

A small detail in this parasha catches our attention. It is located in the census of Reuben, where we read about the family of Eliav:

...ובני אליאב נמואל ודָתן ואבירם הוא דָתן ואבירם קריאי העדה אשר הצו על משה ועל אהרן בעדת קרח בהצתם על ה'. ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת קרח במות העדה פאכל האש את חמשים ומאתים איש ויהיו לנס. ובני קרח לא מתו. (במ' כו:ט-יא)

...the sons of Eliav were Nemuel, Datan and Aviram - these are the same Datan and Aviram, chosen in the assembly, who agitated against Moses and Aaron as part of Korah's band when they agitated against the LORD, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with Korah, when that band died, when the consumed the two hundred and fifty men; they became an example. **But the sons of Korah did not die.** (Num. 26:9-11)

Datan and Aviram died with their families. Just before the earth opened its mouth, all of the 250 other rebels were standing at the entrance of their tents together with their wives and children (Num. 16:27), and then it says that the earth swallowed them up...

ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל הרכוש. (במ' כו:לב)
together with their households, all the human beings who belonged to Korah and all the property (Num. 16:32).

Based on that text, we are led to believe that Korah also died with his family. But the small detail above corrects that impression: **the sons of Korah did not die.** As usual, even in the Torah's smallest details there is a story. What is the story here?

1. Biblical Scholarship: This correction reconciles the elimination of Korah in Numbers 16 with the appearance of a Korahite clan in Numbers 26. In the census of the Levites, we read:

אלה משפחת לוי משפחת הלבני משפחת החברני משפחת המחלי משפחת המושי משפחת הקרחי וקהת הולד את עמרם.

... These are the clans of Levi: the Livnite clan, the Hevronite clan, the Mahlite clan, the Mushite clan, **the Korahite clan.** (Num. 26:58).

There is only one way that there can be a Korahite clan at the end of the book of Numbers and that is if **the sons of Korah did not die** when their father was swallowed up by the earth. Moreover, if Korah's family died in the desert, how is it possible that there are numerous Psalms attributed to the **sons of Korah**? One straightforward explanation is that they must have survived. Therefore, this detail was added to reconcile all of the texts.¹

¹This is the view of Baruch Levine z'l, (NYU professor, 1930-2021) in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, p. 318. In his opinion the detail was added by a later editor. The Sons of Korah are attributed in Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87, and 88. Korahites are also mentioned in 1 Chron. 9:19, 31, 12:6, 26:1, 19. 2 Chron. 20:19.

² ותפתח הארץ את פיה ותבלע אתם ואת בתיהם ואת כל האדם אשר לקרח ואת כל הרכוש. וירדו הם וכל אשר להם חיים שאלה ותכס עליהם

2. The Rabbinic Interpretation. As always, aside from tracking down the individual Talmudic and Midrashic texts that interpret a specific verse, the best commentator to consult for a distillation of the rabbinic tradition on a specific text is Rashi. This is Rashi's comment on **the sons of Korah did not die:**

הם היו בעצה תחלה, ובשעת המחלוקת הרגרו תשובה בלבם, לפיכך נתבצר להם מקום גבוה בגיהנום וישבו שם.

They were in the plot originally, but at the moment when the rebellion broke out they had thoughts of repentance in their hearts; therefore, a high spot was fortified for them in Gehinnom and they stayed there.

Rashi's source is a Talmudic text that is part of a long discussion of the Korah incident:

"ויבני קרח לא מתו". תנא משום רבינו אמרו: מקום נתבצר להם בגיהנום וישבו עליו ואמרו שירה. (סנ' ק').

With regard to the verse: And the sons of Korah did not die (Numbers 26:11), it is taught in a baraita that in the name of our teacher, the Sages said: A place was fortified for them in Gehenna, and they sat upon it and recited songs of praise. (Sanhedrin 110a)

The Talmud had an old legend about the sons of Korah. The author of that legend was **our teacher**, a reference to Rabbi Judah the Prince, the final editor of the Mishnah. According to him, when the earth opened its mouth to swallow Korah, the sons of Korah were miraculously saved at the last minute. As everybody was sliding into the bowels of the earth, they grabbed hold of something like a ledge or a flat rock, climbed on top of it and sang! Sometime later they managed to extract themselves and come back to the surface.² When you examine Rashi closely, you can see that he - great storyteller that he was - embellished the Talmudic text with a few extra details:

a. The Sons of Korah were in on the plot against Moses, that is, they were originally aligned with their father.

b. When Korah challenged Moses, Moses countered by summoning him and his supporters to an incense duel, promising that God would decide who was leader. It was at that point that the Sons of Korah had a change of heart. They repented.

c. But because things were moving so quickly, they were not able to extract themselves from the group. Nevertheless, God acknowledged their repentance, and they were spared.

d. God provided what must have been some sort of ledge or monolith to save them.

הארץ ויאבדו מתוך הקהל. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed up them and their households, all the human beings who belonged to Korah and all the property. So they went down, they and all theirs, alive, to Sheol; the earth covered them, and they vanished from the midst of the assembly. (Num. 16:32-33)

Rashi does not mention here that they sang, but elsewhere, (commenting Psalm 42, which is attributed to the Sons of Korah), he writes the following:

לְבַנֵי קֹרַח. אֲסִיר וְאֶלְקָנָה וְאַבְיָסָף (שְׁמוֹת וּכְד) הֵם הָיוּ תַחֲלֵה בַעֲצַת אֲבֵיהֶם, וּבִשְׁעַת הַמַּחֲלָקֶת פָּרְשׁוּ. וּכְשֶׁנִּבְלְעוּ כָּל סְבִיבוֹתֵיהֶם וּפְתַחַה הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ, נִשְׁאַר מְקוֹמָם בְּתוֹךְ פִּי הָאָרֶץ, כַּעֲנֹן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וּבְנֵי קֹרַח לֹא מָתוּ (בַּמִּדְבָּר כּו: יא). וְשֵׁם אֲמָרוּ שִׁירָה, וְשֵׁם יִסְדּוּ הַמְזֻמָּרִים הַלְלוּ, וְעָלוּ מִשָּׁם, וְשָׂרְתָה עֲלֵיהֶם רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְנִתְנַבְּאוּ עַל הַגְּלוּיֹת וְעַל חֲרָבֵן הַבַּיִת וְעַל מַלְכוּת בֵּית דָּוִד:

(For the leader. A *maskil*) of the **Sons of Korah**. *Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaf*.³ *At first, they were in their father's counsel, but at the time of the controversy they parted, and when all those around them were swallowed up, and the earth opened its mouth, their place was left within the mouth of the earth, as the matter that is stated (Num. 26:11): But the sons of Korah did not die. There they sang a song and there they composed these psalms. [Then] they ascended from there, and the holy spirit rested on them, whereupon they prophesied concerning the exiles, the destruction of the Temple, and the Davidic dynasty.* (Rashi's comment on Psalm 42:1)

Wow! So, now we have a picture of the earth forming a gaping crater into which all the rebels tumbled. We see the rebels literally swallowed by the earth and covered. We imagine that the Sons of Korah must have initially slid down on the sides of the crater only to be stopped - miraculously! - by some kind of monolith or ledge. As the other 250 rebels and their families, (as well as Korah himself!) lay encapsulated in the earth, the Sons of Korah begin to sing. What does this resemble? This is an adaptation of Moses at the Sea of Reeds!⁴ Rashi is quite possibly superimposing the Sons of Korah and the crater on the scene of Moses after the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds! There, Moses stood on the shore, most likely on a high ledge, and after the walls of water closed in on the Egyptians and drowned them, he sang his song! Just as Moses sang a song after the water covered the Egyptians, here too, the Sons of Korah sing songs after the earth covered the rebels! Even when their very own father had perished! That is quite stunning indeed!



³ We know these names of Korah from Exod. 6:24: *Now the sons of Korah: Assir, Elkana and Aviasaf; these are the Korahite clans.*
⁴ *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned, at the face of daybreak, to its original-place, as the Egyptians were fleeing toward it. And God shook the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned; they covered the chariots and the riders of all of Pharaoh's army that had come*

3. A Homiletical Interpretation. What are we to make of all of this fascinating material? A large body of traditional commentary seizes on the Sons of Korah and, to borrow a metaphor, puts them on a pedestal as an example of piety and repentance. This is understandable. How else do you go from being a batch of contemptible rebels to a chorus of soulful poets who composed some of the most sublime religious poetry ever written? That's some repentance! As an example of their art, here are the first lines from Psalm 42, cited above:

כַּאֲיֵל תַּעֲרַג עַל אֲפִיקֵי מַיִם כִּן נַפְשִׁי תַעֲרַג אֲלֵהֶיִם.
 צְמֵאָה נַפְשִׁי לְאֱלֹהִים לְאֵל חַי מִתִּי אֲבֹא וְאֶרְאֶה פָּנֵי אֱלֹהִים.
As a deer thirsts for water, so my soul cries for You, O God; my soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God!

Metaphor. Repetition. Pathos. Imagery. Longing. Mood. Tone. There is so much compressed in those lines. Those Sons of Korah sure knew how to write a poem! Rashi says that they composed all of their Psalms on the ledge! Talk about poetry writing as risk-taking! While that seems outlandish, the point that he is trying to make is *that sincere repentance makes pietistic poetics possible*. But as far as we might be concerned, it renders the Sons of Korah inaccessible as models to average individuals - like us - who do not experience divine inspiration on a regular basis. Perhaps we could offer a different interpretation. Let's understand Korah's sons as the immediate survivors of this terrible spasm of rebellion generated by none other than their father. They and all of their subsequent descendants, have to live with the legacy of their eponymous ancestor who, while being a brilliant, talented and charismatic political charlatan, also nearly brought Israel to a catastrophic end. *While we often witness how righteous ancestors cast a long shadow of their less-righteous descendants, often placing a huge burden upon them to live up to their example, in this case, the pious and poetic descendants are trying to redeem the legacy of their impious ancestor.* Korah was a rebel. An agitator. A rabble-rouser. But his sons, and their sons after them, were singers. Poets. Versifiers. Korah tried to undo order and create chaos. His descendants created poetry and prayer. Korah and his cohort remain entombed in the bowels of the earth. But the Sons of Korah wrote poems and prayers that lift our souls up to the heavens. Indeed, *the sons of Korah did not die*. Arguably, they live on in their prayers and in the souls of all who recite them regularly.

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after them into the sea, not even one of them remained... So God delivered Israel on that day from the hand of Egypt; Israel saw Egypt dead by the shore of the sea, and Israel saw the great hand that God had wrought against Egypt. The people held God in awe; they trusted in God and in Moses his servant. Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel this song to God... (Exod. 14:27-15:1).