

A Shema fit for Korach

A: introduction, and Korach's manifesto

Korach - or at least the Korach of the rabbinic imagination - would not have liked the Shema.

Korach has a special relationship with the Shema. The third paragraph of the Shema - the commandment to wear tzitzit - ends with the final verse of Parashat Sh'lach L'cha,¹ and if we continued reading the Torah from there, it is immediately followed by the first verse of Parashat Korach.²

In recognition of this proximity,³ many midrashic texts portray Korach's rebellion as being predicated on or connected to the issue of tzitzit. For example, Midrash Tanchuma says:⁴

"And Korach betook himself" (Numbers 16:1).

What is written immediately above this thing? "Speak to the Israelites, and you shall say to them that they should make them a fringe..." (Numbers 15:38).

Korach leapt up and said to Moses [...] "A tallit that is techelet all over: how about that? Has it fulfilled the laws of tzitzit?"

Moses answered, "It is still subject to the laws of tzitzit."

Korach said, "When a tallit is techelet all over that does not suffice to fulfil the law, yet four threads can fulfil it?!" He went on, "A house full of holy books: has it fulfilled the laws of mezuzah?"

Moses said to Korach, "It is still subject to the laws of mezuzah."

Korach responded, "The whole Torah – all 275 sections⁵ – are in the house, and they do not fulfil the law, yet two excerpts in a mezuzah do fulfil it, on behalf of the house?!" He went on,

¹ Numbers 15:41

² Numbers 16:1

³ W Gunther Plaut. "Some unanswered questions about Korach", *CCAR Journal: the Reform Jewish Quarterly* 16 (1969), 74-78: 74.

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 2 (my translation). Similar or parallel texts, linking Korach's rebellion with disquiet over the laws of tzitzit, can be found in, for instance, bSanhedrin 110b; ySanhedrin 10:1, 27d; Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Korach 4; Numbers Rabbah 18:3; and Yalkut Shimoni, Korach, 750.

⁵ mSoferim 16:10 refers to 175 passages of Torah that depict God speaking. It is unclear where this reference to 275 sections comes from.

“You were not commanded regarding these things. You are forming them from your own desires!”

This aggadah gives Korach’s entire rebellion a distinctive Shema flavour. He questions not only the laws of tzitzit (from the third paragraph of the Shema) but also the laws of mezuzah (from the first, also reprised in the second).

Writing in the 14th century, the commentator Rabbeinu Bachya⁶ linked these specific complaints with Korach’s wider agenda regarding individual holiness. Just as Korach believed that the entire Israelite community was sufficiently holy as was, without the adornment of a priesthood or Mosaic prophecy (“For all the community, together, are holy, and the Eternal is among them - why would you raise yourselves above the community of God?”),⁷ so too would a tallit in the prescribed shade be sufficiently holy as was, without the adornment of a tzitzit. Likewise a house full of holy books would, in his view, be in no need of the formalistic embellishment of a mezuzah.

Since he did not accept the Divine origins of these (purported) commandments, he would plainly have been uncomfortable with a Shema built around them. And while the rabbinic tradition may seem implacably opposed to his platform, one must bear in mind that it is nonetheless the rabbis who created much of it, albeit placing critiques in his mouth rather than in their own. As Rubenstein has said, “One of the most interesting aspects of the Korach story is that as one reads the aggadic accounts, one is never quite sure who the real villain is.”⁸

In the spirit of accepting Korach as, potentially, non-villainous, this essay sets itself the task of assessing the Shema through his eyes. It ultimately proposes alternative biblical passages to comprise the second and third paragraphs, and concludes that these may be suitable not only for Korach himself but also for the piece of Korach that resides in all of us.

B: Korach’s critique of the Shema

The disputation in Midrash Tanchuma shows that Korach objects to various themes which appear in the Shema. The biblical story suggests that he might be uncomfortable with others.

Beginning with paragraph one, the most problematic element will, of course, be the institution of mezuzot. However, of course the word *מזוזה* refers not only to the object now known as a mezuzah - the box containing the Shema - but also to the doorpost itself. It is this latter meaning that is plainly used in Deuteronomy 6:9. Given Korach’s fondness for having a house full of holy books, he could well have

⁶ Rabbeinu Bachya on Numbers 16:1

⁷ Numbers 16:3

⁸ Richard L Rubenstein. “God’s omnipotence in Rabbinic Judaism”, *Judaism* 9(2) (1960), 120-128: 122. See also 121-123 more generally.

understood the phrase וכתבתם על־מזוזות ביתך as meaning, “You shall write them within⁹ the doorposts of your house,” - in other words, every Israelite house should have within it a copy of God’s word, the Torah. They should all be houses full of holy books.

The second paragraph is the paragraph least implicated in the Midrash Tanchuma disputation, but one nevertheless has the sense that Korach would have objected to it. The description in Deuteronomy 11:13-21 of the land turning against Israel and wreaking destruction may have been a little too close to home for him, given his ultimate fate of being swallowed up by the ground.

It is the third paragraph, however, with which Korach had his ultimate grievance. As Judith Plaskow observed,¹⁰ the descent from high covenant to fashion choices marks a significant change of tone and emphasis (“from the sublime to the ridiculous”), and Korach attacked the law of tzitzit in particular as serving, allegorically at any rate, to bolster the superiority over the Israelites of a priestly caste whose very foundation he did not accept.

It is worth spending a moment here to consider the significance of tzitzit. Milgrom suggests that this custom was, in fact, innovated in order to address concerns similar to those of Korach (rather than to inflame them). He argues, “The significance of the tassel [...] is this: it was worn by those who counted; it was the ID of nobility [...] The requirement of the blue thread - royal blue - is a sign that Israel is a people of nobility, whose sovereign is not mortal, but divine. But more than this: Israel is a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). Every Israelite wears his priestly clothing, the tzitzit. The tassels are a reminder of this holiness.”¹¹

Milgrom, then, says that the universality of tzitzit dyed with rare and valuable techelet was intended to be a tool of egalitarianism. It would level the Israelite playing field and induct each person into their status as member of a holy nation. What’s not for Korach to like? I think it must come down to his attack on the commandment as arbitrary and lacking rational foundation: if a tiny strand of techelet can make something holy, why would a large splash of techelet not?

Perhaps Korach objected to the forced specificity. If everyone is dressing like a noble because Moses commanded them to, in exercise of authority he had unjustly arrogated to himself, then that is not a marker of the Israelite nation operating with true parity. It is a marker of the Israelite nation play-acting at true parity at the direction of a self-appointed leader.

⁹ This is a meaning that can comfortably be borne by על. David J A Clines (ed). *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press), vol 6: 387, 389.

¹⁰ Lawrence A Hoffman (ed). *My People’s Prayerbook* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997), vol 1 - ‘The Sh’ma and its blessings’: 111, 115.

¹¹ Jacob Milgrom. “Of hems and tassels”, *Biblical Archeology Review* 9(3) (1983), 61-65: 62, 65.

As a central prayer, Korach would argue that the Shema should focus on central themes, without deviating into either minutiae or shams. He would, therefore, not be content with its third paragraph.

C: an alternative

The Movement for Reform Judaism siddur¹² contains a number of alternative passages for the latter paragraphs of the Shema. They are all taken from the Tanach (mostly from outside the Torah) and are broken down by theme.

In assessing the problem through Korach's eyes, though, it is preferable to limit source material for an alternative second and third paragraph of the Shema to the Torah - for that is what would have been available to him - and to a single second and a single third paragraph, so as to emulate as closely as possible the structure and purpose of the prayer as a whole. His critique of mezuzot and tzitzit related to content rather than structure. He had no quarrel with the structure.

The alternative texts proposed are reproduced in full in the appendix, and this section will explain why they are apt.

For the second paragraph, Deuteronomy 28:1-9 preserves the theme of the traditional second paragraph, and even its opening words of והיה אם שמוע. However, it has the added benefit of not containing threats of Divine retribution (in which Korach is instinctively unwilling to trust, warily viewing them as of possible human origin as part of a project by Moses to build up his personal power). The blessings it promises are also somewhat different in tone to the traditional second paragraph; these blessings relate more explicitly to every section of society - those engaged in crop-farming and shepherding, those in the storehouse business, those in the military, and indeed everyone in every endeavour. This universal application to all the Israelites - as well as the explicit reference to their collective status as a holy people - would appeal strongly to Korach, while also retaining the theme and substance of the traditional paragraph of the Shema which it replaces.

For the third paragraph, Exodus 19:4-11 repeatedly stresses the universal holiness which formed the centre of Korach's platform. Its focus on actual revelation mirrors that of the traditional third paragraph. The law of tzitzit was there to remind the Israelites about the importance of accepting all the commandments; this passage uses shared history, rather than arbitrary ritual, to issue that reminder, but it accomplishes the same goal.

Reuven Hammer views the traditional third paragraph of the Shema as a "substitute for reading each and every one of the [613] commandments".¹³ Exodus 19 serves this purpose equally well by leading the Jewish people - via collective memory - back to the giving of the commandments.

¹² Jonathan Magonet (ed). *Forms of Prayer: daily, Sabbath and occasional prayers*, 8th ed (London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008): 689-697.

¹³ Reuven Hammer. *Entering Jewish Prayer: a guide to personal devotion and the worship service* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994): 128.

It confirms that the law, and the covenant arising from its revelation, was given in the sight of all the Israelites, to avoid any disputes flowing from Moses's role as intermediary. The reference to clothing is another thematic echo of the traditional paragraph's focus on tzitzit, but the commandment to wear clean clothes is much more rational and explicable and free from any hint of Mosaic corruption.

D: conclusion

A reader might be forgiven for accusing this essay of being a flight of aggadic fancy rather than a serious liturgical project. However, that would be uncharitable. In creating a version of the Shema fit for Korach, we have in fact discovered a version of the Shema fit for everyone.

There is a piece of Korach inside all of us, whether or not we recognise (or like) it. The Chassidic rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk referred to Korach as his "holy grandfather".¹⁴ Korach's agenda to place universal holiness at the forefront of Jewish religious life is hardly objectionable, and his doubting of mitzvot on grounds of arbitrariness and irrationality may well speak particularly strongly to Progressive Jews.¹⁵

Liturgy is there for the benefit of those who use it. This is especially true for the Shema: as Max Kadushin has written,¹⁶ "acceptance of malkut Shamayim [ie of Divine supremacy] is an experience of God, and this experience is achieved in the recital of discrete passages of the Bible that, in the Shema, are felt to be logically related and sensed as elements of a unitary entity".

What seems a logical progression of scriptural excerpts in one era might look very different in another era. Just as significant is the subjective element, though: every Jew has the right to a Shema which facilitates them in the "experience of God" and in the "sense[...] of a unitary entity".¹⁷

A slight recasting of this central piece of liturgy - retaining its structure, purpose and broad themes, but ironing out some of the concerns that were raised by Korach but that may equally trouble modern Jews - can make a world of difference to its spiritual impact.

¹⁴ J Jonathan Schraub. "Our holy grandfather: a reassessment of Korach", *Conservative Judaism* 65(3) (2014), 69-88: 69-70.

¹⁵ David Biale. "Korah in the midrash: the hairless heretic as hero", *Jewish History* 30 (2016), 15-28: 27-28.

¹⁶ Max Kadushin. *Worship and Ethics: a study in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1963): 83-84.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Second paragraph - Deuteronomy 28:1-9

And it shall be that, if you obey the voice of the Eternal One your God, and abide by all of God's laws that are commanded to you this day, the Eternal One will set you on high, among all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings will come to you and permeate you, if you will obey the voice of the Eternal One your God.

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the field. The fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land and the fruit of your herds; the offspring of your cattle and the young of your flocks - they shall all be blessed. Blessed shall be basket and bowl. Blessed shall be coming and going.

When enemies stand before you, God will defeat them before you. They may approach you in unity, but they will flee in disarray.

The Eternal One will decree blessings for you - for your storehouses and for all your enterprises - in the land which your God is giving you.

As God's own holy people will the Eternal One station you, just as was sworn to you - if you keep God's commandments and walk in God's ways.

Third paragraph - Exodus 19:4-11

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, if you will truly hear My voice and keep My covenant, you will be My heirloom from amongst all people on all the earth (which is Mine). And you will be to Me a dominion of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.

Moses went and summoned the longest-standing of the people, and placed before them all the words that had been commanded by the Eternal One.

The entire people answered together. They said, "All that God has said, we will do." And Moses relayed the words of the people to God. And God said to Moses, "Behold, I have come before you under cover of a cloud, so that the people will hear our conversation, and will trust forever. Then Moses recounted to the Eternal One the people's words.

And God said to Moses, "Go to the people, and direct them to sanctify today and tomorrow, and to wash their clothes. They shall be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, the Eternal One will descend, in the sight of all the people, from Mount Sinai.

¹⁸ My translations (designed for use in a hypothetical siddur so not absolutely literal).

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Classical Jewish texts

- Exodus 19:4-11
- Numbers 15:37-41
- Numbers 16:1
- Numbers 16:3
- Deuteronomy 6:4-9
- Deuteronomy 11:13-21
- Deuteronomy 28:1-9
- mSoferim 16:10
- bSanhedrin 110b
- ySanhedrin 10:1, 27d
- Numbers Rabbah 18:3
- Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 2
- Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Korach 4
- Yalkut Shimoni, Korach, 750
- Rabbeinu Bachya on Numbers 16:1