

# Crises of Leadership

*Are we more worried about our own egos than about the Jewish people as a whole?*

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Commentary on *Parashat Korach*, [Numbers 16:1 - 18:32](#)

This portion features the well-known assault by Korach and others on Moses' leadership. Most will argue that Korach attempted to arrogate himself into a position of power. Following this line of logic, Korach's posture was deemed unacceptable, because Moses' leadership emanated from Divine selection. Thus, Korach's challenge to Moses' authority was interpreted as a direct affront to God.

Some rabbinic authorities argue that this incident was the most dangerous moment during the entire journey through the desert, even more vicious and damaging than the attacks of Amalek. Korach's uprising, of course, had to be crushed if God's rule was to be acknowledged and maintained. After all, this is the thread that holds the entire Torah together.

But should we assume that all challenges to authority are similarly invalid and must be met with the same reaction? How do we know when such challenges are "righteous" — to borrow an appropriate term from the vernacular — and should be encouraged and sustained? By probing the failed leadership plan of Korach, perhaps we can gain some insight for our own lives to help us navigate through the challenges that we must deal with every day.

## **Korach's Critical Flaw**

Korach was a man of the people. He emerged from the masses and thus seemed to speak for the common person. That was the foundation of his leadership. By portraying himself as a representative of the people, Korach was able to gather the support of others among the community.

But Korach was anything but a representative of the people who advocated for the concerns of the entire community. What seems to be Korach's critical flaw was that he more interested in self-aggrandizement than ensuring a safe and profitable future for the ancient Israelites—and by extension the future of the Jewish people. Furthermore, he did not have an intimate relationship with the Divine. Because of both shortcomings, he failed.

Like all leaders, Moses was clearly imperfect. His character flaws were many, but he was able to overcome them in order to lead the people. As with Korach, when Moses allowed self-interest to guide him, he failed. Moses only became a successful leader when he learned to place the needs of the people ahead of his own.

Some say that we are in the midst of a crisis of leadership in the North American Jewish community. Affiliation and engagement rates are historically low. Inter-marriage rates are unprecedented. We could even say, as did our forebears, that we are at the most critical time in

our journeys, as well. Just as the ancient passage of the Israelites was a journey of freedom through the desert, this too is a journey of freedom.

We need to learn from the examples of Korach and Moses and ask ourselves, “Are we more worried about our own egos than about the Jewish people as a whole?” No one would admit to such egocentrism, but when we are bound perhaps inseparably to our programs and institutions, and then project such worry onto the integrity of Judaism, it is difficult to discern the difference. And that is what leads us to Korach-like failed leadership.

But when we are able to transcend the self, which is only possible through a connection with the Divine, then we are able to help guide us on a positive future course for the Jewish people, one that sees everyone as a vital part of it.

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