



Korach 2022

Never Enough

4 minute read | Straightforward

Most humans born in the past several thousand years have heard of Moshe; he is rightly one of the most recognized figures in human history.

Today, we might reasonably say that a strange burning bush is no basis for a system of government and that supreme executive power ought to derive from a mandate from the masses, although that's not particularly relevant in the world of the Torah's story. But to the extent that's actually true, you'd think Moshe's glittering array of accomplishments would win some popular support eventually.

He stood up to Pharaoh and won, walked a generation of enslaved people into freedom, led them through the ocean, gathered them at Sinai, generating magic food and water in the barren desert waste, among other significant and unparalleled achievements.

And still, his people complained at every turn, resisting him at every turn.

One particular time, the infamous Korach raised a formidable following and led an attempted coup and insurrection to supplant and usurp his cousin Moshe:

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָם קִדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם הוּא וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהָל ה' – They combined against Moshe and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the community are holy, all of them! God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” (16:3)

Moshe responds rhetorically:

הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַד תֵּישְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן הוּא וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׂרְתָּם: וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְּךָ וְאֶת־כָּל־אַחֶיךָ בְּנֵי־לֵוִי אֶתְּךָ וּבִקְשׂתֶּם גַּם־כֹּהֲנָה: – “Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you direct access, to perform the duties of God’s Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that God has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?!” (16:9,10)

Korach directly paraphrases God’s directive at Sinai to be a nation of holy people – וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מְקֻדָּשִׁים. But Moshe’s rhetoric seems to fall a bit flat.

There is no challenge or rebuttal to what Korach has claimed; it is only a restatement!



So when Moshe accuses him of wanting to be part of the priesthood – וּבִקְשׁוּתָם גַּם־כֹּהֲנָה – it’s hard to see how that would give Korach a moment’s pause. Korach would say yes, precisely!

Where is Moshe’s winning argument?

The Shem Mi’Shmuel explains that Moshe’s accusation towards Korach was about how self-serving his coup was. Moshe’s rhetoric pierces through Korach’s claim of shared holiness; because true as it might be, Korach’s words are empty and self-serving. God wants people dedicated to God’s purposes; Korach was out for himself – for power and influence, personal gain, and honor – בִּקְשׁוּתָם / תַּהֲיוּ־לִי.

Moshe’s entire story prominently features the enormous personal cost and self-sacrifice that was required to faithfully lead and serve his people. Ahron’s entire story was about connecting people with the divine and closer to each other. Korach’s accusation of overstepping – רַב־לָכֶם – rings hollow; Moshe’s accusation of Korach self-serving rings true – בִּקְשׁוּתָם.

But perhaps there’s more to Moshe’s retort.

Our sages associate Korach with another famous villain – Haman.

Both were fabulously wealthy; our sages say they were two of the richest men in the world.

Both were highly influential; Haman was second only to the king, and Korach was in the highest tier as well. While Moshe and Ahron had the most visible roles, Korach and the whole family of Levi had critical and desirable roles in the new Jewish religion – הַבְּדִיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַד תִּשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו – לְעַבֵּד אֶת־עַבְדֹת מִשְׁכַּן הַ וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשָׂרְתָם.

But with all Haman’s influence, prestige, power, and wealth, it wasn’t worthwhile to him without one thing:

– וְכִלְיוֹהַ אֵינְנוֹ שׁוֹהַ לִּי בְּכֹל־עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת־מִרְדֵּכַי הַיְהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמָּלְךְ: “Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordechai sitting in the palace gate!”

Perhaps the rhetoric in Moshe’s reply to Korach is similar – הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם – is everything Korach already has so trivial? Are all the duties, honors, and privileges of the Mishkan still not enough?

Korach craves the one thing out of reach, the priesthood, without which everything counts for naught. Haman desires the one thing out of reach, Mordechai’s submission, without which everything counts for naught. But everything is not only a lot to take for granted, but to outright trivialize, discount, and devalue – הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם.

What’s more, our sages note that the Torah refers to Haman in the story of Adam and Eve; hinted in God’s language to Adam asking if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, which can be read as an oblique allusion to Haman – הַמֶּן / הַמִּזְוֵה־הַעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לִבְלֹתִי אֶכְלֶם־מִמֶּנּוּ אֶקְלֹתָ.



Dayan Chanoch Ehrentrau observes that Adam and Eve's mistake is of the same color. God creates the entire universe for them; all of Creation is at their disposal in the palm of their hand. But they crave one thing out of reach, the one tree they mustn't eat, without which everything falls stale and flat.

It's the same mistake as Korach and Haman, and it is quite clearly a consistent and recurring mistake humans make from the very beginning. While there is plenty of room for healthy ambition and aspirations for tomorrow, you must still value and appreciate where you stand today; otherwise, what's it all worth? While you can say you appreciate your blessings, your actions may indicate otherwise.

Gratitude, as well as its inverse form, taking things for granted, are recursive throughout the Torah, consistently one of its core themes, and a leading indicator of prosperity or disaster. Korach, Haman, and Adam and Eve all suffered severe punishment for taking everything for granted – they lost everything, and everything quickly turned to nothing. In Korach's case, the earth he stood on eroded beneath him.

They say you don't know what you've got until it's gone, but sometimes you do know what you have; you just never think you're going to lose it while you go chase the next thing.

Appreciate what you have, who loves you, and who cares for you. Don't take the people or things in your life for granted, and not just because nothing lasts forever – but because, as Moshe said, is it not enough?

The Covenant of Kings

3 minute read | Straightforward

One of the most basic and essential rules of interpretation is understanding that the Torah is written in language humans can read and understand – דיברה תורה כלשון בני אדם.

R' Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this means that the Torah writes within the boundaries of human understanding, and not objective truths known only to God.

The Rambam utilizes this theme prominently, famously suggesting that the Torah co-opted animal sacrifices only because they were culturally familiar methods of worship in the Ancient Near East. The Ralbag similarly recognized the value of understanding the ancient world of the Torah to give us enhanced context and understanding of the Torah's teachings.

Apart from animal sacrifices, another ancient practice that would be culturally familiar was the notion of the covenant.

In the Ancient Near East, kings would formalize their diplomatic relations with treaties or covenants. These treaties were drafted between equals and sometimes between a superior and a subordinate state, or suzerain and vassal. The structure of the Torah's covenants has striking parallels to the suzerain-vassal treaties. If we unpack the layers to the structure, we can unlock a deeper appreciation for it.

The main elements of suzerain-vassal treaties are identifying the treaty-maker, the superior; a historical introduction, such as prior beneficial acts the superior has done for the subordinate; the stipulations, typically the demand for loyalty; a list of divine witnesses; and blessings and curses. The treaty was proclaimed in public along with a ceremonial meal, and the treaty was stored at a holy site. There would be a periodic public reading to remind the subordinate citizens of their duties.

The similarity between the Torah's use of covenants and other treaties extant in the Ancient Near East isn't merely interesting trivia – it's political dynamite.

For most of ancient history, the head of state was also the head of the cult – god-kings and priest-kings were standard. The king or the priestly class had a monopoly on the rituals of religion, and the common serfs were passive observers living vicariously through these holy men.

In sharp contrast with that background, the Torah's rendition of a covenant is striking not in its similarity but also in its difference.

God does not seek a covenant with Moshe, the head of state, nor Ahron, the Kohen Gadol. God does not even seek a covenant with the Jewish People; the party God treats with is no less than every single individual, which is explosive because it's shocking enough that a God would care about humans in general, let alone each of us in particular. And by making a covenant with us, God goes even further and asks us to be His partners.

A covenant between God and individuals doesn't just illustrate the dignity of every single person; it also bestows a second facet to our identity. By elevating common people into vassal-kings, we are all royalty – *ממלכות כהנים וגוי קדוש / כל-העדה כלם קדשים* – This also echoes a broader ideological theme that idealized a community of educated and empowered citizens – *ושננתם לבניה / והגדת לבנה*.

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that we take self-identity for granted today, but historically, self-identity was subsumed to community and culture. In a world where the individual self barely existed and mattered very little, it's radical to say that God cares for us individually, because it's not obvious at all – *בשבילי* – *גברא העולם*. This tension between God as distant yet close is captured in our blessings, where we call Hashem "You" in the second person, indicating familiar closeness, and then "Hashem," with titles in the third person, indicating distance.

Striking a covenant with individuals democratizes access to God and spirituality, creating a direct line for everybody. Parenthetically, this echoes the Torah's conception of creating humans in God's image – everyone is, not just a few "special" people.



We are all royalty in God's eyes, and we are all God's partners.

Failure is not Fatal

3 minute read | Straightforward

Dissatisfied with his middle management role in the tribe of Levi, Korach attempted a coup.

The story unfolds and wraps up with an epilogue that the remaining leaders conducted a public disputation by planting their walking sticks into the ground. Nothing happened to theirs; but Ahron's instantly blossomed with almonds and flowers, showing Ahron's divine election, that God supported Moshe and Ahron's leadership and not Korach's insurrection.

The Torah concludes the story by telling us how Ahron's staff became a sacred relic stored in the Mishkan, a powerful symbol of what took place. It's blindingly obvious why the legacy of Ahron's miraculous staff is recorded. It was a long-dead walking stick, and yet it touched the ground and burst into life; it was an object of the highest cultural, historical, and religious significance, giving closure and finality to the story.

But the Torah also has words to say about the vanquished individuals, that they stepped forward to collect their inert walking sticks and went home.

Why does the Torah bother to tell us for posterity that each person took their walking sticks back?

R' Shlomo Farhi notes that in the same way that Ahron's staff was a symbol of victory, these walking sticks were a symbol of defeat – but they took them home just the same. These ordinary and inert walking sticks, with no magical properties, symbolized that these men had reached for greatness but failed. In telling us that each man stepped forward to reclaim his staff, the Torah is telling us that they took ownership of their failed attempt, and in doing so, there is a future after failure.

Their defeat was a reality check, but by owning their failure, they could once again resume their place in the hierarchy they had attempted to overthrow. The man who learns from failure has not truly failed.

It's part of a broader theme in the Torah; failure features prominently throughout, from the very first stories of humans in the Garden of Eden, through the very last stories of Moshe not able to finish his great mission of settling the Land of Israel.

The Torah doesn't shy away from human failure; it leans into it, and perhaps we should reappraise failure in that light.



TorahRedux

As Kierkegaard said, life must be lived forwards but can only be understood backward. But because of that, no matter how you look at it, our experiences always have a two-fold significance.

First, there is the initial experience of something; the excitement of meeting someone new, the strangeness of an unfamiliar event, or the pain that follows failure.

But then afterward, there's the meaning that those experiences take on as we reshape and retell them into the story of our lives as they continue to unfold, which has the power to change how we perceive them. Most honest, successful people tell the story of how their failures became stepping stones to more meaningful victories down the road, giving the story of their failure a triumphant ending after all.

You can't learn if you don't try, you can't try if you are afraid to fail, and you can't be good at something if you have not failed multiple times. Learning to manage failure is one of the most important skills you can and must cultivate. If you are someone who never fails, you probably aren't trying enough.

The final word in the story isn't the magical staff; the final word affirms for posterity that these men could recover from failure, that there was a life and future beyond their mistakes.

A person who never makes a mistake has never tried anything. Mistakes can often be a better teacher than success; success only confirms the lessons you expect. But failure teaches you unexpected lessons in ways you can't foresee.

Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it's the courage to continue that counts.

Quote of the Week

"Intention is nothing without action, but action is nothing without intention."

– Unknown



Thought the Week

“Alshich quotes his Rebbi, in Noach: After the sin of the golden calf, Hashem's internal rage was enough to destroy His people. So He talked it out. And then His anger dissipated and He grieved His anger, turning His anger into Rachamim.

”וינחם ה על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו”

– @RatzonAdam

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have a niche business that allows me to spend substantial time on TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing quality content that matters. I help NY home care companies implement compliant Wage Parity plans that enhance recruitment and retention; whether or not that was comprehensible, if you know anyone in the New York home care field, please introduce me!

PPS - I want to use my reach to help more people in more ways; this is me shooting my shot at another one. Several of my home health clients are hiring at all levels from entry-level to management. Please send me a resume and a one-line explanation of what kind of role would be the best fit and I'll make some introductions.

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.