



Aharon, Yirmiyahu, and the Almond Rod

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Parashat Korah is a mix of narrative and priestly ritual, in which what may seem to us at first like the driest and most drama-free passages about technical processes of the sacrificial worship in the desert tabernacle are juxtaposed to grandiose, tragic, even monstrous events. This is no coincidence: the intertwining of ritual and story is one of the ways our tradition wrestles meaning out of disaster.

To me, that's the main question *parashat Korah* poses us. How on earth does the covenantal relationship recover from a disaster? Because if there's one thing we know about the world we live in, and the life we're living in it, it is that even our covenantal relationships—even our greatest sources of hope, of optimism, of spiritual elevation—are sometimes going to be subject to disaster. We have our elevated moments—our high at the Sea in salvation, or at Sinai in new understanding, or at the *mishkan* in the development of new and better institutions. But catastrophe can befall each of these, so that we may feel all our hope, our progress is undone. And yet we need to keep walking, each time, toward a renewed relationship with God, and toward a renewed world. How that can happen is the fundamental problem in *parashat Korah*; and to look at that I want to examine especially how the web of allusions within this story and between this story and other parts of Tanakh help us understand Aharon's role in *Korah*'s rebellion and its terrifying aftermath.

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Even more than in many portions of Torah, *parashat Korah* alerts us to its contrasts and comparisons through a dense net of allusive language. The initial set of confrontations between Moshe and his challengers, first *Korah* and then *Datan* and *Aviram*, set up several of these language echoes very dramatically. The first words the challengers speak to open their



opposition to Moshe's leadership are רב־לַכֶּם, "You go too far!"¹ They point to the holiness and elevation of the whole people, and see the particular leadership of Moshe's family as self-aggrandizing. But Moshe retorts with the same words, רב־לַכֶּם בְּגִי לִי!² It is they who are truly self-aggrandizing. Similarly, Datan and Aviram's refusal to come up to the tent, לֹא נֵעֲלֶה,³ echoes their complaint that Moshe has brought them up, הֶעֱלִיתֵנוּ, from Egypt.⁴ More creepily, it will be echoed again when God warns the rest of the people, הֶעֱלוּ, get up and out of the way of these rebels,⁵ because they themselves are shortly destined to go the opposite way: down, down, down into the mouth of the earth.⁶

But a big part of the force of this story comes from its allusions to other biblical texts outside its own borders. The *haftarah*, for example, shows us Shmuel defending himself and his leadership to his people in language full of allusion to the images that Moshe uses to pour out his heart, somewhat defensively, before God in our *parashah*.⁷ In fact one might say that the whole structure of our story alludes to other narratives in which, as in Korah, bad behavior happens, then there's a mass death, then there's a covenantal reconciliation between God and the people. Noah tells a parallel story on the universal level, with our *parashah's* plague standing in for the Flood; and in Ki Tissa the rebellious production of the Golden Calf, the people's deaths at the hands of the Levites, and the subsequent receipt of new replacement tablets, form yet another parallel triptych.

For me, however, the most meaningful intertextual allusion to this story is in the opening chapter of Yirmiyahu. The image near the end of parashat Korah of Aharon's staff, which miraculously sprouts almond flowers and fruit,⁸ is echoed by God in Yirmiyahu's earliest prophetic vision. The book opens with God's announcement to Yirmiyahu of the nature of his prophetic role: רֵאֵה הַפְּקֹדֶתֶיךָ | הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַל־הַגּוֹיִם וְעַל־הַמְּמַלְכוֹת לְנִתּוֹשׁ וְלְנִתּוּץ וְלְהַאֲבִיד וְלְהַרְסוֹ: "Look: today I have set you over the nations and the kingdoms, to overthrow and to smash, to ruin and to destroy, to build and to plant."⁹ Immediately, in the very next verse, God presses him into his first prophetic service, asking him, מַה־אַתָּה רֹאֶה יְרֵמְיָהוּ, "Yirmiyahu, what do you see?" Yirmiyahu replies, מִקֵּל שִׁקְדֵי אֲנִי רֹאֶה, "I see an almond rod." And God answers him, כִּי־שִׁקְדֵי אֲנִי עַל־דְּבָרִי לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ, For I am *shoked*, assiduous, about my word, my *davar*, to enact it."

¹ Bemidbar 16:3.

² 16:6.

³ 16:12.

⁴ 16:13.

⁵ 16:24.

⁶ 16:31.

⁷ | Shmuel 11:14-12:22.

⁸ Bemidbar 17:23.

⁹ Yirmiyahu 1:10.



On one important level of *peshat*, the key parallel between these two texts in Yirmiyahu and in Bemidbar is in their similar wrathfulness. In this reading, when God tells Yirmiyahu, “I am assiduous to keep my word,” we can understand it to mean, “When I warn you that evil is coming from the north because the people are full of sin and deserve punishment, believe it!” That’s why this vision, of the rod with which God intends assiduously to beat God’s people, makes sense as an introduction to the chapters that follow, filled with Yirmiyahu’s vision of destruction.

In Aharon’s case, too, we can understand the staff as the sign of God’s wrath, to be held before the congregation’s eyes to remind them of exactly what that wrath has just done to them and it can readily do again. It is an אֲזוּת לְבִנְי־מִרְי¹⁰, a warning to the potentially rebellious, forgetful of God’s sanctioned order, they cause their own deaths, like Korah. Aharon’s transformed staff says to the viewer, “If you think you are as good as Aharon, look at this staff and remember Korah, and know that I am assiduous in maintaining the holiness system that I have laid out for you. See me, and know your place.”

Not very spiritually uplifting message! But actually I have come to think it’s the wrong—or at least a much too narrow—reading of this parallel. In Yirmiyahu, I don’t think the most important part of God’s point in this first vision is to threaten. Rather, God is setting all of the terrifying visions to come into the correct frame.

Yirmiyahu has just been told that his job is to destroy and to overturn, to bring suffering and loss, but also to build up and to plant. In the vision of the almond rod that immediately follows, God is telling Yirmiyahu himself that all of the prophecies that God will cause Yirmiyahu to speak—*le-daber*—will be true, that God will be scrupulous about fulfilling Yirmiyahu’s prophecies.

Even more to the point, God assures him that God will be solicitous to fulfill God’s own *davar*. Because this opening vision frames all of Yirmiyahu’s prophecy, a book whose larger message is about the process that leads through destruction ultimately to repentance and covenantal reconnection, we can see now that God’s word, דְּבַר, is the Word of the covenant, *devar brit*. God sees the whole prophetic situation, we’re being told here, even the elements of it that may rightly terrify us, as one of maintaining—or better: of rebuilding—a covenantal relationship.

So with that shifted understanding of Yirmiyahu, how should we now understand the parallel with Aharon?

¹⁰ Bemidbar 17:25.



To answer that, just as we looked toward Yirmiyahu's larger context, we need to remember Aharon's context.

Back in *parashat* Shemini, just as Aharon and his sons are nearing the end of the complex rituals involved in dedicating the newly-completed *mishkan*, two of his sons, Nadav and Avihu, die suddenly and shockingly. Immediately Moshe forbids Aharon and his surviving sons from mourning, or indeed making any further interruption in the ritual, because, he says, God will be *יִקְצֹץ*, furious, with the whole people.¹¹ In response Aharon is silent, and he does indeed complete the sacrifices of the dedication; he is, we might say, *shoked*, careful, not to do anything that might infuriate God in that terrifying context.

But he insists on one deviation. At the very end of the dedication, Moshe has let him know that he is expected to eat his family's portion of the sacrificial meat, the *hatat* that he receives part of after the rest was burnt.¹² He is, in a sense, invited to join God at the table, in commensal communion. But silent as he has been in the face of his son's deaths, this is too much for him: now Aharon talks back to Moshe, and, having experienced what he has this day, *וַתִּקְרַח אֶתִּי כְאֵלֶּה*, he refuses to share God's meal.¹³

Before that day, before the construction of the *mishkan*, Aharon's prior big narrative moment had been his weakness before the people at the time of the Golden Calf, when he responded to their anxiety and pressure by producing an idol for them to worship. At that time Moshe just couldn't believe what Aharon had done, and he asks him, in *Ki Tissa*, *מָה-עָשָׂה לָךְ הָעָם הַזֶּה*, "What do you have against this people, that you have brought this enormous sin on them?!"¹⁴ There at the foot of Sinai, Aharon was much worse than merely "not careful." He was an active enabler of the people's sin, of disruption of the covenant so severe that God's relationship with the people was almost over in a wash of death before the marriage of people to their God was ever consummated.

When we remember Aharon's actions and his conversation with Moshe at the time of the Golden Calf, we notice two things about Aharon's subsequent behavior at the time of his sons' deaths.

First of all, we see that in the intervening time he has grown stronger and more confident in his own role as someone who can protect the people from God's anger. Silently completing the ritual in Shemini, rather than giving way to his anxiety as he did in *Ki Tissa*, he behaves in a

¹¹ Vayikra 10:6.

¹² 10:16.

¹³ 10:19.

¹⁴ Shemot 32:21.



way that is clearly difficult for him but which he believes to be important to avoid God’s anger on the whole people.

Second, in his refusal nonetheless to eat the sacrifice, we see him turning the tables on God. Instead of his behaving ungratefully toward God as in the Golden Calf incident, now he seems to imply that God is behaving inappropriately toward him! And while Aharon is scrupulous to behave well himself, and speaks no outward word of reproach, he nonetheless makes sure God understands just what Aharon thinks of him.

Finally, as we return to Korah, remember that the story about his flowering rod is the last event we are going to hear about Aharon’s life. In the very next *parashah*, Hukkat, God says of him, in the distressing third person, וַיֹּסֶף אֱהָרֹן אֶל-עַמּוּי, “Let Aharon be gathered in” to die—and Aharon obediently walks up Mount Hor to his own death, without any comment.¹⁵

Now, bearing in mind all of that history of Aharon’s, how do he and Moshe and God all see Aharon’s role in the story of Korah’s rebellion?

First of all, Moshe recognizes the difference in Aharon now relative to the man he was at the time of Sinai. Instead of asking him what the people have done to him that he should bring sin down on them, he turns the question on its head and asks Korah’s people, וְאַהֲרֹן מִה־הוּא?¹⁶ And why are you making trouble for Aharon?

But more important, in the aftermath of the rebellion, when Moshe sees, prophetically, כִּי-יֵצֵא הַקֶּצֶץ, that God’s fury has emerged to attack the people,¹⁷ Aharon’s actions once again hold the key to alleviating God’s wrath. In contrast, however, to the day of his sons’ deaths, his obligation now is not merely omitting to offend. In Korah, he actually runs out to stand between an angry God and a repentant people:

- He runs out among the people, וַיֵּרָץ אֶל-תּוֹךְ הַקֶּהָל,
- He atones for the people, וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל-הָעָם,
- And he stands between the dead and the living until the plague stops, וַיַּעֲמֵד בֵּין-הַמֵּתִים, וּבֵין הַחַיִּים¹⁸

¹⁵ Bemidbar 20:24. In fact even that scene alludes strikingly to the moment of his sons’ deaths. In Shemini we read that Aharon’s nephews carried his sons’ bodies out of the mishkan, still wearing their kuttonot, their priestly tunics. But in Hukkat, Aharon walks up the mountain, is stripped of his vestments, and sees them put onto his surviving sons, all before he dies, and in view of the entire people.

¹⁶ Bemidbar 16:11.

¹⁷ Bemidbar 17:11.

¹⁸ 17:12-13.



Only then, under his own power and uncommanded, does he return to Moshe, who is still waiting for him in the door of the *Ohel Mo'ed*.

This is the point at which Moshe is directed to collect a rod from each tribe, including Aharon's rod on behalf of the tribe of Levi. Now, when we see Aharon's staff flower and ripen almonds, we understand that God, also, sees Aharon's new, fruitful strength. Somehow, in dealing with the deaths of his sons, the weak Aharon of Ki Tissa has passed through an inner transformation that has left him better able to reach out to the people and also better able to reach out to God. And God, it now seems, is willing for the first time to reach out to Aharon.

It's at the time of plague, and fear, and death, that Aharon at last turns and blooms, and ripens, and bears fruit. Almonds are not the sweetest fruit, but they among the most nourishing. Their flowers lead the season of bloom, and their fruit remains good to eat for a long time.

Maybe this is what Yirmiyahu means when, thirty chapters after his initial vision of the *makel shaken*, that early and assiduous almond rod warning of destruction, he quotes God again in chapter 31. Now Yirmiyahu has been a prophet for many years, and the long-prophesied moment of catastrophe has arrived. From his prison in the palace, he can literally hear the sound of the siege engines preparing to destroy the walls of Jerusalem. It's at that moment that God tells him:

ירמיה לא:כח

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר שִׁקְדָתִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְנִתּוֹשׁ וְלְנִתּוּץ וְלְהַרְסֵם וְלְהַאֲבִיד וְלְהַרְעֵם כִּן אֲשֶׁקֶד עֲלֵיהֶם לְבָנוֹת וְלְנָטוּעַ
 בְּאֵם-יְקוּק:

Yirmiyahu 31:28

Just as I was assiduous to uproot them and to pull down, to overthrow and to destroy and to bring disaster, so I will be assiduous to build them and to plant: this is God's declaration.

The verbs that in chapter 1 delineated Yirmiyahu's tasks are turned around here to reflect that, ultimately, it is God who effects all of those actions in the world. But the series is different in another way, too. Before, these verbs were an undifferentiated list, but now they are divided: the destructions are already accomplished, but the rebuilding is still to come.

Spoken in Yirmiyahu's catastrophic moment, the words of destruction are the words of reporting on the real world: words of realism. These breaches really happen; these terrors take lives; these relationships suffer harm; our losses are real losses. But the words of



restoration at the verse's end represent a divine promise that adds a layer of meaning even to those losses. The covenant moves forward; behind the losses will come other gains; behind the destruction we will see new planting and building.

All of us sometimes experience ourselves as בְּנֵי־מִרְיָ, people of rebellion, perhaps, but also people shaped by our moments of bitterness. But the flowers and almonds that endure on Aharon's rod, stored ongoingly as a reminder for us in the ark of Torah, also remind us of that promise to Yirmiyahu. May we be realistic about our warnings even while we hold onto the almond branch of promise; may what seems at first bitter come to be a harbinger of flowers we cannot yet see, and of fruit that will nourish us in time still to come, a sign for all generations.

