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Rabbinic Midrash for Our Time

Presenting Five New Rabbinic Midrashim on Korah's Rebellion

Stacey Nolish Blank

Thesis submitted for Rabbinic Ordination

March 1, 2007 ✡ 11 Adar 5767

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Preface

As a child, one of my favorite things was to hear a story – a book read by my parents as I sat on their lap, a story inspired by the Bible told by the rabbi when he would visit our class, the stories told by my grandparents about their childhoods, and more. As an adult, I have sought the stories of people that I meet – as a college student whose freshman year roommates were Christian Scientist and Hindu, as a community worker with homeless men recovering from drug addiction, as a volunteer in Poland with Jews who had recently discovered their Jewish roots, as a student rabbi in communities around the world where people in these isolated areas are starving for Jewish life, and in Israel where everyday life is a story unto itself.

Stories can captivate any audience of any age. Stories also teach us about ourselves, as well as others, and often present central life lessons in a way that we do not even realize that we are gaining an important message because we are so much enjoying the flight of imagination. In the Jewish context, I would take a great midrash any day over any halacha. Midrash, which is by and large rabbinic play, teaches us essential Jewish lessons through vivid imagery, artful word manipulations, and instructive narratives.

As much as I love hearing stories, I have always had a muse within seeking to be a storyteller – I wrote my first story at age three which I dictated to my mother. Combined with my desire to promote meaningful lives through the Jewish tradition and to build caring communities through my pursuit of the rabbinate, the idea for this thesis was born. Following rabbinic tradition of over 2000 years, as a rabbi, I want to tell Jewish stories that both teach great truths and inspire the imagination to engage every person in his/her own individual search and in our aspirations as groups such as congregations, communities, and even the State of Israel, to sanctify our lives.

Jewish tradition provides us with an umbilical cord back to the beginning of time. Historical memory is ingrained within the Jew. The secret of Jewish survival, in my opinion, is the constant intertwining of the past with a drive toward the future expressed in the co-mingling of tradition and modernity. I also believe that it is the Jewish value of struggle, as evident in the name *Yisrael*, which also has ensured the survival of the Jewish people, through discussion, movements, and a constant testing of our values and resolve

to adhere to those values throughout time. Struggle is also inherent in the relationship between tradition and modernity.

I bring these premises also to my approach to Midrash – The Midrash of rabbis created and set down over more than a thousand years is full of truths and ingenious techniques for expounding the Torah and arousing discussion and debate. However, some of the images and archetypes of the rabbis are now outdated, difficult with which to relate, and simply irrelevant for the contemporary Jew.

With these thoughts in mind, I began my journey to become a writer of contemporary rabbinical Midrash.

Introduction

This thesis contains a short discussion on the definition of contemporary midrash. It then describes the process that this project underwent over the past two years of exploration, study, and creation. Next, it will present two series of Midrashim which I wrote in Hebrew with English translation followed by an exposition of the text and relationship with the ancient rabbinic midrash and its techniques. This is followed by a short story consisting of ideas culled from the reflections that I wrote over a period of six months. Finally, it closes with conclusions concerning the project.

There exist a number of contemporary definitions of midrash in recent years by those "working in the field". For example, Rivka Walton said, "Midrash...delves into the text and plays in the text but never violates the text....It has something new to say -- some new insight or some new gestalt of some kind about the text, and that gives us a new sense of connection or meaning with the text or meaning in our lives as we see our own lives reflected in the lives of our ancestors."[1] Peninah Schram noted that the "idea of Midrash is vague — it is an exploration deep inside us as well as with text outside of us, like weaving on a loom...."[2] Finally, Alicia Ostriker calls midrash "work in any art form which re-presents a biblical story or character...not as commentary but as a creative re-vision of it."[3] These views represent a trend across the midrash scene that midrash is an open-ended, soul-searching genre.

However, my definition is slightly different from those that I discovered in the contemporary lexicon, therefore I would like to add my definition of midrash as well. I believe that, today, there is midrash, and there is also Midrash. The first, midrash, is the word *k'pshuto*, as it sounds literally – "interpretation." This very open definition is consistent with the conviction of many contemporary scholars and writers of midrash that it refers to any type of creative interpretation of Torah verse which inspires us to see the Torah in a new way. The second, Midrash, is a body of literature that was disseminated by rabbis beginning in the Second Temple Period and continuing throughout Jewish history whose aims are pedagogic, utilizes a range of literary techniques, can be

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[1] Dr. Rivka Walton. Former Editor of *Journal for Contemporary Midrash*. Telephone Interview. August 5, 2005.

[2] Peninah Schram. Storyteller and Author. Telephone Interview. July 2, 2005.

[3] Dr. Alicia Ostriker. Poet and Scholar. Telephone Interview. August 3, 2005.

interpolated to sermons or *divrei Torah*, and demonstrates a degree of mastery of the Bible while speaking to the average Jew.

My goal is to write Midrashim in the spirit of the rabbinic legacy which are intended both for enjoyment and for study. The enjoyment comes from the fun of the play of words and the "aha!" of gaining a new, imaginative, and perhaps even humorous insight into the Torah. The study aspect is bound up in the task of understanding the Hebrew, analyzing the word devices, and in discussing the themes, challenges, and issues that the Midrash presents. My Midrash, as I believe is the case with both the Torah and classical Midrash, is intentionally sparse on words – the fewer the words, the more the reader has the opportunity to fill in with his own thoughts and imagination. Also, I want these Midrashim to challenge the reader and to lead him to new questions. The scarcity of words leaves room for the reader to bring his/her own questions and challenges. He is free to disagree with the premise of my Midrash, however only as long as he can defend why. It is my hope that this type of Midrash, as it continues to be written today by me and other students of Midrash, is such that rabbis, or others, will turn to them when searching for material for a sermon or *d'var torah* and will use these Midrashim as they would use any of the classical rabbinic Midrashim. In this way, Midrash is a springboard to new, and sometimes radical, ideas, eternal truths clothed in contemporary metaphor, and sometimes the only way to say the unspeakable which everyone is really thinking anyway.

Process

In Summer 2005, I began the process of investigating the field of contemporary midrash (also known as "modern midrash") at the same time as I chose a Torah portion upon which to focus my Midrashic venture. This investigation helped me understand all of the definitions that exist in the scholarly dialogue about contemporary midrash and influenced me in sharpening my own definition of midrash.

My investigation of contemporary midrash took me to the East Coast of the United States where I met and spoke with people who have created midrash, each with his own definition of the genre and analysis of the field of contemporary midrash.[4] I also reviewed literature about classical rabbinic Midrash.[5] At the same time, I set about to determine which section of the Torah on which I would focus my Midrashic endeavor. I arrived at the answer by taking the advice of Dr. Tamara Eskenazi, at HUC Los Angeles, who said, "Choose a Torah portion that challenges you." Therefore, after examining a few Torah portions, I chose the first chapter of the portion concerning Korah, Numbers 16.

The project began in full force in July 2006. The first part of this project consisted of two parallel processes: In the first, I studied all of the classical Midrash I could find in which Korah was mentioned. This included the Midrash collections that are organized by Torah portion, such as Numbers Rabbah, Midrash Tanchuma, and Midrash HaGadol, in which I studied the Midrashim on the Torah portion of Korah, focusing on those relevant to Numbers 16 and skimming the Midrashim on Numbers 17-18 for relevant material. Using the Bar Ilan Responsa Project and Judaica Classics CD's, I searched all of the Midrash located on both databases using the key word "Korah" in order to find references to Korah in Midrashim that were located in other collections and in Midrashim in which only minor references were made to Korah. Over the course of three months, I studied the Midrashim in terms of content in order to understand how the text has already been interpreted, to discover overarching themes, and to gain familiarity with different rabbinic literary techniques which I aimed to adapt into my own writing. I

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[4] See Bibliography for complete list of interviews and correspondences.

[5] From here on out, when I refer to "classical rabbinic midrash", I am referring to the compilations of midrash written or told by rabbis which are estimated by contemporary researchers to have been edited between approximately 200 CE and 1400 CE. This is not including the midrash of the Zohar and other kabbalistic or Chassidic texts.

divided the Midrashic literature and studied all of it section by section with different study partners. This was especially helpful as often themes and entire Midrashim repeat themselves in different compilations, so although I studied similar texts all the time, I received a new perspective through the diversity of my study partners. My *chevrutot* included professors of HUC such as Rabbi Michael Marmur, Rabbi Dalya Marx, Rabbi Naama Kelman, and Rabbi David Levine, local rabbis and Jewish educators, and students in the Israeli Rabbinical Program of HUC.

In parallel to my study, I conducted a process in which I wrote "stream of consciousness" reflections upon my readings of the Numbers 16 text. For the first few entries, I read the entire portion and then wrote. After this, I went verse by verse through Numbers 16, concentrating on one verse at a time as I wrote. This helped me enter more deeply into the language of the Biblical text and to struggle with individual words and phrases as I searched for meaning in the story of Korah.

The second part of the project consisted of the writing of my Midrash. I reviewed the forty or so pages of reflection that I had written. I made notes of recurring themes in my contemplations as well as overarching problems that I consistently addressed over the course of the six months. In some of my writings, I found that I had even already begun to write a Midrash or the frame of a story. Out of around eight themes that I discovered in my writing, I chose two on which to focus. From these two general themes, I generated a number of ideas for my Midrashim. I decided to write the Midrashim in Hebrew as this is the language of the Biblical text and the classical Midrashim and allows for the closest connection with the original text while leaving much room for creativity. One will see in my Midrashim that there is mixture of Biblical, rabbinic, and modern Hebrew in the text. This is consistent with the language of the classical Midrashim in which the rabbis varied Biblical Hebrew with their contemporary Aramaic dialect and words borrowed from Greek and Latin which were a part of the culture milieu in which they lived.[6] I translated my Midrashim into English for facility of the non-Hebrew reader to access them.

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[6] An excellent example of the variation of language is Exodus Rabbah. See Moshe Herr on "Exodus Rabbah" in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

I wrote exposition on the Midrashim as a means of explaining my ideas and demonstrating the stylistic and thematic connections that exist between my Midrash and classical rabbinic Midrash as well to highlight the innovations that my Midrash brings to the genre.

Finally, I returned to the reflections that I had written over the past six months, this time with the aim of creating a cohesive story. I gleaned narrative material from the reflections and shaped them into a complete account that retold the story of Korah in a new way in the context of entire human history.

Literature Review

1. Summary of Contemporary Biblical Criticism

Most contemporary scholars believe that Numbers 16 is a composite of two different rebellion stories, that of Korah and that of Dathan and Abiram, the Reuvenites. Budd posits that Korah's rebellion was brought by the Priestly author and Dathan and Abiram's rebellion was brought by the Jahwist author.[7] He believes that the Priestly author's goal is to confirm his view of the priestly chain of command.[8] Milgrom, however, quotes Abravanel who sees three rebellions tied into one story – Dathan and Abiram against Moses, Korah and the tribal chiefs against Aaron, and Korah and the Levites against Aaron. Milgrom also adds a fourth narrative of Korah and the community against Moses and Aaron.[9] He divines these separate stories because of ambiguities in the Torah text over which the classical commentators disagree if, for example, Korah died by fire or in the opening of the earth and if Korah is the leader of Levites or the leader of the tribes.[10] Magonet detects a theme in Korah's rebellion which manifests itself in other rebellions throughout the Torah, that of "political and spiritual organization and leadership of the newly emergent people."[11] Rivkin, on the other hand, places the rebellion in harsher terms, seeing it as a "violent struggle for absolute power" with a vitriolic God who punishes harshly.[12] Levine sees Korah's rebellion as part of a series of rebellions taking place throughout the Torah, especially that which occurred in Exodus 17:13 and Numbers 21:5 in which similar language is used in complaints against Moses.[13] In particular, he views the priestly rebellion as a rival group's attempt to wrest power from the "Amramite family" of Aaron and Moses.[14]

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[7] Phillip J. Budd. *Numbers. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol. 5.* (Waco, Texas: Word Books 1984), 181.
[8] Ibid, 190.
[9] Jacob Milgrom. *Numbers.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 415.
[10] Ibid., 416.
[11] Magonet, 10.
[12] Ellis, Rivkin. "The Story of Korah's Rebellion: Key to the Formation of the Pentateuch." *Society for Biblical Literature Seminar Papers.* (1988): 575.
[13] Baruch Levine. *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation (Anchor Bible Series, Vol. 4A).* New York: Doubleday, 1993, 425.
[14] Ibid., 430.

Milgrom believes that the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram reflects a struggle for supremacy on the part of the tribe of Reuven among the Israelites. He believes that Korah's rebellion, which he labels as "the chieftains' rebellion" struggle for priesthood, reflects a conflict in the court of King Jeroboam who appointed laymen to priestly positions in I Kings 12:31.[15] Milgrom agrees with this statement in his support of Liver's dating of a rebellion of Korahite Levites at the beginning of the First Temple.[16] However, he also introduces the idea that it could have occurred before the monarchy began because the word עדה was in use as an official body only until the monarchic period.[17] Rivkin, however, dates the origins of the Korah story as later, perhaps occurring in the times of the prophets Malachi, Ezekiel, and Nehemiah whose writings decry the corruption of the Levites. He posits that the story in Numbers 16 could be referring to a new group which claimed to be the descendents of Aaron who rose up to wrest power from those corrupt Levites, thus crafting a new story which integrated itself into the theme of the Torah which was not canonized until later.[18] Budd supports this idea noting that the Korahites were not found on the lists of Levitical families returning from the first Babylonian exile and perhaps were a priestly group which had been established in the land of Israel during that time.[19]

Modern scholarship draws attention to literary details that assist in understanding the Biblical narrative. For example, Magonet asserts that Korah is to be viewed as an important personage in the Torah because of the long lineage presented at the beginning of Numbers 16.[20] He also describes the role of כל העדה, "the whole congregation", as that of a "legally constituted popular assembly" of all the people gathered for a matter of great importance. He stakes this claim because the only other time this phrase occurs in the Torah is in Exodus 12:6 when the people are called to sacrifice the Passover lamb.[21] Levine draws parallels between Moses's petition to God to reject the rebels' incense and ancient Near Eastern treaties and royal inscriptions in which the rulers asked the gods to

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[15] Jacob Milgrom, "The Rebellion of Korah, Numbers 16-18: A Study in Tradition History." *Society for Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1988): 572.
[16] Ibid., p. 420.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Rivkin, 579-580.
[19] Budd, 190.
[20] Jonathan Magonet, "The Korah Rebellion." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (1982): 4.
[21] Magonet, 16.

reject the offerings of those who would oppose them.[22] Budd also interprets Moses's act of falling on his face as an expression of prayer in which he is asking for God to intercede as is seen in post-Biblical literature like Jubilees and Maccabees.[23]

Special emphasis is placed upon analyzing the violent end of the story. Within the context of the book of Numbers in which Moses creates an army of the Israelites (Numbers 1) and sends out spies on a military survey (Numbers 13), and the Israelites lose a war against the Amalekites and the Canaanites which Moses warns them not to fight (Numbers 14), Magonet interprets the phrase "יצאו ניצבים" in Numbers 16:27 in that the men came out from their tents "taking their stand" or ready for a military confrontation with Moses, thus ordaining for themselves a terrible punishment.[24] Leveen also emphasizes the sense of horrible destruction in highlighting the word אכל, referring to the fire that consumes the rebels. She posits this term as a "measure for measure": As the people longed to return to Egypt to "consume" the bounty of that land, thus they were "consumed" by God's fire.[25] (This also corresponds with the interpretation in, among others, Bamidbar Rabbah 18:10 in which Dathan and Abiram's reply to Moshe was "we will not go up", therefore they went down to Sheol.) In addition, Levine notes that "being swallowed up by the earth is a known depiction of catastrophe in epic poetry."[26]

While the scholarly literature attempts to place the story of Korah within an historical and cultural framework, it provides a limited understanding of the human issues that transcend time and space which surround this piece of Biblical literature. Midrash, therefore, offers a different framework for creative expression that brings various ideas and understandings to elucidate concepts and themes.

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[22] Levine, 426.
[23] Budd, 188.
[24] Ibid., 8.
[25] Adriane Leveen, "Falling in the Wilderness: Death Reports in the Book of Numbers." *Prooftexts* 22,3 (2002): 250.
[26] Levine, 428.

2. Synopsis of classical Midrashim studied

Numbers Rabbah – is thought to really be a compilation of two separate works put into one. The first half covers the first two weekly Torah portions which the second half covers the rest of the weekly portions found in this book of the Torah. The first half consists mainly of exegetical Midrash with some homiletic Midrash and is written mainly in Mishnaic or medieval Hebrew.[27] The second half, which consists mainly of homiletic Midrash, is thought to have been ordered according to the triennial cycle of reading the Torah. Numbers Rabbah has many parallels with the *Tanchuma Yelammedenu* collection of Midrashim (described further on). It is thought by some to have been part of a larger Numbers Rabbah collection that was written down in the 9th Century CE while others think it was recorded earlier but combined into one collection in the 13th Century.[28]

Tanchuma is a series of mainly homiletic Midrash written in late rabbinic Hebrew. It is part of the body of literature called "Tanchuma Yelammedenu" which also incorporates Exodus Rabbah, Numbers Rabbah, Deuteronomy Rabbah, and Pesiqta Rabbati, in which the Midrashim mainly begin, "Let our master teach us." It was named for the rabbi to whom many of its Midrashim are ascribed, Rabbi Tanchuma bar Abba, who was known to have lived in the 4th Century CE in Palestine. The work itself is thought to have undergone final redaction in the Gaonic period in Babylon and is quoted often in medieval works, attesting to its reputation.[29] There are two well-known versions of the Tanchuma Midrash, the "Ordinary Edition" which was first printed in Constantinople in the 16th Century and the "Buber Edition" which was published in the 19th Century based upon manuscripts as early as the 13th Century. The Midrash usually begins with a

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[27] Moshe Herr. "Numbers Rabbah." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 15. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, (2007): 337-338.
[28] H. L. Strack and G. Stemberg. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 336-337.
[29] Marc Bregman. "Tanchuma Yelammedenu." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 19. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 503-504.

halachic issue followed by an aggadic text each with a number of proems as part of the opening of the midrash and a messianic *nechemta* at the end.[30]

Midrash HaGadol is a Yemenite collection of midrash thought to have been compiled by David ben Amram Adani in the 13th Century with its origins in Midrashim from the time of the Talmud. It is written in simple Hebrew prose, but its unique features are the poems that he composes before the Midrashim on each weekly Torah portion and his references to philosophy and other sources of Tannaitic Midrashim previously unpublished.[31] The Midrashim generally feature visions of redemption and return from exile to Israel. It is unique in its interweaving of Midrash with halacha and writings from the Talmud, Maimonides, and various Gaonim.[32]

Yalkut Shimoni is believed to have been compiled in Frankfort, Germany, in the 13th Century as an attempt to assemble as much of all the Midrash as possible for the entire Bible. It includes both aggadic and halachic rabbinic teachings from sources from different centuries, often resembling a carefully compiled and numbered catalogue.[33] It consists of two sections, the first focusing on the Torah and the second focusing on the rest of the Bible. The collection was written by Shim-on ha'Darshan.[34]

Midrash HaChefetz was compiled by Zechariah ben Solomon-Rofe, a Yemenite rabbi and doctor. It was completed in 1428 and is a "midrashic anthology of the Torah and haftarot."[35] He based much of his work on Midrash HaGadol, and it is considered one of the most significant Yemenite collections of Midrashim.[36]

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[30] Strack and Stemberg, 331-332.
[31] Solomon Fisch. "Midrash Ha-Gadol." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 186-187.
[32] Strack and Stemberger, 386-387.
[33] Jacob Elbaum. "Yalkut Shimoni." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 21. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 275-276.
[34] Strack and Stemberger, 383-384.
[35] Yehuda Ratzaby. "Zechariah ben Solomon-Rofe." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 21. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 487.
[36] Yehuda Ratzaby. "Zechariah ben Solomon-Rofe." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 21. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 486-487.

Genesis Rabbah, once known as Bereshit de-Rabbi Oshaya Rabbah, is thought to be one of the earliest compilations of Midrash. Edited in the 5th Century, it is primarily an exegetical collection thought to be an Amoraitic Palestinian invention as it contains similar language and even similar Midrashim as the Jerusalem Talmud, though most of the Midrashim are anonymous. Most of the proems begin with a verse from Psalms or Proverbs.[37] Many of its Midrashim contain adages and pedagogic tales. It may have been called "Rabbah" as a way to distinguish it from a different, smaller collection of Midrashim on Genesis.[38]

Exodus Rabbah is a compilation of Midrash which can be divided into two parts. Its Midrashim have their source in many earlier aggadic Midrash and are written in a mixture of Hebrew dialects peppered with Greek and Latin words. The first part is almost entirely exegetical and aggadic, and its proems begin mainly with a verse from Psalms, Proverbs, or Job. The second part is almost entirely homiletic and a mixture of halachic and aggadic Midrash, usually ending with verses of comfort and hope for redemption.[39] This part followed the Palestinian Torah reading cycle. There are a number of varying opinions on the dating of the complete text ranging from the 10th to the 12th Centuries.[40]

Leviticus Rabbah is one of the most ancient Midrash collections, most likely edited in the 5th Century in Palestine. The language is mainly Palestinian Aramaic sprinkled with many Greek words. The Midrashim take place in Palestine of the centuries preceding, and Amoraic rabbis are cited as relating the Midrashim as well as relating to other literature of the time. The Midrashim are main homiletic and often deal with moral issues, sharing common material with those found in Pasikta de-Rav Kahana as well as

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[37] Moshe Herr, and Stephen Wald. "Genesis Rabbah." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 7. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 448-449.
[38] Strack and Stemberger, 300-301.
[39] Moshe Herr. "Exodus Rabbah." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 6. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 624.
[40] Strack and Stremberger, 336-337.

other Midrash collections.[41] They usually end with eschatological themes. The Midrashim follow the Palestinian Torah reading cycle, and it is debated if they served as smaller pieces of larger sermons.[42]

Midrash Tehillim, also known as *Aggadat Tehillim* or *Shoher Tov*, is thought to be a compilation of different collections of Midrashim on the various Psalms that were written in different times and perhaps in different locations, ranging from the late *Eretz Israel* period to the 13th Century. Also, the Midrashim differ in form and technique. One thing which is uniform throughout this work is that "it has exalted language and colorful themes, cites many stories and parables, and makes extensive and tasteful use of the hermeneutics of aggadic interpretation."[43] It is thought to consist of two parts, the first of which consists of Midrashim on Psalms 1-118 compiled from different sources and the second which consists of Psalms 119-150 which shares many similarities with the Yalkut Midrashim.[44]

Midrash Bereshit

This collection of Midrash is thought to be written by Mosheh ha-Darshan of Narbonne in the 11th Century. It is considered part of the school that compiled the *Midrash Aggadah* originally published by Buber in the 19th Century. It is characterized by its frequent references to pseudepigraphal literature though it quotes and modifies earlier Midrashim at its own whim.[45]

Midrash Samuel (Midrash Shemu'el) is the only Midrash compilation dedicated to a book of the early prophets. It is thought to be a product of Palestine, probably edited by the 11th Century. It utilizes Midrashim from a number of other sources including more Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, though some of its Midrashim are unique. The language is Palestinian Hebrew with many words in Greek. It consists mainly of

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[41] Joseph Heinemann. "Leviticus Rabbah." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 12. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 740-742.
[42] Strack and Stremberger, 315-317.
[43] Jacob Elbaum. "Midrash Tehillim." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 192.
[44] Strack and Stremberger, 350-351.
[45] Strack and Stremberger, 388-389.

homiletic Midrash, some exegetical Midrash, and some Midrash combining the two styles.[46]

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana is characterized by its use of *pesikta,* or "sections, chapters" of Midrashim. Some Midrashim are thought to be among the earlier ones ever set down though others believed it underwent editing processes until the 11th Century. Around five chapters of *Pesika de-Rav Kahana* share close similarity with Leviticus Rabbah.[47] It is purely homiletic Midrash collection related to the Torah and haftarah of the holidays and designated Sabbaths, most famously the Sabbaths surrounding Tisha B'Av. The name is derived from a Rabbi Kahana who is referred to early on in the Midrashic text. It is thought to have originated in Palestine and to have followed the order of the holidays beginning with Rosh HaShanah.[48]

Pesikta Rabbati is a compilation of midrashim taken from the Tanchuma Yelammedenu and the Pesikta de Rav Kahana collections. It is believed to be Palestinian in origin and to have been edited in its earliest form anywhere in the 5th-7th Century but to have appeared in its complete form not until medieval times. It is divided into sections (from the word "pesikta") of homilies, each pertaining to a different holiday during the year.[49]

Sifre Numbers is part of a body of literature known as halachic Midrash which is mainly involved in explaining Jewish law. It reflects the work of Rabbi Ishmael, a prominent redactor of the Mishnah, and his school in the 2nd Century CE.[50] It is an exegetical Midrash collection on the book of Numbers beginning with Numbers 5. It was studied independent of the weekly Torah potion and is arranged into *baraitot.* It is not a unified text as different forms are apparent, and its final redaction was set in the 9th Century.[51]

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[46] Jacob Elbaum. "Midrash Samuel." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007) 191.
[47] Strack and Stremberger, 318-319.
[48] Bernard Mandelbaum. "Pesikta de-Rav Kahana." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 16. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 11-12.
[49] Daniel Sperber. "Pesikta Rabbati." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 16. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 12-13.
[50] Reverend Paul P Levertoff. (*Midrash Sifre on Numbers. Selections from Early Rabbinic Scriptural Interpretations*. London: A Golub 1926), vi-xiv.
[51] Strack and Stemberger, 292-293.

Sifre Deuteronomy, also known as *Sifre de-be Rab*, is also part of the body of literature known as halachic Midrash which is mainly involved in explaining Jewish law though it does contain narrative portions. This collection interprets the Torah in an exegetical fashion, verse by verse. The traditions of the Midrashim go back to the Tannaitic period though the mixture of simple and complex Midrashim show that they were probably created at varying times.[52]

Midrash Zuta Song of Songs is a collection of excerpts from various Midrashim influenced by the *Yelammedenu Tanchuma* Midrashim. It was probably redacted between the 10th-12th Centuries, though it draws on much earlier sources. It is not distinguished by any style.[53]

Otzar HaMidrashim is a collection of around 200 minor Midrashim most of which were composed during the Gaonic period and some during the time of Rashi and Rambam. They were first compiled in a collection by Yom Tov Lipman in 1832. However, they consist of many references and stories known to come from ancient times including descriptions of the celestial chariot, the angel Metatron, and the messiah. There is thought to be a relationship between these midrashim and some aspects of early Christian thought.[54]

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[52] Reuven Hammer. *Sifre. A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), 4-6.
[53] Moshe Herr. "Midrashim, Smaller." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA (2007): 188.
[54] J. D. Eisenstein, Ed. *Ozar Midrashim*. (New York: Bibliotheca Midraschica, 1915), x.

Midrash Series #1

1. "ויקח קרח בן יצהר בן קהת" וגו'. הה"ד (איוב טו: כא) "קול-פחדים באזניו בשלום שודד יבואנו". זה היה שאמר קרח (במדבר טז: ג) "רב-לכם" ומשה לא שמע רב אלא שמע ריב. כלומר כל קולות העדה צעקו באותה שעה. זה היה כש"כ (חבקוק א: ג-ד) "ויהי ריב ומדון ישא. על-כן תפוג תורה ולא-יצא לנצח משפט". עם כל המולת הריב, משה לא שמע את הצדק בדברי קרח. אילו קרח היה מאחד את כל הקולות לקול אחד, משה היה שומע את מה שבא אחריו: (במדבר טז: ג) "כי כל-העדה כלם קדשים ובתוכם יהוה". ומשה היה נזכר בדברי אלהים: (ויקרא יט: ב) קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם" וגם (שמות יט: ו) "ואתם תהיו-לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש". אבל לא היה קול אחד ברור. לכן, "קול-פחדים באזניו בשלום שודד יבואנו".

1. "And Korah the son of Yitzhar the son of Kohat took" etc. It is written (Job 15:21), "A frightful sound is in his ears; unhindered a pillager shall come upon him." This is compared to what Korah said (Numbers 16:3), "You take greatness upon yourselves", but Moses did not hear Korah say "greatness", but rather he heard a great quarrel.[55] That is to say, all the voices of the community shouted at once. This is as it is written (Habakkuk 1:3-4), "When there is quarrel, strife will endure. Thus, Torah will fade away and no justice will ever come of it."[56] With all the commotion of the quarrel, Moses was unable to hear the just things Korah had to say. If Korah had been able to unify all of the voices into one voice, Moses would have heard what followed (Numbers 16:3): "For all of the

[55] The word play is on the word "רב" (*rav*) found in Numbers 16:3. The Midrash says that Moses did not hear the word "רב" (*rav*) which can mean great or numerous but rather heard a ריב (*riv*), a quarrel. Or to carry the word play further, he heard a *great quarrel* (among the rebels).

[56] Other translations of the verse from Habakkuk: Soncino: "For destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise; Therefore the Torah is slacked, and justice never goes forth." JPS: "Strife continues and contention goes on: That is why decision fails and justice never emerges."

community, everyone is holy and God is within them." And Moses would have been reminded of God's (earlier) words: (Leviticus 19:2) "You shall be holy because I, YHWH your God, am holy," and also (Exodus 19:6), "And you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". But there was no one clear voice. Therefore, "A frightful sound is in his ears; unhindered, a pillager shall come upon him."

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ד"א "ויקח קרח" אין ויקח אלא לשון המונים שהוא לקח קהל גדול נגד משה. במושה הוא אומר (במדבר א: יז) "ויקח משה ואהרן את האנשים האלה". וכן (בראשית כ: יד) "ויקח אבימלך צאן ובקר ועבדים ושפחת". וכן הוא אומר (יהושע ח: יב) "ויקח כחמשת אלפים איש". וכן (דברים ג: ד) "לא היתה קריה אשר לא-לקחנו מאתם" . הוי: "ויקח קרח" שעמד על משה עם קהל עצום. משל למה הדבר דומה: לעובד שאסף את כל עובדי המשרד ובישיבת הצוות הטיח במנהל שהוא מרוויח שכר גבוה ללא עבודה קשה בעת שהעובדים עומלים שעות ארוכות ושכרם מועט. אחרי הישיבה, העובדים חדלו לעבוד ונהגו בחוסר כבוד כלפי המנהל. המנהל פיטר את העובד. הוא שאלו, "למה פיטרת אותי? דיברתי אמת." השיבו, "אפשר הדבר, אבל ביישת אותי לפני כל עובדיי וכעת הושבתה העבודה. אילו באת אליי פרטי, יתכן שאקבל דעתך". אף כאן קרח גינה את משה לפני כל בני ישראל. לפיכך הכריז משה על נפילתו (במדבר טז: כט) "ואם-כמות כל-האדם ימתון אלה וכו'". ייתכן שקרח צדק, אך הוא בייש את משה לפני כל העם. אילו בא לדבר עם משה פרטי, ייתכן שמשה ישקול דעתו. ועל כך נענש.

Another interpretation: "And Korah took". "Took" must be referring to the multitudes, meaning that Korah took a huge congregation to stand against Moses. Of Moses, the Torah says (Numbers 1:17), "And Moses and Aaron took these people." Similarly (Genesis 20:14), "And Avimelech took sheep and cattle and slaves and maidservants." In the same strain it says (Joshua 8:12), "And he took around five thousand men." Similarly

(Deuteronomy 3:4), "There was not a town that we did not take from them." These all support the explanation, "And Korah took" to mean that Korah stood against Moses with a mass congregation.[57] A parable to what this situation is like: To an employee of an office that got all of the other employees together, and, in the staff meeting, accused the manager of earning a high salary without having to work very hard, while the employees toil long hours for little pay. After the meeting, the employees refused to work at all and treated the manager with no respect. The manager fired the (instigating) employee. He asked him, "Why did you fire me? I spoke the truth." He answered him, "That might be true, but you embarrassed me in front of all my employees, and now no work gets done. If you had come to me in private, I might well have listened to you." Also (in the case of Korah), Korah denounced Moses before all the Israelites. Accordingly, Moses declared his downfall (Numbers 16:29), "And if they will die a death like any other human being," etc. Korah might well have been right, but he embarrassed Moses before all the people. If he had come to speak with Moses in private, Moses might well have considered his claim. And for this, he was punished.

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ד"א "ויקח" – מה לקח קרח? קרח לקח מאש הקטרת (במדבר טז: כז) "ויעלו מעל משכן-קרח". מה משכן-קרח? הוא בנה משכן שלו לה' ושם את אש ה' בתוך משכנו. מה בין אש לאיש? מכניסים יו"ד לאש להופכה לאיש. היו"ד באיש היא ניצוץ אלהי. למדים מזה שבכל איש ישנה אש אלהים שבוערת בתוכו. יש אש המשכן ויש אש מסוכן. אש המשכן כמו י' הדברות שנחקקו באש בהר סיני כש"כ (יחזקאל כח: יד) "בהר קדש אלהים היית בתוך אבני-אש התהלכת". אש מסוכן כמו בי' המכות במצרים כש"כ (שמות ט: כד) "ויהי ברד ואש מתלקחת בתוך הברד כבד מאד אשר לא-היה כמהו בכל-ארץ מצרים מאז היתה לגוי". אש המשכן היא אש היצירה – ניצול על האש הזאת מביאה יופי ופלא. אש מסוכן היא אש ההשמדה -- ניצול האש הזאת מביאה אלימות ואבדון. ויאמר משה (במדבר טז: ל)

[57] In all of these examples brought from other places in the Bible, what was "taken" was something or some people in large quantities.

"ואם-בריאה יברא יהוה ופצתה האדמה את-פיה ובלעה אתם ואת-כל-אשר להם וירדו חיים שאלה". אש מסוכן מובילה תמיד לאלימות.

Another interpretation: What did Korah take? Korah took some of the incense from the fire (Numbers 16:27) "and (then) they went up on Korah's *mishkan*." What is Korah's *mishkan*? He built his own tabernacle to God and put the fire of God inside his tabernacle. What is the difference between *ish* (man) and *esh* (fire)? You put a letter "yud" into *esh* (fire) to change it into *ish* (man). The "yud" in *ish* (man) is a Divine spark. We learn from this that within each man (*ish*) there is the fire (*esh*) of God that burns within him. There is the fire of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) and there is fire that is *m'sukan* (dangerous). The fire of the tabernacle is like the fire that engraved the Ten Commandment on Mount Sinai, as it is written (Ezekiel 28:14), "And you were on God's holy mountain; You walked among stones of fire." The fire that is dangerous (*m'sukan*) is like that found in one of the ten plagues in Egypt as it is written (Exodus 9:24), "And there was hail -- and fire was flashing amidst the hail – that was very heavy, the likes of which had never been seen in the land of Egypt since it had become a nation." The fire of the tabernacle is the fire of creation – use of this fire leads to beauty and wonder. The fire that is dangerous is the fire of annihilation – use of this fire leads to violence and destruction. And Moses said (Numbers 16:30), "And if God created creation, then the earth will open its mouth and will swallow them and all that belongs to them and they will go down alive to Sheol." The fire that is dangerous always leads to violence.

Exposition of Midrash Series #1

The main thrust of this Midrash series is that Korah's sin was not the grievance itself but rather *how* he brought his grievance. In the Torah, Moses says that Korah rebelled because he wanted to take Aaron's place and run the high priesthood. The classical rabbinic Midrash wanted to strengthen this statement and tells a story in which Korah described the process of Aaron being anointed High Priest in such a way to make him look ridiculous and incur the wrath of all the Israelites (BaMidbar Rabbah 18:4). However, this claim does not relate in any way to the grievance that Korah brought that "all the community is holy." (Numbers 16:3). However, if the *content* of Korah's grievance is not be the sin that sends him down to Sheol, then another possibility is that it was Korah's *method* of making himself heard.

This Midrash series presents three possibilities in the three Midrashim:

1. Korah's sin (or mistake) was that he was unable to keep the protesters in order in approaching Moses. He did not exercise good leadership as he was unable to restrain them. This Midrash imagines the voices competing until a mob mentality is created in which all reason is lost. Examples of this in the modern world are civil protests that self-destruct into looting and harmful activity. Good leadership, though, is when one can take all of the voices of the congregation, meaning all of the different individual opinions and claims, and unify them into one strong, common voice with a positive message that can serve as an advocate for society. According to my Midrash, this is *not* what Korah did, and, therefore, he suffered the consequences.

The Midrash begins in the rabbinic style of *petichta (*proem) Midrash. It commences with a פסוק רחוק, a verse brought from the book of Prophets or Writings that, at first, seems to have nothing to do with the message of the Midrash. This method was first used in the classical rabbinic Midrash "so as to arouse the curiosity of the audience and increase their interest"[58]. At first glance, the reader may wonder: what does this verse from Job, in which Eliphaz the Temanite accuses Job of being the wicked one for whom the destroyer came, have to do with Korah gathering the leaders of the Israelites? The next line of my Midrash explains the connection as that "a dreadful sound is heard in

[58] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Preaching." CD-ROM Edition. Judaica Multimedia Ltd., Israel, p. 2.

his ears" describes exactly what it was that Moses heard when Korah rose up against him. This verse from Job helps me build a vivid picture of a cacophony of sound which is Korah and his band. This same style is used in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:1 which brings a פסוק רחוק from Proverbs 18:19 ("A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city; and their quarrels are like the bars of a castle.") to emphasize the irreversible and terrible nature of Korah's rebellion against Moses and, thereby, against God.

Next, I utilize a play on words interpreting רב as ריב. This is a common device in the classical Midrash to help establish the connection between the פסוק רחוק and the verses from Numbers 16:3.[59] I provide support for my idea by bringing another verse from the Bible, this time from Habakuk who uses the word ריב in the same verse as the word נשא. This word is associated with Korah and his particular clan of Levites, as they are instructed in Numbers 4:15, "And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary, and all the utensils of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohat shall come to carry it" (לשאת). Adrian Leveen, citing Catherine Bell, writes that in Numbers 16, "claiming that Moses and Aaron have raised themselves above the others (תתנשאו)" and using the term "נשיאי עדה" are not coincidental occurrences."[60] The connector between Numbers 16 and Habakuk 1:3 is also the root נשא and provides support for my word play on the word רב in Numbers as ריב is found in Habakuk. Therefore, instead of raising up *the ark* as is their duty (as referred to in Numbers 4:15), the Kohatites are instead raising *strife and contention*. In BaMidbar Rabbah 18:16, we find a word play on the name יצהר, Korah's father, which claims that the name means "oil" as derived from a version of the word "ויצהרך" in Deuteronomy 7:13 and therefore Korah saw himself as the "son of oil" meaning the one who ought to be anointed in place of Aaron.

The continuation of Habakuk 1:4, "a righteous judgment cannot come of it" (ולא-יצא לנצח משפט) further supports my Midrash as it hints at an idea that I bring out also in some of my other Midrashim – no matter who is right, no good can come of this confrontation. There is no good from violence and chaotic rebellion. While Korah is suggesting democracy, he is not utilizing democratic processes to bring it about. In the

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Adrian Leveen, *Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers* (Cambridge University Press, Not Yet Published), 145.

contemporary context, one might extend the analogy to the United States attacking Iraq in order to bring about democracy – it used an undemocratic process of a military attack, coup on the leadership, and troops to fight off incursions to bring about a result of democracy.

Then I do something which I have not observed the rabbis ever doing, at least in conjunction with Korah – I suggest what might have been the correct solution for the Biblical characters. In doing so, my hope that is we do not just receive a negative message that tells us how *not* to behave, but rather I hope we can take a constructive rabbinic message from Korah in teaching the right way to behave. In many instances, the rabbis present this negative type of lesson. For example, in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:12, we read, "Two of these faults were in Dathan and Abiram, insolence (עזות פנים) and contentiousness (מחלוקת) ," but we never hear what behavior would have helped them.

After passing judgment on Korah, I want to give him a small נחמתא, or concluding words of comfort, as it is written in Pesichta de-Rav Kahana, "all the prophets began with words of reproof and ended with words of comfort"[61]. Whereas the classical rabbinic Midrash conclusion usually is messianic in nature and emphasizes the glory of God,[62] I wanted to emphasize the hint of justice in Korah's claim itself and, using the root of the word *kadosh* (holy), I have brought examples from the Torah in which Korah's claim is actually commanded by God. Therefore, one could construe that God *does* seem to agree with Korah's idea in other places in the Torah. This reinforces my idea that it is not the claim itself which is problematic but rather *how* Korah brought the claim. Many of us can cite from personal and professional experience that there are many wonderful ideas that often get lost in bureaucracy, politics, personality conflicts, jealousies, bad timing, and other reasons. This is a tragic flaw in the human condition and one that is just as relevant today as it was in Biblical times.

In the classical rabbinic style, I close this Midrash by bringing back the פסוק רחוק to emphasize its connection to the Numbers 16 text and bring closure to the Midrash.

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[61] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Aggadah," *CD-ROM Edition*. Judaica Multimedia Ltd., Israel, 1.
[62] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Preaching", *CD-ROM Edition*. Judaica Multimedia Ltd., Israel, 3.

2. This Midrash emphasizes the Jewish value of not causing someone embarrassment (*busha*). Korah attacks Moses in public which I interpret as causing Moses great embarrassment. This is one of the worst things a person can do in Jewish tradition, as it is written in Berachot 43b, "R. Johanan said it in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: It is better for a man that he should cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than that he should put his fellow to shame in public." A Midrash expressing a value judgment appears also in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:15 with a teaching from Mishnah Nega'im , "אוי לרשע אוי לשכנו", "woe to the evil person and woe to his neighbor", suggesting that since the Kohatite clan was camped next to the Reuvenites, Korah's evil rubbed off on Dathan and Abiram. This serves as a warning to the reader/listener – if you keep evil company, you will become evil.

In being accused of bad leadership before all the people, Moses stands a chance to lose total credibility. As one of my study partners, Beit Midrash Kolot facilitator Devorah Busheri, said, "Imagine the alternative if Moses had lost and Korah had won. We might have lost Judaism." I imagine if Korah had gone to Moses in private, perhaps Moses would have listened to these complaints, which, at face value, seem legitimate. However, the public nature of the event was too threatening. For example, if a political leader is accused of bribery or sexual harassment in public, usually they deny it though later it turns out to be true.

I begin the Midrash with the term דבר אחר, literally "something else" which indicates that I am bringing an alternative interpretation to the one that I have already suggested in the previous Midrash[63]. This technique is demonstrated, among many other places, in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:7. After presenting an explanation for why Moses instructs Korah to come in the morning -- Moses thinks perhaps Korah is drunk and needs the time to come to his senses -- the Midrash presents an alternative explanation, which is completely different from the first, that the term "morning" was used to show God's ultimate rule of the universe in separating morning and night and thus separating Aaron from the rest of Israel to be the High Priest.

I then use a classical rabbinic form אין....אלא which is a device that is used for emphasis, literally meaning that the verse "can only mean..." This term is used when the

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[63] Adin Steinsaltz. *The Talmud. A Reference Guide.* (Random House: New York, 1989), 109.

Torah verse probably seems the most ambiguous and needs some rabbinic certainty to explain the meaning of the text. An example of this device can be seen in BaMidbar 18:2 which explains "ויקח קורח" ("And Korah took") as "....אין 'ויקח', אלא משיכת הדברים רכים" ("Took" can only mean through persuasive words") and then provides other examples from the Bible in which ויקח could be interpreted in this way. I do the same in my Midrash, imitating the classical rabbinic style and even utilizing one of the supporting verses that a classical rabbi used in order to support my definition of the expression.

My claim is expressed in one of the most famous rabbinic devices, the *mashal*, a parable or short story whose function is "illustration and instruction".[64]

This device has two parts: In the first part, I present a story or parable that, at first, one might not be sure of the connection between the story and the verses from the Torah. In the second part, I tell the *nimshal* which describes the situation of the *mashal* as it appears in the Torah text. This is a fun exercise for the learner because it causes one to think about all of the possible connections and to stretch one's imagination before I give the game away in the *nimshal*. However, I have modernized this device. One of the most prevalent motifs in the *meshalim* of the classical rabbinic Midrash is that of a king and his servants or children. This was a relevant metaphor for the Babylonian or medieval Jew as this was the mode of government under which people lived and they could, therefore, relate to the metaphor. For example, in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:6, the rabbis tell a *mashal* about a king whose son rebels against him, and the king's friend makes the peace between them again and again until the friend despairs of always bothering the king in this matter. It then explains the *nimshal*: The son is the Israelites who continue to sin in the desert, and the friend is Moses who always pleads on behalf of the people with God until the incident with Korah when Moses is fed up with being the interlocutor.

I believe that it is hard for a modern Jew to relate to the notion of kingship as, clearly, there are very few actual working monarchies today. Instead, I invented a metaphor with which most modern people in Western society can identify – the contemporary work environment in an office consisting of a staff and a boss. This is

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[64] Encyclopedia Judaica, "Parable," *CD-ROM Edition*. Judaica Multimedia Ltd., Israel, 1.

truly the *chidush*, the reformation, of the modern midrash, as the word "midrash" comes from the root דרש which means "to search," "to seek," "to examine," and "to investigate".[65]

My midrash concludes with the message clearly stated – if you have a problem with someone in authority, it is better to speak with him in private rather than in public.. In BaMidbar Rabbah 18:6, we read "במחלוקתו של קרח (משה) אמר 'כמה אוכל להטריח את המקום'! לפיכך "וישמע משה ויפל על פניו" ("In Korah's dispute, Moses says, 'How much can I continue to bother God?'"). In this classical midrash, the message is less pronounced whereas in my midrash, I spell out the implications. Perhaps my midrash is too simplified, but I think the message is clearer.

3. This midrash focuses on the fire pans. There seems to be a symbolism in these ritual objects that I did not find very much elucidated in the classical midrashim that I studied. Fire can be very useful or very dangerous in the same way that there is a fine line between creativity and destruction. We find the *esh* (fire) in the *ish* (man) by way of an extra letter, yud. Also, it is written in the Torah text that Korah had a *mishkan* of his own. *Mishkan* can denote the portable Tabernacle that the Israelites carried with them throughout the desert, and it can also denote simply a "dwelling." I chose the first definition and, in my midrash, Korah builds his own tabernacle. Therefore, Korah's downfall, once again, takes place as a result of his actions, not his words, which, in this case, was turning his home into a temple that competed with the Tent of Meeting. In other words, he begins to create his own rules, his own sacrifices, his own Torah, etc. It is one thing to bring disagreement and multiple interpretation of the Torah, but it is another thing to build an entirely separate religion altogether. This can be a source of debate in today's multi-stream Judaism where each stream claims to have the patent on "authentic Judaism" and claims that Jews in other streams do not practice true Judaism. Perhaps one of the sources of this debate can be seen in this incident in Numbers 16.

Using a word play on משכן and מסוכן and איש and אש, I describe the origins of creativity and destruction, two polar opposites of a wide spectrum. As the tabernacle is

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[65] Ibid., "Midrash," *CD-ROM Edition*. Judaica Multimedia Ltd., Israel, 1.

the symbol of holiness, creativity is an activity that leads to beauty and innovation and is truly the hallmark of human ingenuity. It is often described in terms of a "spark", a fire that burns within. At the other end of the spectrum, a dangerous fire can correspond to the fire of madness that causes people to be the victim of their "burning" passions. However wide the spectrum, nonetheless there has to be a point where the line is crossed over from the realm of praiseworthy and creative conduct into the realm of dangerous and destructive conduct. In my midrash, Korah crosses that line from the realm of intelligent reasoning to the realm of irrationality. This can be compared to the fine line that exists between creative genius and chaotic psychosis. It is a difficult thing to judge – for example, Vincent Van Gogh demonstrated a certain amount of dysfunction in chopping off his ear, but he created some of the most beautiful and inspiring paintings known in the modern world.

I am troubled as well by Moses's reaction which I believe is much stronger than Korah's action warranted. In his act of causing, even requesting, that all the men get swallowed up by the earth, I am frightened by the thought of this dictator-like action of violent killing to protect his position and/or his religion. In the contemporary developed world, most violence is not condoned – for example, most first world nations have outlawed the death penalty. With that in mind, I brought the statement at the end of the midrash about Moses's responsibility in the whole situation, though he was not the initial cause of the trouble.

The midrash begins with a rhetorical question, meaning that it does not expect the listener/reader to give an answer but rather is meant to encourage reflection by the listener/reader before they hear the assertion of the midrash writer. This is a device that is common in classical rabbinic literature throughout the midrash and the Talmud. Aside from provoking thought, it helps create an intimate atmosphere of hearing a story or holding a conversation. Many rabbinic midrashim begin this way. For example, BaMidbar Rabbah 18:2 asks "?(קרח) על ידי מה נחלק" ("What was Korah disagreeing about?") and then goes on to tell us that he was upset that his cousin Elitzaphan was chosen leader of his clan over him.

My answer, immediately following the question, is that Korah took the incense which first appears later on in the chapter in Numbers 16:7. I then utilize the technique

of filling the gap (למלא פער) and say that Korah took the incense to put in his tabernacle that he had built. This statement is nowhere in the Torah text, but the Torah's sparse language provides ample opportunity for us to fill in the holes with our imaginations. I will explore the technique of filling the gap more in the later midrashim.

I then utilize a word play between אש (fire) and איש (man). I interpret the word play one step further this time instead of finding a supporting verse (like in midrash 1 of this series). I make note of the י that changes אש to איש for an added nuance. My interpretation of the "yud" is based on Kabbalistic philosophy which is not found in the classical rabbinic midrash as it was developed later than most of the midrashim were written down. One can find such types of interpretation in the Zohar and in the Torah commentaries of Chassidic masters. For example, the Zohar teaches that "yud" is "the root and foundation of the world" (Section I, Bereishit 56a) and "yud" never ceases from the world (Bereishit 229a). The Hebrew letter *yud* is often found in Jewish mysticism as a symbol for God's wisdom, since the written form of this letter is a single point placed at the top of the line of writing; thus representing the notion that ideas first enter the mind as single, unformed points that have yet to be developed. (Alter Rebbe, *Torah Or*). אש (fire) by itself is just a physical material. With the added *yud*, it becomes divinely inspired, an eternal flame that connects the human with the God's wisdom.

I continue the word play between משכן (tabernacle) and מסוכן (dangerous). This was a bit problematic as I wanted to utilize this word play with the word אש (fire) which is a feminine noun and whose grammatically correct form would be אש מסוכנת. However, since that does not sound as pleasant to the ear, I took the liberty that the rabbis have taken throughout rabbinic text and ignored this grammatical rule for the sake of my play. For example, in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:10, it is written, "...אף הם עמדו ברשעון". In modern Hebrew, this is grammatically incorrect as הם is a male plural pronoun and רשעון is a female plural noun. In modern Hebrew, it would be more correct to say רשעם. The rabbis, however, do not often pay attention to such rules as we know today.

I make a judgment in saying that there is holy fire, the *mishkan*, and there is also destructive fire, *m'sukan.* I then turn to sources within the Bible to uphold my assertion. My support for אש המשכן, a holy fire, is drawing an association with the Ten Commandments which were engraved on stone on Mount Sinai. How do we know that

they were engraved with fire? Ezekiel tells us that there were stones of fire on the "holy mountain" which is usually associated with Mount Sinai. One might see this as a far stretch, but that is the fun and beauty of the rabbinic imagination. This can be seen in BaMidbar Rabbah 18:13 when Rabbi Yehuda ben B'teira says that Korah will someday arrive to the World to Come. He gives as proof Psalm 119:176 in which David says, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant; for I do not forget your commandments." The correlation is made because David is compared to a "lost sheep" (צאן אבד) and it is written in Numbers 16:33 that "they were lost from the congregation" (ויאבדו מתוך הקהל).

For my example of אש מסוכן, I wanted to stay with the number ten for continuity. Continuity in midrash brings a certain wholeness to the text which, in a spiritual sense, aims to show that a Divine thread runs through all pieces that the midrash writer has conveyed so that one begins to see them as part of a cosmic tapestry of the universe for which the sum of the individual parts creates a sense of harmony. Therefore, whereas the Ten Commandments represent a positive gift from God, the Ten Plagues in Egypt serve as a foil representing a destructive act by God. In the seventh plague, we find the word אש, as in fire that fell upon the earth – a dangerous fire like the one that I describe in my midrash.

The next two lines of the midrash clarify the meaning of the אש משכן (holy fire) and the אש מסוכן (dangerous fire) in explaining the positive creative nature of אש משכן (holy fire) and the negative destructive nature of אש מסוכן (dangerous fire). The midrash concludes with an ominous tone that is meant to leave the reader hanging with a shocking thought that is asserted in an understated way. It quotes Numbers 16 in which Moses calls on God to bring about violence to prove that Moses is really God's messenger. The "fire" that burns is Moses, I subtly imply, is also judged to be an אש מסוכן (dangerous fire) which can only lead to violence and destruction and does not create nor propagate holiness. This is not a direct proclamation of judgment on Moses, but rather it is a restrained "כביכול" – could it be that this is also our Moses?! My hope is that this Midrash will leave the listener/reader with questions about what is holiness and what is the righteous thing to do in the face of threat and danger, and to seek that borderline in every situation between creativity and destruction.

Midrash Series #2

.1

(במדבר טז: ד) וישמע משה ויפל על פניו." מדוע נפל משה על פניו בטרם ענה לקרח? משה חיכה לציווי אלהי. נפל על פניו שעה ארוכה, אך לא קיבל כל סימן מאלהים. עמד וקרא, "בקר וידע יהוה" וגו'. ככלותו לדבר, משה חיכה לדבר האלהים, אך השמיים שתקו. קרא, "שמעו נא בני-לוי" וגו'. ככלתו לדבר, חיכה לנבואה אלהית, אך אוהל מועד היה חשוך. שלח משה לקרוא לדתן ואבירם. דבר לא השיבו. מתוך יאוש, אמר משה לקרח: "היו לפני יהוה אתה והם ואהרן מחר" וגו'. "ויקהל עליהם קרח את-כל-העדה אל-פתח אהל מועד". סוף סוף קרא אלהים למשה. למה אלהים שתק עד כה? כדי לתת למשה אפשרות להזדהות עם אלהים. זאת המשמעות של הפסוק (שמות לג: יא) "ודבר יהוה אל-משה פנים אל-פנים כאשר ידבר איש אל-רעהו". אין פנים אל-פנים אלא כאשר אחד שם את עצמו במקום השני. כביכול אלהים אומר, למעשה, למשה, "עכשיו תבין צערי עם העם זה". בשלשה מקומות חרה אף אלהים ורצה לאכול את בני ישראל באש: במעשה העגל (שמות לב: י), בזנותם עם בנות-מואב (במדבר כה: ד), ובגניבת החרם על יד עכן ממטה יהודה (יהושע ז: טו). רק עכשיו משה הזדהה עם ה' וחווה את הבגידה, התלונות, וקשיית העורף של העם. לכן: "ויחר למשה מאד" ואמר (במדבר טז: כט) "אם-כמות כל-האדם ימתון אלה ופקדת כל-האדם יפקד עליהם לא יהוה שלחני".

(Numbers 16:4) "And Moses heard and fell on his face." Why did Moses fall on his face before he answered Korah? Moses was waiting for God's command. He fell on his face for a long time, but he did not get any sign from God. He stood and called out, "In the morning, God will make known," etc. When he finished speaking, Moses waited for the

word of God, but the heavens were silent. He called out, "Listen up, Levites," etc. When he finished speaking, he waited for a Divine prophecy, but the Tent of Meeting was dark. He sent to call to Dathan and Abiram. Not a word did He answer him. Out of desperation, Moses said to Korah, "Come before YHWH, you and them and Aaron, tomorrow," etc. Then (Numbers 16:19), "Korah and all of his community congregated against them at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting." Finally, God called out to Moses. Why was God silent until then? In order to give Moses a chance to identify with God. This is the meaning of the verse (Exodus 33:11), "And God spoke to Moses face-to-face as a person speaks with his fellow." "Face-to-face" can only be referring to (the situation in which) one puts himself in the place of the other. It is as if God, figuratively, is saying to Moses, "Now you understand my sorrow with this people." In three places God becomes angry and wants to consume the Israelites in fire: In the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:10), in their whoring with the women of Moab (Numbers 25:4), and in the stealing of the property set aside for worship by Achen of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 7:15). Only *now* (in the incident with Korah) does Moses identify with God and experience the disloyalty, the complaints, and the stiff-necked nature of the people. Therefore, "Moses became very angry," and he said (Numbers 16:29), "If they will die a death like any other human being and if they will be protected like any other human being, that YHWH did not send me."

.2

(במדבר טז: טו) "ויחר למשה מאד". הא הדא דכתיב (הושע ב: כא) "וארשתיך לי לעולם וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים" וגו'. סימני האהבה בין האלהות ובין משה: האלהות אירסה את משה כמו שכתוב (שמות ג: ב) "בלבת-אש מתוך הסנה וירא והנה הסנה בער באש והסנה איננו אכל". אחר כך, שלחה את משה להוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים כדי שמשה יוכיח את אהבתו. הכניסה אותו לחופה בהר סיני עם בני ישראל כעדים. השניים מימשו את יחסיהם בהר סיני כמו שכתוב (שמות כד: יח) "בארבעים יום וארבעים לילה". אחר כך, שקעו

בשגרא כמו שכתוב "ארבעים שנה במדבר למען ענתך לנסתך". מ"ם בגמטרייה ארבעים, המ"מ הפותחת את שמו של משה. ארבעים זה ארבע עשרות. ארבע אותיות בשם המפורש של האלהות – רמז שהאלהות השתקפה במשה. ארבעת המינים בלולב – רמז שמשה שמח לפני האלהות שבעה ימי שבע הברכות כמו שכתוב (ויקרא כג: מ) "ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ הדר...ושמחתם לפני יהוה אלהיכם שבעת ימים". וארבע האמהות – רמז שהאלהות היתה כמו ארבע אמהות למשה. וכך גידלו את בני ישראל עד בגרותם עם כל ההצלחות והכשלונות, העליות והירידות הבלתי נמנעות. במרידת קרח "ויחר למשה מאד". למען אהבתה, כשמשה הכריז (הבמדבר טז: כט) "אם-כמות כל-האדם ימתון אלה ופקדת כל-האדם יפקד עליהם לא יהוה שלחני," האלהות ביצעה את בקשתו ופתחה את הארץ (במדבר טז: לה) "ואש יצאה מאת יהוה ותאכל את החמשים ומאתים איש מקריבי הקטרת." לכן, "וארשתיך לי לעולם" וגו'.

Another interpretation: (Numbers 16:15) "And Moses became very angry." There it is written (Hosea 2:21), "I will betroth you to me forever, and I will betroth you in righteousness and in justice and in loving-kindness and in compassion," etc. The signs of the love between God and Moses: God betrothed Moses, as it is written (Exodus 3:2) that Moses saw "...A flame of fire in the bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire but the bush was not consumed." Afterwards, God sent Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt in order that Moses would prove his love. She brought him to the wedding canopy on Mount Sinai with the Israelites as witnesses. The two of them consummated their relationship on Mount Sinai, as it is written (Exodus 24:18), "For forty days and forty nights." Afterwards, they immersed themselves in the daily routine, as it is written (Deuteronomy 8:2), "Forty years in the desert in order to humble you and to prove you, to know what is in your heart." In Gematria, forty is symbolized by the Hebrew letter "mem", the "mem" that begins the name Moses. Forty is four tens. Four letters in the unpronounced name of God – a hint that God was reflected in Moses. Four

species of plants in the lulav – a hint that Moses rejoiced before God seven days of the seven customary wedding meals (after the wedding canopy), as it is written (Leviticus 23:40), "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the etrog...and you shall rejoice before YHWH your God for seven days." Four matriarchs – a hint that God was like four mothers to Moses. And thus, (God and Moses) raised the Israelites until they came of age with all of the inevitable successes and failures, the highs and lows. In Korah's rebellion, "Moses became very angry." For the sake of Her love for him, when Moses declared (Numbers 16:29), "If they will die a death like any other human being and if they will be protected like any other human being, then YHWH did not send me," God carried out his request and opened the earth (Numbers 16:35), "And fire went out from YHWH and consumed the 250 people who were sacrificing the incense." Therefore, we understand "I will betroth you to me forever," etc.

Exposition of Midrash Series #2

This Midrash series focuses on the relationship between God and Moses. The Torah presents God and Moses as having a complex relationship from their first meeting at the burning bush until Moses dies in God's embrace, as the Midrash teaches, "Thereupon God kissed Moses and took away his soul with a kiss of the mouth, and God, if one might say so, wept" (Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10). Since the relationship of God and Moses is so integral to the Torah story, it *must* have some influence on what transpires in Numbers 16. Given that that they have such a verbal relationship throughout the Torah, it is then problematic that God is silent for much of Numbers 16 and that Moses does not turn to God immediately for consultation on such a serious problem. The classical rabbis also recognized this problem. BaMidbar Rabbah 18:4 answers this problem by actually inserting God's voice into the text so that God would not be silent. BaMidbar Rabbah 18:6 answers the problem with a *mashal* whose message is that Moses does not turn to God right away because he reasons that the Israelites have behaved badly so many times in the wilderness that "How much can I bother the Presence!" That is to say, BaMidbar Rabbah 18:6 explains that Moses took things into his own hands because

he imagined that God was tired of dealing with all of the problems that the Israelites caused.

I, however, wanted to offer a new interpretation to solve the problem of God's silence. Therefore, each Midrash in this series offers a possible explanation:

1. This section fills in the gaps in the narrative of Numbers 16 and creates a new narrative that encompasses God's silences and makes them a part of the story. The explanation for God's silence in this midrash is that God wants Moses to understand what it is like to be God and to understand the decision-making process that God goes through in the moments of complaint, stubbornness and worshipping other gods. We see, for example, in Exodus 32, that Moses restrains God from destroying the people after the incident of the Golden Calf. Perhaps God wonders if Moses would himself act with such restraint if the Israelites made a personal attack on *him*. Therefore, my Midrash explains, God keeps silent in this incident as a test for Moses to see what he does when the people rebel.

The Midrash begins with a rhetorical question (explained in the commentary to my Midrash 1:3). It asks why Moses would fall on his face before answering Korah, giving the reader a moment to pause and consider for himself what might have been the reason. It then answers itself immediately, doing so, however, in a multi-layered way. There is the *pshat* (the simple answer) that Moses was simply waiting for God to respond, and then there is the *drash* (the more expanded answer) which is the Midrash itself of Moses's continuous waiting for God.

The technique used from here on out is filling in the gaps. It is a method in which I retell the Biblical story but add details between the original lines of the Biblical text in order to either flesh out the story better or turn it into an entirely different story altogether. An example of this would be BaMidbar 18:4 in which the Midrash fills in the gap from the time of the Levites' ordination as servants in the Tabernacle to the time when Korah gathered the congregation against Moses and Aaron. In doing so, it tells the story of how Korah explained to the people how Moses dressed up Aaron and instructed

him to take the tithing from the people. Immediately, the Midrash jumps to Numbers 16:3, saying thereby "they congregated against Moses."

In my Midrash, I fill in the gap by saying that each time Moses spoke, he was indeed waiting for God to, so to say, jump into the conversation. There is a growing sense of Moses's frustration and desperation as the story goes on as he is not sure what to do but feels that he must make a statement or take a stand nonetheless. This can lead to questions for the listener/reader about leadership – how do we know when we are making the right decisions? Is there an inner voice that tells us the right thing to do? How do we judge a situation?

My midrash asks another rhetorical question about why God was silent throughout most of Numbers 16. Again, this gives another pause for the reader to reflect upon possible answers to this question. Then, I give my answer: God wanted Moses to understand what it is like to be God, at least in relation to his anger at the ungrateful and argumentative behavior of the people. There is, then, an unspoken question that is answered by the Midrash: Why would God want to do that? The answer is that the true friendship between God and Moses is defined through the ability to empathize one with the other. I bring a verse from elsewhere in the Torah, Exodus 33:11, and re-interpret that verse, thereby inserting into this Midrash a small Midrash on another verse of the Torah, and thus bringing new meaning to the story at hand in Numbers 16. This is also part of the multi-layered aspect of the Midrash that I mentioned earlier. In addition, it reflects the אין...אלא technique described in my commentary on the first Midrash series that emphasizes my belief that my re-interpretation is the definitive way of looking at the verse. I interpret Exodus 33:11 as an expression of true friendship -- the deepest form of empathy in understanding the pain of a beloved friend. This idea resonates with the modern French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who said that in place of the term "love", he prefers "responsibility for the Other, being-for-the-other".[66]

I then utilize the rabbinic phrase כביכול, which means "as though it were possible" which Jastrow describes as "referring to an allegorical or anthropomorphous expression

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[66] Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations With Philippe Nemo.* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 52.

with reference to YHWH"[67] This is a statement of modesty on the part of the Midrashic writer, saying that I truly do not dare to say what God is like or what God would say when I am about to assign human attributes or action to God. In this Midrash, I assert that God says something to Moses which is not written in the Biblical text or, rather, I say that God *might* have asked Moses to please understand God. This is a frustrated, misunderstood God who is at the end of God's wits to form a relationship with the people and who finds consolation in God's relationship with Moses. However, according to my Midrash, even God's relationship with Moses is not perfect as, in God's attempt to deepen God's relationship with Moses, God's lack of communication with him only frustrates him.

The Midrash continues by recalling three other situations in the Torah where God is enraged by the people's actions in which God's anger is expressed by the phrase ויחר אף and God wanted to destroy them by fire. These situations parallel Numbers 16 in which the phrase ויחר אף is now used in terms of Moses and, as a result of his wrath, a fire destroys some of the people. Moses seems to be taking on characteristics of God in this scene and I interpret this identification with God as God's attempt to help Moses form an even closer relationship with God.

My Midrash raises a lot of question about relationship. On the surface, of course, it is about the relationship between God and Moses. But their relationship presented in the Torah can be interpolated to any symbiotic relationship. It raises questions of how to best help those you love, how to teach a lesson, or how to get a point across. It hints at the possibility of the existence of flaws in communication even between those who truly care for one another, giving insight into the imperfect nature of relationship.

The Midrash ends with Numbers 16:29, having begun with Numbers 16:4. These verses form the bookends for a new narrative -- the Midrash retells the Biblical story from a new perspective. Placing a verse from beginning of the chapter and a verse at the end of the chapter shows that the narrative between flows from the beginning to the end and could be the legitimate story. The Midrash uses the Biblical verses as building blocks to tell the story of Korah's rebellion in a different way.

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[67] Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*. (Jerusalem: Chorev Publishing, 1950), 577.

2. The best way that I can think of to describe this Midrash is allegorical. It was most influenced by the allegorical interpretations of Song of Songs as a love song between God and Israel and the book of Hosea in which God wants Hosea to physically enact the romantic relationship between God and Israel. This midrash, thereby, turns the story of Exodus through the end of the Torah into an allegory for the love between God and Moses.

I believe that one way to view the Torah is as God's search for a partner or, dare I say, a mate. From many of our personal experiences, we know that this can be a very difficult task to find the one person you can love. And we know that love is not about finding the perfect person, but rather it is finding the person who we love so much that we can live with their flaws. God tries various relationships: God's first love is Abraham (we always remember our first love!) and then God tries out the ancestors that follow him.

The question may be asked: Why does God keep choosing men? The answer that this Midrash supplies is that God is a female figure, of course! This female version of God also takes on a feminized version of God's name. I decided to call God "Elohut" because it is the closest to "Elohim." Also, this word does not have any other meaning other than "God" or "Godliness", unlike other names of God which describe a quality of God (like Shechinah is about a place where God dwells). I wanted it to sound as much like the God, including the name, so that we get the message that this is the same God as the God we are used to seeing except with a female role. Not only that, but God is also a strong female figure who exercises control over events in history and pursues the men for whom she feels attraction. One might be inclined to call this a "feminist" midrash in creating a strong, female God, but I prefer to think of it as a balancing midrash – for two thousand years, we have read piles of rabbinic literature in which God is described in the male voice and, since God is beyond male or female, we also deserve to hear a female description.

For God, the problem with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is that they all remain very connected to their wives until they die. It is only Moses who leaves his family and truly cleaves to God. This Midrash tells the history of the romance between God and Moses

until Numbers 16 which provides yet another explanation for how it is that God could allow Moses to strike out with such violence against the people, especially his own close family members (Korah is his first cousin). The premise is that as Moses has done everything that God has requested throughout the Torah, so too, in this moment, God's love for Moses is so strong that God cannot or does not want to refuse Moses his desire to destroy those who oppose him.

The Midrash begins with Numbers 16:15 in which Moses becomes angry. The next verse brought is a פסוק רחוק (see explanation in midrash 1:1) as the first hint of the passionate love that God feels for Moses. A statement about the love between God and Moses is made followed by a chronology of their love supported by proof texts from the Torah. As I demonstrated in my commentary to the first Midrash series, this is a rabbinic technique that utilizes Biblical verses to support a rabbinic idea which often takes the verses out of their original context and infuses the verses with new meaning. It could also be said that this technique demonstrates the multi-layered nature of Biblical text, demonstrating to the reader that all is not as it seems or, as the Kabbalists believed, the true meaning of a text is not the literal meaning but rather it is the *sod*, the secret meaning, that is divined through various methods of interpretation.

I then placed in the Midrash in a Gematria, playing with the numerical value of a word in order to infuse it with new meaning. Gematria "consists of explaining a word or group of words according to the numerical value of the letters, or of substituting other letters of the alphabet for them in accordance with a set system." In rabbinic literature, especially in later collections of aggadic Midrash such as BaMidbar Rabbah, Gematria plays a role in interpreting individual letters and "is used as supporting evidence and as a mnemonic."[68] I think there is also an element of rabbinic play at work in the creation of a Gematria through which rabbis can further demonstrate their knowledge of the Bible and create unexpected connections that surprise and delight the reader. An example of a Gematria can be found in BaMidbar 18:21 in which the letters of the name השטן is found to add up to 364 which is the days of the year minus Yom Kippur, meaning Satan can harm people every day of the year except that holy day.

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[68] Derovan, David, Gershom Scholem, and Moshe Idel. "Gematria." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 7. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. p. 424-425.

In my Gematria, the repetition of the number 40 both in the days and nights that Moses was on Mount Sinai with God and the number of years that the Israelites wandered in the desert leads to a correspondence with the letter "מ" which I attributed to Moses. The Gematria is further developed in breaking down the 40 to 4 times 10 and delving into the symbolism of the number 4. There are a number of associations with this number in Jewish tradition and I connected each association to an attribute of the love between God and Moses.

Continuing on, the dramatic love affair between God and Moses is described until arriving at the "present" situation of Korah's rebellion. This technique could be loosely compared to BaMidbar Rabbah 18:6 in which a chronology of Israel's rebellions are related until arriving at Korah's rebellion which is then shown to be the last straw of God's patience, thus explaining the violent way in which he and his crowd are destroyed. In my Midrash, Korah's rebellion is a tool which demonstrates what God was prepared to do to show Her love for Moses – when Moses got angry and called upon God to destroy Korah and his band, God did it.

In the closing line, the פסוק רחוק returns to remind the reader how all the loose ends tie together and how, indeed, the drama of Korah and his rebellion was only one episode in the great saga of the eternal love between God and Moses.

This Midrash leaves a problematic picture of God, Moses, and the Israelites which can lead to much discussion. How does the relationship described between God and Moses affect the Israelites? Is the relationship symbolic of a healthy, normal relationship between two people who raise a family together or perhaps not? One of my thoughts on how to possibly interpret this Midrash is that this incident surrounding Korah is a sign that it is time to move on – while Moses has achieved a momentous success in bringing Israel out of Egypt and guiding them to freedom and their own land, perhaps his time is coming to an end as he ages and wearies of his heavy burden. On the other hand, perhaps God sees Moses's waning energy as a sign of a loss of interest in Her and begins to do desperate things to keep his attention. A multitude of ideas could come of such a discussion and lead to personal insights about love, aging, and other aspects of relationship.

Story Based on Journal Reflections:
How Korah's Rebellion Might Have Really Looked

Preface: How the World was Created

In the beginning, God created the world. This world that God created, in human eyes, was not perfect. But God thought it was perfect because God created a world that always changes, and, therefore, it is never boring. What human beings call "defects", like war and food chains, God calls entertainment. When some little ants call out "Peace! Peace!", God shouts back, "No! No! How awfully boring that would be for everyone!" For example, God is amused by the men in the black hats sweltering in the 33 degree Celsius sun praying for a messiah to make the world sunny and sweet and, well, boring all the time. "Isn't that funny," God says to Godself, "that they think they are serving me?"

God created a game. God created chaos, and then God created humans to play in this game. The game goes like this: God made *yetzer harah,* the evil impulse, and humans strive to resist it. Humans want to strive for righteousness precisely because it is contrary to our nature. And, by the way, genetics are no indicator of human nature. One generation of good people leads to a generation of bad people. Therefore, you should not feel like you are a total failure as a parent if your child is not perfect or even goes astray. And a poet can descend from the loins of a misfit.

* * * * * *

The Story of Korah

Korah grew up in the mud pits of Egypt, like every other Hebrew child, a slave. There was no royalty among the Israelites, everyone was as unequal as the next, and everyone suffered. Dathan and Abiram were brothers who were childhood friends of Korah – though they were from different tribes, somehow their parents allowed them to mix. Perhaps this was their fatal mistake because then they were loyal to Korah until the end. As oldest of old friends, one has no choice – you stick to the one who stuck his neck out for you on numerous occasions in the mud pits of Egypt. Dathan and Abiram were

like Korah's personal body guards, some might say his "yes-men". They were a little slow in the brain, but when they were with Korah, for some reason they felt full of hope.

Later on, wandering in the desert, Korah would prove his mettle as a practical, realistic, and pragmatic leader. Korah was a wiz at fixing tents, making portable fixtures, designing new types of bowls woven from straw, figuring out a new system of sharing the load and saddling the animals for maximum carrying. He knew how to tie knots – in fact, this is what got him out of the mud pits and into Pharaoh's palace.

One day, the taskmaster saw Korah tying knots to join ropes together that would attach to a pulley to lift stones from the ground to the top of the pyramid. When he saw how strong the knots held the ropes under tons of weight, he thought, "This is a great talent for Pharaoh's riverboats for the Nile. This Israelite would make the ideal deck boy." So he picked out Korah and brought him to the palace.

When Korah arrived to the palace and they cleaned him up, eventually he met Moses. They became close pretty quickly – maybe because they were close in age and maybe also because they were kinsmen (though they didn't know it at the time.) Korah became like an older brother to Moses.

As the story goes, when the boys grew up and Moses learned his true identity and the plight of his people, he killed an Egyptian taskmaster, left Egypt in fear of his life, and then one day mysteriously reappeared with Aaron. When Moses reunited with Aaron, who he discovered was his real brother, Aaron because his deputy in confrontations with Pharaoh and in leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Korah, Moses's childhood "brother", was left out in the cold.

After crossing the Sea of Reeds and escaping Pharaohs' army, the desert proved tough for the Israelites. Every other day, there were rebels organizing against the rule of Moses and God – they cried out for water, they complained about the Manna that fell from heaven, they built a Golden Calf to be their god when Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments, and more. None of these rebellions had been a success. So, in the case of "Korah's rebellion", the unnamed instigators of this rebellion thought maybe it would be better to send a close relative of Moses to make their claims because he thought that Moses would listen more to such a person. So, they sent Korah, Moses's first cousin.

In order to psyche himself up for the confrontation, Korah spent the night getting drunk. Korah was a fine upstanding Levite who performed the tasks assigned him with dedication and care, and he was certainly not an alcoholic. However, he was so full of fear and trembling at this task that was thrown upon him, like a rope that was looped tightly around his neck, that he grabbed a bottle of spirits in a sort of flailing stupor. This didn't help anything after the heat of the desert day which makes a person faint and sometimes hallucinatory. The truth is, he was egged on by the other people who had been complaining all the way from Egypt – he had listened and listened for some months now, and, when you hear something enough times, sometimes you start to believe it even if, in your heart of hearts, you know it to be untrue. Part of him, however, thought he could do for the people this time what Aaron had done in the time of the Golden Calf when Moses was up on the mountain – Korah would neutralize the situation and try to placate them and try to save the people in the end. And perhaps he would even be the hero now, and *he* could become Moses's right-hand man.

It happened one day when Moses and Aaron were sitting around having a cup of coffee, discussing the latest news from God, planning the strategy for the upcoming battles against foreign nations, sitting wistfully wondering what the Promised Land looks like, knowing they will never see it; trading stories about the kids, boasting proudly. Aaron had more what to say. As usual, Moses mumbled, – he didn't see his family all that much. Aaron, on the other hand, burst at the seams -- his pride and joy were his sons. He couldn't believe his fortune that he got to work with his sons and see them every day and share holy service with them, though his heart still aches at the loss of the elders. Here were Moses and Aaron chit-chatting, when this mass of men descended upon them, full of fury, shouting all at once, with Korah at the head.

Moses, when Korah came to him with the congregation, took the situation as a personal affront. He asked Korah, 'Why are you doing this to *me*?" Sensing a threat, Moses lashed out with a threat -- the human way of one-upmanship. He began to shout. His anger took control of him. He began to stutter. The words came out in fits and starts. He couldn't get out even a complete paragraph he was so distraught. He cried out with a rage – a blind, irrational rage.

When Moses saw Korah coming, memories flooded into his head. He addressed Korah personally as his cousin with whom he grew up and with whom he played as a child. Then Moses, as the fire of his fury grew, he moved on to attacking Korah's immediate family and then he attacked Korah's tribal group. He claimed that they were social climbing and wanted to take over as priests. The tribal leaders stood dumbfounded – what had started as the people's revolution had turned into a familial squabble from which they and their concerns had been completely left out. Perhaps Moses should never have given the job of guarding the Tabernacle to his kinsmen. The boundaries and relationships of family became blurred. When Moses cried out to Korah, was he appealing to Korah his cousin or to Korah the political dignitary? Were they dealing in holy matters or the mundane? Moses's speech blurred these boundaries for all who were present. Some wondered, Was it a sign of senility?

In any case, Korah saw almost immediately that the only way for this to end would be in death – everyone knew what happened to the rebels who initiated the Golden Calf. However, once the ball got rolling, there seemed to be no way to stop it. "So, if I'm going to die," he thought in the heat of the moment, "I might as well go down in history." In that moment, Korah became the emblem of the oxymoron that lay within the generation of freedom. He embodied the mixed feelings and insecurities of a generation that could never have fully succeeded. The yoke of slavery would always weigh heavily on their shoulders, and they would never fully actualize the potential of the Jewish people – they were the "bridge" generation and there was nothing they could do about that. It was all a part of the game.

Therefore, when Moses began to yell and God didn't answer him, Korah was actually emboldened and began to think that perhaps he *was* the right person to embark on this mission. Korah also thought that Moses's reaction showed that he was nervous, and God's lack of reaction proved that God had left him. Korah thought, "Maybe God will listen to my contention. Maybe God *will* hear this cause. My cause *is* just. I am fighting for the people. Maybe God is tired of Moses. God sees how Moses is taking all of the power for himself. God *is* ready for a new leader, a new style of leadership, God *is* with the people. Isn't that what all of the Exodus from Egypt was all about? Moses is nervous, Moses is scared, Moses knows that he is going down."

Aaron tried to help out, as he always tried to make the peace in his bumbling way. Moses sensed that this would happen, and he would have none of that this time. The Golden Calf incident had been enough of an embarrassment. So, he immediately dragged Aaron's name into it and claimed that Korah was fomenting rebellion also against him. He made Aaron stand next to him in full priestly garb so they would appear as a formidable wall.

Tension hung in the dry desert air. No one slept that night.

Moses and Aaron performed the evening sacrifices alone at the Tent of Meeting. As they held the night watch shifts, they spoke deeply together. Though Moses ran the show in public, he always listened carefully to his gentle brother's thoughts behind the scenes.

The women gathered around the dying embers of the fire that night, their faces glowing red throwing muted shadows to the desert. The only sound was a faint wind rustling the brush. They murmured among themselves. One said, "I would have invited a few representatives from Korah to sit with Moses, with God as Advisor." Another said, "I would have told Moses to consult first with God before issuing any threats or ultimatums." They replayed the scene from the day and reconstructed it how they would have handled the situation: They would have turned to Korah and asked what are the problems and demands. They would then have turned to Moses, restraining him from, in his wrath, interrupting Korah, and they would have asked him, "Do you understand what Korah is claiming?" Moses would have shuffled crossly and only hurled back vitriol at Korah. The women, without raising their voices, would have said to Moses, "Yes, but you are not hearing the pain beneath Korah's words. On the surface, he is telling you that he thinks you shouldn't be leader any more for such and such reason. Underneath all of this bravado, the leaders are trying to tell you that they are scared. They are supposed to be brave for their people, and they want to be and they act brave when addressing the people, but they have no where to address their own fears. You keep telling them there's this promised land. That's easy for you because you have a great faith. It's harder for us because our faith relies solely upon you. It relies upon what you have told us about God and our dim memory of the terrible storm at Sinai which we are still confused how to

interpret that and what it tells us about our God. We want to have faith, but we are having a hard time. Please help us."

At the same time, the tribal heads huddled around camp fires on the other side of the camp. They spoke little.

All in all, no one slept that night.

The next day, as the dawn gained strength into morning, all of Israel gathered in the middle of the camp as a light wind began to rustle the tent flaps. Moses and Aaron stood stoically at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting like the dusty statues guarding the pyramids of Egypt. The children looked up at Moses and Aaron with big pleading eyes – or perhaps they were accusing eyes -- that said, "You are not fair. You are evil men. My father is righteous and trying to do the right thing for people while you want all the power for yourself." The wind began to pick up speed. The women vacillated between henning about nervously and dutifully standing by their husbands holding his hand or grabbing a fold in his shirt.

Then a great wind swept through the camp. And then there was a stillness. Suddenly, the earth rumbled and trembled and a giant rift was ripped in the dirt. The people screamed in a frantic panic as some fell right into the hole with their children and their tents and all of their herds. Jagged lines of black appeared all over the ground and more and more people and objects fell in the holes. Fires sprung up everywhere. Everything went blurry and shook with a furious thunder. The air became hot and moist. There was no where to run.

Those present, and for many generations following, say they saw the hand of God in the fire and heard the voice of God call upon the earth to open its jaws to swallow the 253 families that dropped into the earth that day. Some, today, however, call this event an earthquake, a natural phenomenon devoid of theological value that happened to coincide with a rift in the community..

In any case, after this moment, Moses's leadership changes. After Korah's rebellion, Moses lost all of his energy. He became a bit defeated – perhaps he knew his time was nearing the end. He then appointed Joshua to take over when he would die. Soon after, he sat down on a rock, and he just started to repeat himself, telling the stories a bit differently this time because, in his memory mingled with his fear of death, the

stories looked a little differently and they were tinged with his experiences and his hindsight. It is true that Moses was wiser in his old age, but he had his share of bitterness that he carried from life along with his regrets and remorse, his stubborn hold onto certain ideas and beliefs, his sharpness worn down, his mind and body tiring.

* * * * * *

Epilogue

That day of Korah's rebellion was a day of baseless hatred when all became confounded and spiraled into complete misunderstanding that could only lead to violence. Each hour the tension escalated until it could only explode into violence. Violence always means death and loss: mourning and pain that never go away. A revenge that always needs to be taken. Whichever leader has might on his side is the winner -- but he doesn't really win.

And the rest of the Israelites? Most of us in most circumstances, we sit by and we are placid and docile. We don't speak up. We fear the sparks, the opposition, and being defeated. We leave the leadership to the people who are ready to take the chance, and they start the wars. Someone may win, someone may lose, but for sure, people will be killed.

How quickly men are to anger! Men strike out. They hurl words. They ask the earth to open up and swallow their opponents! They solve problems with missiles, artillery, and bunkers 100 meters underground. Moses could be like many modern leaders: He thought that by having his opponents and their families and all of their stuff swallowed up, he could erase their existence and make them and the problem disappear. But the problem of Korah's rebellion hangs with us even after 3000 years. It is as ever-present in our consciousness as before. In fact, it is even more present.

Yes, in spite of it all -- Lucky Moses! Lucky Korah! Whether we judge them as good or bad, their names will probably live forever. We will forever ponder Korah and either blame him or try to find rightness in his cause. We will analyze every corner of Moses's leadership. And we will look for ourselves wherever we can in their stories.

It was a mistake to send Korah, and we Jews sure learned a lesson from this, as we have always learned from all of our strategic failures in history: Don't think because you are a blood relative that you are the person to send. Probably the best person to send is the lowest figure or perhaps even a stranger. The result of sending Korah -- Moses continued to single out Korah the whole time, completely ignored the claims of the rebellion, and it became strictly personal.

Conclusion

It is my hope that, through this Midrash project, the contemporary Jew will be able to come into contact with the ancient Midrashic form, struggle with it, learn from it, and also be able to place it within the modern context. Midrash is a world of creativity unto itself, and the ideal conditions for creativity take place within boundaries. I view the boundaries of Rabbinic Midrash – as indeed, if the rabbis did not invent the genre, they certainly perfected it – as the playground for the renewal of the genre today using metaphors and language that speak to Jews today.

It is possible to define midrash in the broadest of terms, and I do consider this a valid pursuit in which I would encourage all Jews to participate. However, I do not think that the oft heard definition of contemporary midrash is completely true to the original intention of the genre. As a future rabbi who desires to serve as a link in the rabbinic tradition, I want to preserve the stylistic techniques, follow the imperative to delve into and master the Biblical text, and keep the pedagogic goals always before me in my study and in my writing.

Studying the classical Midrash and struggling with the world view of the ancient rabbis was both challenging and delightful. While I did not agree with a number of their interpretations, I was often pleasantly surprised by their incredible ability to draw connections between verses, create inventive word plays, and present imaginative stories to explain the problems they saw in the Torah text. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire writing process from freely reflecting upon a Torah text that I found troubling, culling the central ideas from these writings, and playing with the Hebrew language like a child

playing with new toys – full of joy and wonder, trying different combinations, finding the right verse from the Prophets or the Writings to express my ideas, and feeling Divinely inspired because it all seemed to fit together so well.

Midrash, I believe, is a creative art and, like any art, is one that may be studied, practiced, and perfected. However, within the boundaries of the midrash, the sky is the limit. For me, this is the essence of Judaism: though we may build a fence around our Torah, we are always testing the boundaries of that fence and always building castles, digging holes, and engaging in any and every other kind of creative pursuit to influence the character of our Torah and, in each generation, continue to renew it and make it our own.

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