



5 voices

Try this spirited table topic with family or friends. After a discussion of today's portion (see overleaf), assign each person a character. Hold a conversation about the deeper issues which you believe to be fuelling the rebellions at hand. Allow people to voice what they consider to be important to their character. Creatively develop your character's views while staying close to the text. Five voices are suggested below. Note: the major character, God, is omitted. Decide how your conversation will include God. Will you assign God's voice to someone at table, or perhaps you could introduce moments of prayerful silence as the group searches interiorly for divine discernment amidst its conversation?

1. Moses & Aaron. Remember: they are not only divinely chosen leaders, they are human beings!

2. Korah. Korah is cousin to Moses and Aaron. Like them, he too is from the tribe of Levi. Are family politics at work here?

4. Korah's followers. The text mentions 250 representatives. How did these 'chieftans' with 'fine reputations' (16:2) come to be following Korah? What motivates their support for this rebel?

3. Dathan & Abiram. 'We will not come!' (16:12) Literally the Hebrew text says, 'We will not come up!' What insight is gained by creatively interpreting this detail?

5. The whole community. 'Korah gathered the whole community against them...' (16:19). Are the Israelites really opposed to Moses and Aaron, or are they simply 'looking on'? Consider the moral implications of a fence-sitting position.



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 16:1—18:32

Korah

Why reflect on Torah?

"I would describe John Paul II as the tikkun olam Pope. Tikkun olam is the Hebrew phrase meaning 'healing the world'; after so many centuries of persecution and anti-semitism, John Paul contributed towards healing Jewish-Christian relations, epitomizing as he did, the desire for reconciliation."

— Edward Kessler,
The Tablet 30 April 2011.

These words, by a Jewish commentator writing at the time of the beatification of Pope John Paul II, remind us of the progress made on the world stage in Catholic-Jewish reconciliation in recent decades. The statements and actions of a Pope can go a long way to healing the world!

So too, on a smaller stage—in the networks of homes, parishes and schools—our own efforts can have a collective healing impact. By encouraging a groundswell of Catholic parishioners who read Torah through the eyes of the Jewish sages, *Light of Torah* seeks to contribute to a climate of understanding and appreciation of Judaism, especially in its giftedness for interpreting the Word of God. In this way, we too can contribute to *tikkun olam*.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 16:1—18:32

No sooner has the crisis of the spies been resolved (in last week's Torah portion) when Moses is confronted with two further rebellions among the Israelites. Korah (a cousin to Moses and Aaron) objects to the priesthood of Aaron, and Dathan and Abiram criticize Moses' civil authority.

While these new conflicts dominate the Torah portion, we will focus especially on the first 50 verses, Numbers 16:1-17:15.

Tasting Torah

With the guidance of the Jewish sages, we have been learning not to rush our reading of scripture, to listen carefully to the sacred text, to ponder its subtleties in content and expression. As we do, we start to appreciate the timeless human and spiritual issues it raises. In this spirit, read 16:1-17:15, attentive to the specific characters, their statements and actions. It may help to imagine this portion as a piece of theatre... how would you divide it into a series of acts?

Touching Torah

Distinguishable here are not only two rebellions, but various kinds of response. When Korah questions Aaron's right to priesthood, Moses replies by setting him and his followers a priestly task by which God will judge their claim to priestly office. Yet confronted by Dathan and Abiram's refusal to cooperate (and their mocking remarks which undermine Moses' integrity as well as the claim to the promised land), Moses does not appear to react. Instead he turns to Korah and repeats his original response. Likewise God seems to distinguish among the rebels, applying different forms of punishment. How would you interpret these details?

Note, too, the altruism of Moses as he begs God to forgive the Israelites (16:22), just as he does in previous episodes: the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:11-14), the Spies (Num. 14:13-19), and Miriam's affliction (Num. 12:13).

Depthing Torah

Further subtleties arise in the contradictions and repetitions found in the text:

Commentators observe that despite the apparent disappearance of Korah into the bowels of the earth (16:31-33), the name of Korah is in fact preserved in the greater tradition. Turn to the Psalms and you will find those attributed to the 'sons of Korah' (e.g., Ps. 88). What lesson can be gleaned from this? One traditional opinion says that while Korah himself acts from dubious motives such as personal ambition, the point he raises in 16:3 ('*For all the community are holy*') has enduring validity. Indeed, the whole community *is* holy, and this truth must always inform the specific priestly calling of a chosen few.

Further reflections arise from the observation that these rebellions follow so closely on the heels of the conflict with the spies in last week's Torah portion. There the people cried, '*Let us head back for Egypt*' (14:4) and here we have the rebels referring to Egypt as '*a land flowing with milk and honey*' (14:13). We may ask, have the Israelites learnt anything from previous crises? Did the treatment of the spies just make community tensions worse?

Doing Torah

Continue to ponder the subtleties of content and expression in the text, allowing them to prayerfully fuel your powers of insight and imagination.



Faith & Life

A subtlety arises in the way Dathan and Abiram repeat (and twist) the phrase used by Moses: '*Is it not enough...?*' (Cf. 16:9; 16:13). Note how the text's repetition allows us to hear the mockery in their tone as they 'mimick' Moses. A school teacher reading this portion says it reminds her of a school student she caught mimicking her behind her back!

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006). Scripture: NJPS.