

PARSHAT KORACH

26 Sivan - 2 Tammuz 5785
22 - 28 June 2025

Torah: Numbers 16:1-18:32
Haftorah: Samuel I 11:14-12:22

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Negative Mitzvah 216 Planting Vegetables or Grain in a Vineyard

It is forbidden to plant vegetables or grain in a vineyard.

This biblical prohibition pertains only to the Land of Israel. The Sages, however, extended it to also include fields in the Diaspora.

Positive Mitzvah 93 The Procedure for the Conclusion of a Nazirite Term

When a nazirite concludes his term, he must follow the procedure outlined in the Torah.

HANGING BY A THREAD

Just over a year after leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah, the Jews witnessed the first rebellion in their ranks as an uprising of two hundred and fifty men and their leader, Korach, challenged the true authority of Moses.

In the Torah portion that bears his name, Korach, and which speaks of the revolt and its resolution, we learn of Korach's bid for power, his plot to depose Moses' brother Aaron from the high priesthood and to usurp this office for himself.

The Midrash, however, describes the initial confrontation between Moses and the rebels as centering on quite a different issue. Moses had just finished teaching the mitzvah of Tzitzit (fringes), as stated in the verse: *"Speak to the children of Israel and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments . . . and they shall place on the fringes of each corner a thread of blue."*

Immediately, Korach ordered that two hundred and fifty cloaks be made entirely of blue, and that no fringes be placed on them. His supporters then dressed themselves in these odd garments and paraded before Moses. "You have taught us," Korach said to Moses, "that G-d told you, 'They shall place upon the fringes of each corner a thread of blue.' I ask you, what of a garment that is entirely blue? Does it, too, require fringes?"

Moses answered in the affirmative, that the law remains the same, and such a garment would indeed be obligated to bear fringes. Korach and his men then laughed at Moses and mused, "A garment that is made entirely of blue does not fulfill the mitzvah - and four small strings do? These things you teach us, they were not commanded to you, but you make them up yourself!"

In the biblical account, the main thrust of Korach's opposition was political - his claim for the high priesthood, as mentioned. Yet, as the Midrash makes clear, the rebellion itself was launched upon Korach's stance regarding one peculiar case in the laws of fringes.

This seems odd, for Korach was present with all of the Jews at Sinai when the Torah was given to Moses, and saw for himself how Moses received the Torah from G-d. Furthermore, Korach had studied this same Torah, and was a scholar in his own right, as evidenced by his ability to attract to his following two hundred and fifty supporters, all of whom were heads of rabbinical courts. And yet, despite all he had seen and studied, Korach came to denounce Moses and the Divinity of the commandments, all because of a seemingly academic question as to whether a garment entirely of blue wool is obligated to have fringes.

Making Sense of G-d's Mitzvot

Let us examine Korach's precise argument as presented in the Midrash. We do not find that Korach disputed the basic commandment of fringes. Nor did he reject the concept of a Divine code of law in general. To the contrary, as apparent from his very argument, he most certainly did believe that G-d had ordained specific laws, including even the ritual of fringes in some form. Korach's contention was only that Moses did not faithfully transmit the actual law, but that he instead invented his own rulings as he saw fit.

The invalidity of these teachings, Korach argued, could be observed by the failure of Moses' rulings to conform to logic. The law, as presented by Moses, did not seem consistent. A regular garment with a single thread of blue on each corner fulfills a precept, while a garment made entirely of this same blue does not? This case, asserted Korach, was but a chief example of how Moses had distorted the entire Torah, extemporaneously or even calculatingly adding his own contrivances to all of the commandments until the body of his teachings became wholly inauthentic. Of course, Korach's argument was underlain by one major premise - that the commandments actually are based on logic. Moses, however, answered in truth, for the commandments do not adhere strictly to reason, but transcend intellect, as they are rooted

in G-d's very will. Thus, it was Korach's refusal to allow for the ultimate supra-rationality of the law that led him to vie with Moses and deny his teachings.

A Model for Faith

Elsewhere, the Midrash relates a discussion which took place between G-d and Moses just prior to the issuing of the commandment of fringes. Moses asked G-d, "What good is it that You have given the Jews so many commandments, when they are here in this physical and coarse world and are liable to forget the idea of Torah altogether?" G-d answered, "I will give them the mitzvah of fringes, and they will remember all of the commandments, for the word Tzitzit is numerically equivalent to six hundred, and with its five knots and eight strings, this is six hundred and thirteen. Thereby they will be reminded of all of the commandments, as it is written, 'They will see [their fringes] and remember G-d's commandments.'"

Thus, according to the Midrash, the function of the fringes is specifically to represent the six hundred and thirteen commandments. This exegetical explanation, however, is seemingly difficult to reconcile with the actual ritual as set forth in the Torah. According to Torah law, we are commanded to make fringes expressly for the corners of our garments. The fringes alone - the strings by themselves - have no ritual function or value unless attached to a garment. Yet if, as the Midrash seems to say, the purpose of the fringes is merely to remind us of the commandments, then ostensibly we should be able to make just the fringes without the need for any garment. We could just hold or look at the fringes alone and be reminded of the commandments that way.

In truth, however, the Midrash and its allusions are exact. Precisely for the reason that Tzitzit are meant to represent and remind us of all other commandments, they can serve this purpose only when attached to a garment. As we discussed regarding Korach, his failure was in recognizing that the root and source

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of the commandments exceeds the bounds of understanding. This principle itself is reflected in the mitzvah of Tzitzit.

The function of a garment is to surround a person, remaining external to him. Unlike other necessities, like food and water, that offer sustenance only when taken inside of the person, a garment acts, in Chassidic terminology, as a Makkif - that which encompasses and is aloof. Thus, just as the fringes symbolize the commandments, the garment to which the fringes must be attached symbolizes the transcendent source of the commandments, the Divine will, which surpasses logic and cannot be intellectually internalized or grasped. Thus, while there is indeed an intellectual dimension to the commandments which can be appreciated through analysis and study, ultimately the commandments, inasmuch as they are a pure expression of Divine will, supersede all intellect - even G-dly intellect, as it were.

Intellectual Agenda

This precisely was Korach's undoing. His acceptance of the commandments was as a rational endeavor. Thus, as soon as Torah failed to conform to his understanding, he rejected its Divinity and seized the opportunity to advance his own corrupt agenda. Indeed, this push for self-advancement was but an

expression of the more profound issue of Korach's rationalist thinking.

Our sages have stated, "Which is a dispute that was waged for the sake of Heaven? That of Hillel and Shammai. Which is a dispute that was not waged for the sake of Heaven? That of Korach and his followers." Hillel and Shammai, though constantly at odds with one another in Torah law, were not bound to intellect alone. For this reason, we find cases where both Hillel and Shammai depart from their typical line of thinking and espouse views that are uncharacteristic of their standard rulings. Thus, their disputes, too, were free from intellectual bias and prejudice. Where they disagreed, it was strictly for altruistic motives, to arrive at the proper ruling rather than to further their own agenda.

Korach, however, who followed intellect alone, entered into debate with his own objectives in mind. Whether it is the biblical account of his attempted political coup, or the Midrashic telling of his apostasy over a peculiarity in the laws of fringes, it is but one Korach, the scholar, the thinker and leader desperately confined to calculations and a prisoner to his own point of view.

By Rabbi Shais Taub

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KORACH IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Korach," refers to Korach, head of the rebellion against Moses and Aaron, and is found in Numbers 16:1.

Korach incites a mutiny challenging Moses' leadership and the granting of the Kehunah (priesthood) to Aaron. He is accompanied by Moses' inveterate foes, Dathan and Abiram. Joining them are 250 distinguished members of the community, who offer the sacrosanct Ketoret (incense) to prove their worthiness for the priesthood. The earth opens up and swallows the mutineers, and a fire consumes the Ketoret-offerers.

A subsequent plague is stopped by Aaron's offering of Ketoret. Aaron's staff miraculously blossoms and brings forth almonds, to prove that his designation as high priest is divinely ordained.

G-d commands that a Terumah ("uplifting") from each crop of grain, wine and oil, as well as all firstborn sheep and cattle, and other specified gifts, be given to the Kohanim (priests).

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 26 Sivan 5785 - 22 June 2025

Jews of Olyka Saved from Cossack Mob (1649)

During the Chmielnitzki Massacres, a Cossack mob gathered around the fortified town of Olyka. Among the Jews who had found refuge inside was Rabbi David Halevi (the Taz), a refugee from the nearby city of Ostroh. As the Cossacks prepared to breach the walls, the Jews gathered in prayer in the synagogue. Weak and tired, Rabbi David drifted off to an uneasy sleep, and in his dream he envisioned the verse, "I will protect this city to save it, for My sake and for the sake of My servant David" (II Kings 19:34). Indeed, the old cannons atop the walls miraculously fired spontaneously toward the enemy, who proceeded to flee.

Monday, 27 Sivan 5785 - 23 June 2025

Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon Killed (2nd century CE)

Rabbi Chananya ben Tradyon, one of the "Ten Martyrs" was killed on this date. When the Romans discovered him teaching the outlawed Torah they wrapped him in a Torah scroll, piled bundles of twigs around him, and before setting him afire they placed damp woolen cloths on him to prolong the agony of being burned to death.

As the flames engulfed him, his disciples asked him, "Master, what do you see?" Rabbi Chananya replied: "I see a scroll burning, but the letters flying up to Heaven."

Tuesday, 28 Sivan 5785 - 24 June 2025

Rebbe Arrives in US (1941)

After escaping Nazi-occupied Paris, and many perilous months in Vichy France, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (5662-5754, or 1902-1994), and his wife,

Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka (5661-5748, or 1901-1988), boarded the SS Serpa Pinto in Lisbon, Portugal. On Monday, 28 Sivan 5701 (1941), at 10:30 AM, they arrived in New York.

Shortly after his arrival, the Rebbe's father-in-law, the then Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (who had been rescued from Nazi-occupied Warsaw in 5700, or 1940), appointed him to head the social and educational outreach programs of Chabad-Lubavitch. Thus the Rebbe began his decades-long revolutionary work to revitalize Jewish life, which spread, by means of the emissaries ("Shluchim") he dispatched from his New York headquarters, to every part of the world.

Friday, 1 Tammuz 5785 - 27 June 2025

Birth and Passing of Joseph (1562 and 1452 BCE)

Joseph, the son of the patriarch Jacob, was born in Charan (Mesopotamia) on the 1st of Tammuz of the year 2199 (1562 BCE), the first child of Jacob's most beloved wife, Rachel, born after 7 childless years of marriage. He passed away on the same date 110 years later, in Egypt.

When Joseph was six years old, Jacob and his family returned to the Holy Land, eventually settling in Hebron. Though younger than 10 of his 11 brothers, he was his father's favorite, and a great rivalry existed between him and his brothers, whose animosity toward him increased when he related two dreams he had forecasting that he is destined to rule over them.

When Joseph was 17, he was sold into slavery by his brothers and taken to Egypt; when he refused the advances of his master's wife, she had him

placed in prison, where he languished for 12 years. At age 30, he interpreted a pair of mysterious dreams dreamt by Pharaoh and was appointed viceroy of Egypt to oversee the gathering and storage of grain in preparation for the seven years of famine that Pharaoh's dreams had predicted. He married Asnat, and had two children, Menasseh and Ephraim.

The great famine brought his brothers to Egypt to purchase grain; after subjecting them to a series of trials to test their loyalty to each other and their remorse over what they had done to him, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, was reconciled with them, and settled his father and entire family - 70 souls in all - in Egypt.

Joseph passed away in Egypt on his 110th birthday. The first of his brothers to die, he transmitted to them the divine promise to Jacob that his children will be taken out of Egypt and restored to their homeland, and made them promise to take his remains with them when they go.

Seville Jews Massacred (1391)

On 1 Tammuz 5151 (1391), a mob incited by the fanatical priest Ferrand Martinez killed 4000 Jews in Seville, a city in the Spanish kingdom of Castille. The violence soon spread throughout Castille and the neighboring regions, resulting in the murder or forced conversion of tens of thousands of Jews.

Among the great scholars who fled this wave of persecution were Rabbi Yitzchak ben Sheshet (the Rivash) and Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach (the Rashbatz), who both settled in Algiers.