint a head and return to Egypt*, they voted Datan in place of Moshe and Aviram in place of Aharon.

Korach's status as the ringleader may be a smokescreen. It is Datan and Aviram who had been angling to bring down Moshe and Aharon for much longer than Korach had been on the scene, and they had much to gain if their tribe of Reuven had earned back its rightful place after it had been taken from them by Ya'akov (see Bereishit 49:3-4). Levi, too, had been chastised by Ya'akov, yet here were Moshe and Aharon assuming roles of leadership right in Datan and Aviram's faces. (For a possible reason why the tribe of Levi earned back its tribal privileges, see our essay on Parshat Vayechi earlier in this volume.) Unlike Korach, who even according to Rashi only ever wanted to be the leader of Kehat, Datan and Aviram wanted it all.

Politics makes strange bedfellows. Let's look at the two Pesukim which seem to say that Korach, Datan, and Aviram live together:

ספר במדבר פרק טז פסוקים כד. כז

פסוק כד - דָּבַר אֶל הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר הֲעֵלוּ מִסְבִּיב לְמִשְׁכַּן קַרְחַ דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם.

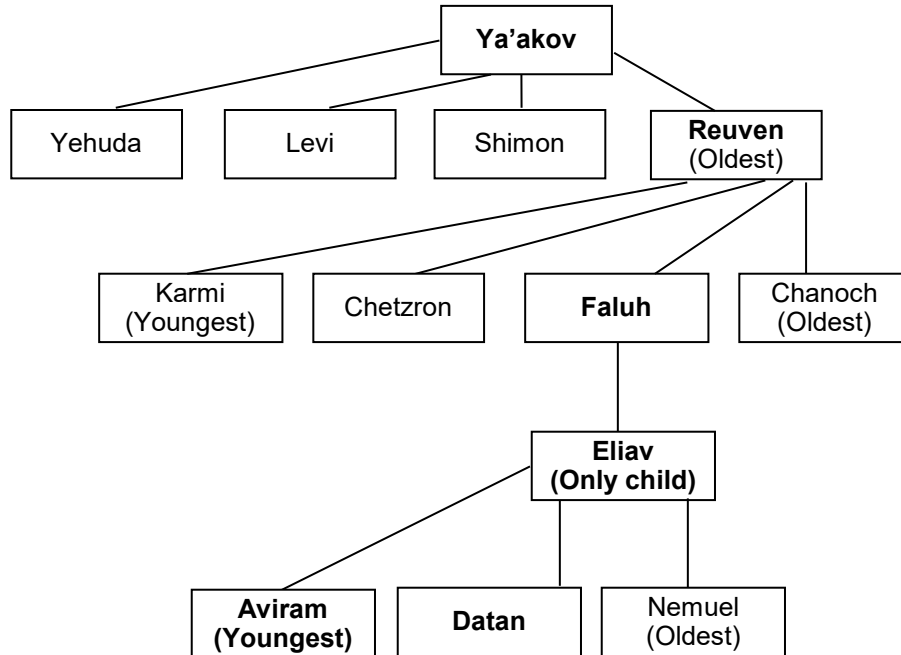
פסוק כז - וַיַּעֲלוּ מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן קַרְחַ דָּתָן וְאַבִּירָם מִסְבִּיב וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם יֵצְאוּ ...

(Bamidbar 27:24) ■ **USUAL TRANSLATION:** Speak to the whole group, saying, “Go up from around the dwelling place of Korach, Datan, Aviram.”

■ **ALTERNATE TRANSLATION:** Speak to the whole group, saying, “Datan and Aviram should go up from around the Tabernacle of Korach.”

(Bamidbar 27:27) ■ **USUAL TRANSLATION:** So they went up from up-on the dwelling place of Korach, Datan, and Aviram, all around, and Datan and Aviram went out ...

■ **ALTERNATE TRANSLATION:** So they went up from being at the Tabernacle of Korach—Datan and Aviram did—from around it, and Datan and Aviram went out ...



These alternate translations (which are supported by the cantillation notes) solve many problems—that Korach was not actually at his Mishkan (Tabernacle) but at the Jews' Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting) at the time; that the three, not all being related and being from two different tribes, would be unlikely to share a dwelling place; and that the brothers' dwelling place is properly called an *obel* (tent) in 16:26 and :27, while Korach's is consistently called a Mishkan. As we have seen, Korach's theological issues with Moshe and Aharon have driven him to create his own new quasi-religion, complete with its own Mishkan. Datan and Aviram have hitched their wagon to Korach's star, as we see them emerge to public shame from Korach's Mishkan. The public pronouncement that Datan and Aviram are to emerge from Korach's Mishkan is the equivalent of federal agents using bullhorns to order those in David Koresh's Waco cult to emerge from their homes. It is the moment of a religious movement crashing down in spectacular and public fashion.

Returning to the Parsha outline several pages ago, we see that the story of Datan and Aviram, from their disrespect to their demise, is set off

from the rest of the story in the Parsha. (This story-within-a-story technique is called an Embedded Narrative.) There is no ambiguity as to the gruesome death of Datan and Aviram, and why only they—and not Korach—are listed in Devarim 11:6 (Parshat Ekev) and Tehillim 106:16-17 as having been swallowed up by the earth. They are the true rebels, the ones who have long coveted the most honorable positions, who bided their time before riding on Korach's coattails to grab the highest positions for themselves. (As the diagram on the previous page shows, Datan and Aviram's pure personal ambition can be seen from the fact that, while they were indeed from Reuven, they did not remotely have the right to claim a chosen status within the tribe.) In Bamidbar 26:9, so soon after the full report in Parshat Korach, the account of their deaths is repeated during a genealogical survey—because their genealogy is intrinsically connected to their complaint and rebellion. Likewise, when their deaths are described in Devarim 11:6, they are referred to as *בְּנֵי אֵלִיָּאב, בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן*, *sons of Eliav, sons of Reuven*, because that pedigree was central to what caused them to rebel in the first place. And in Tehillim 106:15, their deaths are specifically tied to the jealousy that they had for Moshe and Aharon—*וַיִּקְנְאוּ לְמֹשֶׁה בַּמַּחֲנֶה, לְאַהֲרֹן קְדוֹשׁ ה'*, *they were jealous of Moshe in the camp, of Aharon, the holy one of Hashem*—because unlike Korach, who sought only to become the head of Kehat, the brothers sought to usurp the crown of the tribe of Levi for the tribe of Levi's eldest brother, Reuven, and thus claim the greatest positions for themselves.

While Korach's complaint had at least an imprimatur of religious conviction (see end of Rashi to 16:1 *וּדְתַן וְאֲבִירָם*) and resulted in his creating a new Mishkan around his fanatical religious ideas, Datan and Aviram were nakedly ambitious in their attempt to take down Moshe and Aharon and assume their positions. Rashi (see Bamidbar 16:1 *וַיִּקַּח קָרַח #2*) has his own reason for the Torah not telling us what it was that Korach “took” at the beginning of Parshat Korach, but it is worth noting that, even according to a simple read of the text, Korach didn't “take” Datan and Aviram. He didn't need to. Once they saw Korach beginning to argue, they were out of their

seats like a jackrabbit in pursuit of their long-cherished goal of assuming the thrones of Moshe and Aharon. The source of Korach's demise is not made clear in Parshiot Korach or Pinchas, and it is left entirely out of Parshat Ekev and Tehillim, because Datan and Aviram are a more fitting avatar for the kind of overtly gratuitous, opportunistic power-grab of which the Jews must be reminded that they need to avoid. Korach, while flawed, at least outwardly sought to promote the holiness of the average Jew (see 16:3), as manifested in his pluralistic Mishkan. Datan and Aviram were in it entirely for themselves.

The story of Datan and Aviram, from their disrespect to their demise, represents not the religious frustration of Korach but the brothers' personal zeal, and it was ended with their being swallowed by the earth—**כִּי עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל עָפָר תָּשׁוּב**, *for you are dust, and to dust you will return* (Bereishit 3:19). The larger religious rebellion of the Parsha was met with a fitting religious end, at the Tent of Meeting with firepans of incense in their hands. At issue in the Gemara that we saw earlier is whether Korach's own rebellion and punishment represented a mixture of both or something else entirely, and what it was that made his rebellion the source of evil that it became. Yet it is the shallow-minded and greedy followers Datan and Aviram, not Korach, who remain wedded to the ultimate punishment for all time.