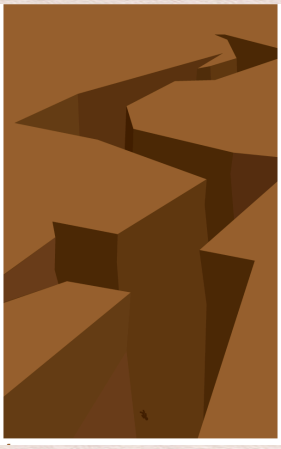
Korach: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?

Korach, an influential, wealthy Levite, **incites a rebellion**, challenging Moses and Aaron's leadership. He is immediately joined by Dathan and Abiram, Moses's longtime foes, as well as 250 members of the community. **The earth opens up and swallows all the mutineers**. Aaron then miraculously stops a mysterious plague, and God commands a *terumah*, or offering from each crop of grain, wine and oil, as well as all firstborn sheep and cattle, be given to the priests.



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"They assembled against Moses and Aaron. They said to them, "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire community—all of them—are holy, and God is in their midst. Why do you raise yourselves above God's assembly?""

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha is named after its villain, Korach, who incited a rebellion against Moses. But what, really, was Korach's great sin?

At first blush, it's hard to figure out what's so terrible about Korach and his ideas. After all, his main argument sounds solid, even admirable: All the people of Israel, he thunders, are holy and special, so why do Moses and Aaron place themselves above everyone else? Why not have a more democratic process for choosing who is worthy to lead? **Shouldn't all of us, after all, have a shot at the top spot?**

It's easy to get confused and applaud what appears to be Korach's egalitarian spirit. But the great Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, explained that Korach had a very different idea in mind. He knew full well that his argument was nonsensical, because, being himself a person in a position of power and privilege, he realized that **not all Israelites possessed the same capabilities and not all were suited to lead**. Many still had much growing to do, which is precisely why God instituted the priestly class: They, wrote the Israeli rabbi Gur Galon, are like the nuclear reactor that gives us all the sustainable spiritual power we need to continue and learn and practice and evolve.

What Korach wanted, then, was not for everyone to thrive and grow larger; it was for everyone to quarrel and grow smaller, concerned not with truth and beauty but with petty political power. **It's hard to imagine a more grievous and devastating sin than that**, and it's sad to see it resonate with so many of our elected officials to this very day.

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