



SERMON KORACH:¹
MOSES AND KORACH PLAY THE DOZENS

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 16 June 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 If there were any Inuit wandering in the wilderness with the Israelites, the whole story might have turned out very differently – for the better.
- 2 Today's Torah reading was only seven verses long, but there's a very particular phrase that appears twice. רב־לכם. It first appears as a threat that Korach's band of rebels spits at Moses and Aaron, and it could mean anything from 'too much is yours' to 'you've gone too far' to 'you're taking rather a lot onto yourself aren't you, old chap'. Then it reappears four verses later, where Moses retorts: רב־לכם. 'Too much is mine? Na-ah! רב־לכם! Too much is yours! This encampment ain't big enough for the both of us!'
- 3 Although Korach's rebellion is presented as a great uprising against God's chosen leaders, the supreme Biblical act of avarice and arrogance and evil, it's actually pretty tame, at least at first. Certainly, Korach chooses his tactics carefully. By saying, "This whole community is holy, every one of them: explain to them why you think you're better than they are!", he positions himself as the ultimate man-of-the-people. 'We're a holy, sovereign nation,' is basically the line he goes for; 'It's time to take back control.' We've all heard that before, and it's not so interesting.
- 4 Is that it for the rebellion? The rebels hurling a few insults and Moses (rather childishly) hurling them back?



- 5 Not quite. Because after bandying insults with Korach, after his ‘yo momma so fat’ act, Moses rather raises the stakes by calling for a showdown at high noon. ‘Let’s you and me come back to this spot tomorrow,’ he challenges, ‘and only one of us will walk away.’
- 6 And only one of them did.
- 7 That’s where it all went wrong.
- 8 We all have disputes in life – we all find people we don’t get along with, we all get into arguments – and most of the time we manage to resolve them without having God swallow up our opponent into the earth.
- 9 In fact, even though I’m deriding the רב-לכם stand-off as childish, that sort of verbal challenge can be a valuable way of letting off steam and pouring out one’s aggression without resort to violence.
- 10 It’s what the Inuit do. Living in a tiny community in a harsh, unkind environment – this would sound familiar to the Israelites – they just can’t afford friction between members of their clan. And so, when an argument arises (often over adultery) they would organise a song duel. The two warring tribesmen would gather in a central area and, egged on by their fellow citizens, take it in turn to sing increasingly rude songs about each other. The community would decide whose song was most cutting, but not who was in the right in the original dispute, which would essentially be forgotten in the excitement of the moment.
- 11 Hanne Petersen, a scholar in the field of ‘unofficial law’, says:² “Song duels served the combined functions of the communication of tension, the prevention of open conflict, and entertainment. There was no impartial judge, but rather the audience served as ‘judge’. Song duels have ritual,



psychotherapeutic and cathartic benefits. Their purpose seems to have been not so much to declare guilt as to reintegrate conflicting community members into the community.”

- 12 The Israelites could badly have done with some Inuit in their midst. The situation was one crying out for healing rather than discipline.
- 13 Every synagogue has members who, from time to time, are upset about something that’s happened or that they perceive to have happened; sometimes we might say that their gripe is reasonable, sometimes we might say that it isn’t. But we don’t escalate such situations into a standoff; we don’t throw them out of the community (or into the bowels of the earth). We heal, reintegrate and move on.
- 14 Korach is a bit of a pantomime villain in rabbinic literature. In the Talmud, a rabbi tells the story of coming across the crevasse into which Korach and his merry men fell, where he put his ear to the sand and heard, “Moses is true and the Torah is true and I’m a liar!”³ – the rebels still underground, thousands of years later, lamenting about how wrong they were.
- 15 So I’m probably not supposed to break with tradition by saying this, but I feel a bit sorry for Korach. He escaped from slavery, he put up with all the hardships of the desert, and, yes, he was a troublemaker who tried to interfere in God’s plans, but he was in a very fraught situation and he had a good spirit. He should have been reintegrated. He, and his associates, were too valuable for the Israelites to lose.
- 16 The ‘רב-לכם battle’ wasn’t so bad. Judaism repeatedly stresses to us that words are important and powerful and can hurt people; but we also know



that a rift can harm a community, and the Israelites were just as damaged by their rift as Korach was, personally, injured by his drop into the crevasse.

- 17 Words are important and powerful and can hurt people, but bottling up one's anger and feelings can hurt people as well. Maybe Moses was taking too much upon himself; maybe Korach was taking too much upon himself too. And maybe a good old-fashioned shouting match would have let them throw it all off and start again.
- 18 Words are important and powerful and can hurt people. But sometimes that hurt is a price worth paying to avert something worse.

Check against delivery.

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¹ Numbers 16:1-7

² Hanne Peterson. 'On law and music: from song duels to rhythmic legal orders?', 41 *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 75 (1998)

³ bBava Batra 74a