

Korah - Moses Responds to Datan and Aviram
Rabbi Eliot Malomet **June 28, 2025 2 Tammuz 5785**

In the tumult of the rebellion, Datan and Aviram, two of the more loathsome Korahite co-conspirators, offer their own calumnious comments against Moses. When Moses summoned them to appear with the rest of the cohort for the showdown, they refused. And then, in their audacity, they lobbed this verbal grenade at him, humiliating him in public:

לא נעלה. המעט כי העליטנו מארץ זבת חלב ודבש להמיתנו במדבר כי תשתרר עלינו גם השתרר. אף לא אל ארץ זבת חלב ודבש הביאתנו ותמן לנו נחלת שדה וכרם העיני האנשים ההם תנקר לא נעלה. (במ' טז: יב-יד)

Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us? Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come! (Num. 16:12-14)

The words hurt. Moses took them personally.

Moses was in deep pain. (16:15) **וַיַּחַר לְמֹשֶׁה מְאֹד** (טז: טו)

Close readers of the Torah will note that the word **וַיַּחַר** is almost always paired with **אף-af-nostril** and literally means: **to flare one's nostrils**. It is the standard biblical expression for anger and rage. Some examples:

וַיַּחַר אַף יַעֲקֹב בְּרָחֵל (בר' ל:ב)	Jacob was angry at Rachel. (Gen. 30:2)	In response to her jealousy of Leah's fertility.
וַיַּחַר אַף ה' בְּמֹשֶׁה (שמות ד: יד)	God was angry at Moses. (Exod. 4:14)	For suggesting that God call on someone else to lead.
וַיַּחַר אַף מֹשֶׁה וַיַּשְׁלֵךְ מִיָּדוֹ (שמות לב: יט)	Moses was angry and threw (the tablets) from his hands. (Exod. 32:19)	Upon seeing Israel's idolatry of the Golden Calf.

But when **וַיַּחַר** appears by itself without **אף** it is not anger. It is to be **aggrieved, wronged**, or to be in **deep emotional pain**. Some examples:

וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד. (בר' ד: ה)	Cain was much distressed. (Gen. 4:5)	That God did not notice his offering.
וַיַּחַר לַיַּעֲקֹב וַיִּרְבַּ בְּלָבָן. (בר' לא: לו)	Jacob was aggrieved and quarreled with Lavan. (Gen. 31:36)	For rummaging through his possessions in search of his idols.
וַיִּבְנִי יַעֲקֹב בָּאָר מִן הַשָּׂדֶה כְּשָׁמָעַם וַיִּתְעַצְבוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיַּחַר לָהֶם מְאֹד (בר' לז: ז)	But Jacob's sons came back from the fields when they heard, and the men were pained, they were exceedingly upset (Gen. 34:7)	Upon hearing the news of the rape of their sister, Dinah.

Paying close attention to these words allows us to present a more nuanced portrait of Moses' character. While Moses gets angry all the time, **here Moses is not angry, he's hurt, and this is a moment of great pathos**. An angry Moses throws the tablets, accosts his brother, or smites a rock - as we shall see next week. But a hurt Moses turns to God:

He (Moses) said to God: Do not turn your face toward their offering. (16:15) **וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל ה' אֶל תִּפְּן אֶל מִנְחָתָם** (טז: טו)

This seems quite benign. But if we compare this to other things that Moses asks of God, it is actually quite significant. A few examples will suffice:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל מֹשֶׁה מַה תִּצְעַק אֵלַי (שמות יד: טו)	God said to Moses, Why do you scream to me? (Exod. 14:15)	At the Sea of Reeds Moses prays for God's help when they were being chased.
וַיִּצְעַק אֵל ה' וַיּוֹרֶהוּ ה' עֵץ (שמות טו: כה)	Moses screamed to God and God showed him a tree (Exod. 15:25)	At Mara, Moses prays for water.
וְסַלַחְתָּ לְעֹנֻנוֹ וּלְחַטָּאתָנוּ וְנָחֵלְתָמוּ. (שמות לד: ט)	so, forgive our iniquity and our sin, and make-us-your-inheritance! (Exod. 34:9)	At Mount Sinai, after the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses prays for forgiveness.
אֵל נָא רַפָּא נָא לָהּ (במ' יב: יג)	O God, pray, heal her! (Num. 12:13)	After Miriam is afflicted with tzara'at, Moses prays for her recovery.

Ordinarily, whenever Moses beseeches God, he is asking God to **do something**. In this instance Moses is asking God **not to do something**, to wit, not to pay attention to the offerings of Datan and Aviram. To ignore them and render them meaningless. We cannot overstate the significance of that request. The Torah does not lack for severe punishments meted out for serious transgressions. Idolatry, blasphemy, murder, violation of Shabbat, and numerous other crimes are punished by death. Eating prohibited foods such as blood or leaven on Passover, and many other ritual transgressions are punished by **karet**, a heavenly excommunication. But for God to ignore an offering, that is effectively the erasure of the person who is making that offering! What were Datan and Aviram's transgressions? A list:

1. They publicly disobey Moses by refusing to come forward.
2. They publicly ridicule the land and demean God's promise.
3. They falsely accuse Moses of causing their eventual death in the desert.
4. They falsely accuse Moses of trying to lord over and enslave them.

With their bombast and bluster and their caustic casuistry, Datan and Aviram grabbed the attention of the entire people. In that one brief ignominious moment, they publicly humiliated Moses and repudiated God. Is there an appropriate punishment for all of these things? Moses does not suggest death or excommunication. He simply wants God to ignore them. **Do not pay attention to their offering. By humiliating me in public they have forfeited your honor. By becoming the center of the people's attention, they have forfeited the right to your divine attention.** Curiously, we have an example of God not paying attention to an offering in the story of Cain and Abel. There is a feint echo of that story here. We recall that when Abel presented his sacrifice to God, God took notice. But when Cain gave his offering, God did not pay attention.

וְאֵל קַיִן וְאֵל מִנְחָתוֹ לֹא שָׁעָה וַיַּחַר לְקַיִן מְאֹד וַיִּפְּלוּ פָנָיו. (בר' ד: ה)
But to Cain and his offering He paid no heed. Cain was much distressed and his face fell. (Gen. 4:5)

Note the similarity of the texts:

אל תפן אל מנחתם	(God), do not pay heed to their offering.
ואל מנחתו לא שעה	To his offering, he (God) did not pay heed.

Why was Cain rejected by God? The Torah never answers this question. We could speculate that he was banal, unimaginative, and stingy; perfunctory, servile, and small-hearted. But all we know is this: he presents an unprompted, plant-based offering to God, to get God's attention. However, when Abel brings God an animal offering, **from the finest and fattest of his sheep**, that really gets God's attention! When Cain discovers that God has ignored him, he becomes depressed. God challenges him to snap out of it. To no avail. Cain reasons, **If killing (for a sacrifice) is what gets God's attention, then I'll show God a real killing!** Thus, Cain kills Abel and only now, tragically, gets God's complete attention. God makes Cain a vagrant wanderer throughout the earth, *i.e.* he becomes permanently landless. **In his moment of pain, Moses invokes the punishment of Cain. He asks God to ignore Datan and Aviram's offering, just like he ignored Cain's, and by association, he renders them symbolically landless, like Cain. For Moses, this punishment fits the crime: those who craved attention by the people are to be ignored by God. Those symbolically landless, like the archetype of exile, Cain.** But this was not enough of a punishment for God. God is incensed that the people have rejected Moses and Aaron, and orders Moses and Aaron to:

הבדלו מתוך העדה הזאת ואכלה אתם כרגע. (במ' טז:כא)
Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant! (Num. 16:21)

But they refuse. They beseech God to relent. He does, but warns the people that he will still punish the rebels alone:

העלו מסביב למשכן קרח דתן ואבירם. (טז:כד)
Withdraw from the encirclement of the abodes of Korah, Datan, and Abiram. (16:24)

The innocent bystanders would have to withdraw from the zone-of-the-rebels beyond a certain undisclosed radius. But before doing that, Moses - astonishingly! - goes directly to Datan and Aviram accompanied by the elders of Israel!

ויקם משה וילך אל דתן ואבירם וילכו אחרייו זקני ישראל. (טז:כה)
Moses rose and went to Dathan and Abiram, the elders of Israel following him. (16:25)

Why does he do that? Here is how one rabbi understood it:

אמר ריש לקיש: מכאן שאין מחזיקין במחלוקת (סנהדרין קי).
Resh Lakish said: From this text we learn that one should not hold fast to arguments. Sanhedrin 110a

In the words of a more recent commentator:

הרי פרשו שהלך משה להוכיחם ולפייסם. (העמק דבר)
The rabbis understood that Moses went to Datan and Aviram to rebuke them but also to reconcile with them.

There is a story here. At first, a hurt and humiliated Moses asks God to ignore his antagonists as he ignored Cain, and to keep them in a symbolic state of exile. But when God discloses that he wants to eradicate them physically, Moses was ready to let their accusations roll off his back and reach a rapprochement with them. Perhaps to forgive them. Resh

Lakish's reading is plausible textually and theologically: While God has already decided to punish Datan and Aviram, Moses tries to try to mollify them and let go of the hurt. The Torah does not tell us how Datan and Aviram responded. But the answer is clear from the very next verse:

וידבר אל העדה לאמר סורו נא מעל אהלי האנשים הרשעים האלה ואל תגעו בכל אשר להם פן תספו בכל חטאתם. (טז:כו)
He (Moses) addressed the community, saying: "Move away from the tents of these wicked men and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be wiped out for all their sins". (16:26)



Datan and Aviram refused to relent. They persisted in their contempt of Moses and the land.

God's punishment was now a foregone conclusion. But how does the earth opening up its mouth and swallowing Datan and Aviram correspond to their transgression. Yonatan Grossman explains:

Datan and Aviram sustained the people's contempt of the land, a contempt that began with the spies. Datan and Aviram were the final proponents of the spies' doctrine, which claimed that the land of Egypt - and perhaps even the wilderness itself! - was better than the land of Israel. In the story of the spies...the image of ארץ אכלת יושביה - a land that devours its inhabitants (13:32) is shocking. While the spies, with whom Datan and Aviram were now associated, worried that the promised land devoured those who dwelled on it, now they Datan and Aviram were going to be devoured by the barren unpromised land, the desert. While Datan and Aviram refused to 'go up' to a mythical land that devours, now they were 'going down' into a real land that is going to literally swallow them up.

Moses was okay with God ignoring Datan and Aviram. God was not. Moses tried to reconcile with them, but they weren't interested. In the end, they weren't only swallowed up by the earth, but by their own arrogance. Shabbat Shalom!

Thankful that the war with Iran has concluded, we continue to pray that God protect Israel from terror. May those whose homes have been destroyed find shelter. We pray for the return of the hostages on this 631st day of their captivity. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded. AMEN!

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