



Hevel's Revenge

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Parashat Korah 5784

From the very beginning of Parashat Korah, the Torah places unusually strong emphasis on his lineage. He is introduced not just with the standard patronym, but with three generations of ancestors, tracing him back to the tribal founder, Levi:

במדבר טז:

קָרַח בֶּן יִצְחָר בֶּן קֵהַת בֶּן לֵוִי.

Numbers 16:1

Korah son of Yitzhar, son of Kehat, son of Levi.

A *midrash* in Bemidbar Rabbah picks up on this extended chain of forebears and suggests that it is there to alert us to the underlying motivation for Korah's confrontation with Moshe:

במדבר רבה יח:

אמר קרח, ארבעה אחים היו אחי אבא (שמות ו, יח) ובני קהת עמרם ויצהר וחסרון ועזיאל, עמרם הבכור זכה אהרן בנו לגדלה ומשה למלכות, מי ראוי לטל את השנייה לא השני, שנאמר: ובני קהת עמרם ויצהר, אני בנו של יצהר, הייתי ראוי להיות נשיא על משפחתי, והוא עשה בנו של עזיאל, קטן של אחי אבא יהי גדול עלי, הריני חולק עליו ומבטל כל מה שנעשה על ידו.



Bemidbar Rabbah 18:2

Korah said: “My father and his brothers were four brothers—‘the sons of Kehat: Amram and Yitzhar and Hevron and Uzziel’ (Exodus 6:18). Amram was the firstborn so his son Aharon merited greatness, and Moshe became the leader. Who, then, was supposed to take the next position? Is it not the second son, as it says: ‘The sons of Kehat: Amram and Yitzhar’? I am the son of Yitzhar, so I deserved to become the chief of my family. But [Moshe] arranged that the son of Uzziel, the youngest of my father’s brothers, will be greater than I. So I will enter into a dispute with him and destroy everything he has accomplished.”

The author of the *midrash* has gathered more information from other places in the Torah in order to help us fill out the family tree. It is these family relationships, says the *midrash*, that account for Korah’s outrage. He may already have been jealous of Moshe and Aharon’s status in the congregation, but that at least could be accounted for by the birth order: they were the sons of the firstborn, so they could reasonably claim to be first in line for leadership in the family. But if that were true, then the next in line to claim a leadership position in the family would be Korah himself, who is the firstborn child of Yitzhar, Levi’s second son.¹ Instead, the Kehati chief that Moshe elects, Eltzafan, is the **second** son of Uzziel, who is the **fourth** son of Kehat. So Korah is accusing Moshe and Aharon of abusing their power by electing whomever they wish, and completely ignoring the tribal rules of birth order that (Korah presumes²) allowed them to ascend to power in the first place. Having been personally robbed of what he believes to be his due, he decides to take revenge on Moshe and Aharon by publicly calling out their corruption and stripping them of their power.

¹ See Exodus 6:21.

² In fact, Korah’s logic is flawed in several ways. It was God—not Amram—who chose Moshe and Aharon. And God clearly did not use birth order as the determinative factor in leadership. Moshe himself, the ultimate leader of the congregation, is the youngest child in his family. It is true that his father, Amram, was an eldest child, but Amram’s father, Kohat, was the **second** son of Levi. If the firstborn was always favored by God, we would have expected Livni, the firstborn son of Levi’s firstborn son, Gershon, to have been tapped to be the leader of Israel. But of course, God has never favored the firstborn, going back to the selection of Hevel’s offering over Kayyin’s. In that sense, even in this *midrash*, Korah is making the same mistake that Kayyin once made.



The Kabbalists of 16th century Tzfat were also interested in how Korah's ancestry might have influenced his revolt against Moshe, but they traced his lineage back much further than just three generations. R. Hayyim Vital, the chief student of the Arizal,³ in his work on reincarnation, posits that the conflict between Korah and Moshe is one that has ancient roots:

שער הגלגולים פרק לג

ודע, כי קרח בן יצהר, הוא מבחי' הרוח של קין... ולכן היה מקטרג להבל אחיו שהוא משה רבינו ע"ה... וקרח חשב, כי בו יתוקן קין הבכור, ולכן נתגבר על משה שהוא הבל.

The Gate of Reincarnations, chapter 33

Know that Korah ben Yitzhar comes from the spirit of Kayyin... and therefore he wanted to kill his brother Hevel, who is our teacher Moshe... And Korah thought that he could reestablish Kayyin as the firstborn, and that is why he rose up against Moshe, who was Hevel.

The souls of Korah and Moshe have transmigrated from the souls of Kayyin and Hevel, the first brothers in history. And just as Kayyin was jealous of his brother Hevel, so Korah is jealous of his cousin Moshe.

There are indeed some common themes and images shared between the two narratives. Both are stories of family conflict driven by jealousy over preferential status. And both conflicts are mediated by two offerings, one accepted and one rejected. Kayyin is the first to make an offering to God, from "the fruit of the ground," and Hevel follows by offering "the choicest of his flock"; but God "turns" to Hevel's offering and not to Kayyin's (Genesis 4:3-5). So when Moshe tells Korah that he and Aharon are to each put incense in a fire pan and that

³ R. Yitzhak Luria (1534-1573), who became the greatest authority of 16th century Kabbalah in Tzfat, is known as אריז"ל (*Arizal*), which has the double meaning of "Our Master R. Yitzhak, of Blessed Memory," and also, "The Lion, of Blessed Memory."



“the man that God chooses is the holy one” (Numbers 16:7), we can hear an echo of the rivalry seeded by those earlier offerings.

R. Vital, however, is suggesting more than just the replaying of an old family feud. In this mystical framework Korah is Kayyin, and Moshe is Hevel. And Kayyin is still jealous of his brother, and still wants to murder him.

But where does this connection come from? What motivates him to suggest that Korah is Kayyin reincarnated?⁴

The link between Parashat Korah and the Kayyin and Hevel narrative can be found in the language of the Torah itself. In the dramatic climax of our *parashah*, the earth opens up and swallows Korah alive. When Moshe first announces this to the people, he says,

במדבר טז:

וְאִם בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא ה' וּפָצְתָה הָאֲדָמָה אֶת פִּיהָ וּבָלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֶתֶם
כִּי נִאֲצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת ה'.

Numbers 16:30

“If the Eternal creates a wonder, and **the ground opens its mouth** and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that those involved have spurned the Eternal.”

⁴ In his commentary on the Torah, R. Hayyim Vital finds a hint to support his theory in the first verse of our *parashah*: “ר"ת וס"ת ור"ת הם קנ"י להודיע, כי לקח רוח קין” - Korah beN Yitzhar, the first letter, last letter and first letter of these three words are KNY, in order to tell you that what he ‘took’ was the spirit of KaYiN” (Sha’ar ha-Pesukim, Parashat Bereishit, Siman 139). This clever derivation is typical of the kabbalistic interpretive style, which seeks hidden messages in the letters of the Torah, and allows for audacious techniques like acronyms and word jumbles. He also finds a similar derivation to connect Moshe with Hevel from a verse later in our *parashah*: “ר"ת הב"ל” - ויפלו על פניהם וגו' הרוחות לכל בשר וגו' ר"ת הב"ל” - ‘They fell on their faces and said, O God, the God of The Spirits Of all Flesh’ (Numbers 16:22), whose first letters make up HeVeL” (Sha’ar ha-Pesukim, Parashat Korah h, Siman 16).



The verb used here for “opens” is not the typical one, לפתוח (*lifto'ah*) but instead the more unusual, לפצות (*liftzot*), meaning something more like, “splits open.” This usage is especially pronounced because, just two verse later, when the event actually transpires, the more common verb is used: “וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ - the land **opened** its mouth” (Numbers 16:32). So why does Moshe use this other verb when he describes what is going to happen?

The verb לפצות, it turns out, has only been used once before in the Torah: just after Kayyin has killed his brother Hevel:

בראשית ד:י-יא

וַיֹּאמֶר מָה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן הָאֲדָמָה. וְעַתָּה אָרוּר אַתָּה מִן הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת פִּיהָ לִקְחַת אֶת דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ מִיָּדְךָ.

Genesis 4:10-11

[And God] said [to Kayyin,] “What have you done?! The voice of your brother’s blood calls out to me from the ground. And now you will be cursed from **the ground that opened** (*patztah*) **its mouth** to take your brother’s blood from your hands.”

The parallel here is striking. We find not only the same verb in the same form (פצתה), but also the same subject, the ground (האדמה), and the same object, “its mouth” (פיה).⁵ The linguistic echoes put particular emphasis on the role of the ground. This helps to explain why this specific punishment was used to punish Korah: the same ground which opened its mouth to receive Hevel’s blood is now **reopening** its mouth to swallow Korah. And if we accept R. Hayyim Vital’s claim that Korah and Moshe carry the actual souls of Kayyin and Hevel, then the swallowing of Korah can be seen as Hevel’s final revenge. So it seems that the family rivalry in Parashat Korah is indeed replaying the oldest family rivalry of them all.

⁵ The Talmud in Sanhedrin 37b also links the mouth of the ground in two stories, although interestingly, it does not note the link between the two verbs, but instead describes the openings only with the standard verb, לפתוח.

We noted earlier that these are the only two uses of the verb *לפצות* in the Torah so far. There is, however, one other appearance of the verb, later on, in Deuteronomy. It comes in Moshe's retelling of the Korah story. However, in that version there is one notable absence. Moshe tells the Israelites to remember:

דברים יא:

וְאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְדָתָן וְלֵאבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב בֶּן רְאוּבֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלָעֵם וְאֶת בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֶת אֹהֲלֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל הַיְקוּם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלֵיהֶם בְּקֶרֶב כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deuteronomy 11:6

That which [God] did to Datan and Aviram the sons of Eliav son of Reuven, when **the earth opened its mouth** and swallowed them, and their households, and their tents, and every living thing in their train, from amidst all Israel.

There is the earth, opening its mouth again. But where is Korah? His allies, Datan and Aviram are mentioned, but the central character for whom our *parashah* is named is nowhere to be found.⁶

⁶ The Ramban notes this absence, but presumes that Korah and the 250 men he was with all died in the fire that came down when they made their offerings. The text says clearly that the fire consumed the 250 men (Numbers 16:35), and it seems clear that Datan and Aviram, who were standing outside their tents, were swallowed by the earth (v. 32), but it is not entirely clear from our *parashah* which of those fates Korah suffered. It depends on how one interprets the phrase “וְאֶת כָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לְקֹרַח” - All of Korah's people.” The Talmud in Sanhedrin 110a debates this, with R. Yohanan arguing that he was neither burned nor swallowed, but died in the plague afterwards, with another opinion holding that he was first burned and then swallowed.

Later in the Book of Numbers, however, the census in Parashat Pinhas, records that: “וַתִּפְתַּח הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלָעֵם” - the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and Korah (Numbers 26:10). That seems to me decisive proof that Korah was indeed swallowed by the earth.

For a critical-historical explanation of this issue, see “Korah, Datan and Abiram: A Case Study for the Methods of Academic Biblical Studies,” available here:

<https://www.thetorah.com/series/korah-datan-and-abiram-case-study>.

Remember that Deuteronomy is distinct among the books of the Torah in that it is almost entirely narrated by Moshe. This is Moshe's first-person account of the events of the previous books. So if Korahh is omitted from this version of the tale, it is Moshe who leaves him out.

Perhaps, then, this was the ultimate revenge. Moshe did not content himself with the physical death of Korahh, but sought an even greater obliteration. Korahh would be erased from memory, extracted out of the story itself, and turned into nothingness.⁷ It is as if God first buried Korahh deep in the ground, and then Moshe buried Korahh again, in the text itself.

And the Torah opened her mouth, and swallowed him alive.

⁷ Just as Hevel—whose name means “vapor,” or “nothingness”—once was.

