



5 ways

to consider the wilderness experience

The pattern of wilderness rebellions is striking in the Torah. Most recently we have encountered the disaster of the Spies, followed by the tragic actions of Moses' cousin Korah and the leaders of the Reubenite tribe...and these are not the only disputes Moses has had to deal with. One is led to wonder in retrospect: how did this "stubborn people" ever make it to the Promised Land?! Yet amidst disaster, there is also success. The Israelites do finally reach their goal and, as commentators note, in many ways the wilderness experience has helped, formed, and prepared them.

1. A time of training.

The wilderness journey is often viewed as a kind of 'training ground,' or a period of redemptive purging by which the Israelites discover their 'soul' as a people, and learn what it means to live as a holy nation.

2. A time of growing up.

After being enslaved for so long, freedom takes some getting used to, including the responsibility and moral decision-making it entails.

3. A time of relationship.

There's nothing like a good fight to deepen a relationship...so long as both

parties are committed to a path of fidelity, repentance, forgiveness, and the sheer courage of 'hanging in there' with one's beloved. Surely this is the story of God and Israel in the desert!

4. A time of realism.

Perhaps the Israelites are also faced with the reality that, whatever their hardships, they have a God who is committed to them. What other god would be better?

5. A time of investment.

Most of the exodus generation will not enter the Promised Land, but the next will. This is a people who strives for a future that cannot yet be seen.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

In this issue we once again delve into the midrash as we read the Torah. Midrash is a traditional form of Jewish biblical commentary that 'reads between the lines' so to speak. The midrash is a weaving of storytelling which is not in the bible, but which serves to elaborate and enrich the meaning of the biblical text. In this way it leads the reader to a creative pondering of Scripture and stimulates the capacity of the mind and heart to engage with God's Word.

In today's discussion the midrash focuses on a scene or character that seems to be on the periphery of the biblical narrative. We might wonder, for example, what value is there in exploring the role of On, son of Peleth, when he really doesn't have much of a presence in the story of Korah's rebellion?!

What we learn from the rabbis is that every detail of God's Word is a source of insight, surprise, revelation if we are willing to take the time to ponder and fully engage with the sacred text. It takes time, patience, discipline, but if we allow the rabbis to teach us, we Christians discover fresh ways to be nourished in our experience of God's Word.



Numbers 16:1—18:32

Korah



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 16:1—18:32

Rebellion in the wilderness is a major theme as the Torah traces the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. In today's Torah portion, we encounter a double uprising that challenges the leadership of Moses and the religious authority of Aaron the High Priest. Read this colorful tale in Numbers 16:1-35. The aftermath can be read in 17:1-28.

Tasting Torah

Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—took two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses (Numbers 16:1-2).

In other *Light of Torah* reflections we focused on three protagonists of this rebellion: Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Here we observe that one rebel, On son of Peleth, though named at the start of this Torah portion drops out as the story proceeds. By the time we come to the disastrous fate of the rebels, On is nowhere mentioned.

In what direction does this observation lead your fertile and prayerful imagination?

Touching Torah

On and his family escape a terrible ending. But how might we explain this? In 16:1 On is named as one of four rebels out of 250 'well-known' Israelite leaders, so he must have been notably committed to their cause. What became of him? Was he forcibly or willingly excluded? Did he make a heroic decision to leave the rebel group? If so, why? And who exerted influence on him?

Our questions lead us to reflect on the decisions, circumstances and influences that can take a person towards or away from wrongdoing and disaster on the one hand, and salvation on the other. As you discuss this rebellion story, ponder the significance of the figure of On.

Depthing Torah

Turning to Jewish tradition we find that the rabbis have preserved a perspective which honours On's wife as having saved her husband from the pursuit of a disastrous course. According to the midrash,¹ On's wife tells her husband that he has nothing to gain from an alliance with Korah:

'Whether Moses remains master or Korah becomes master, you are but a follower.'

'But what can I do?' says On. 'Korah's band has sworn me to be with them.'

'Sit here and I will save you,' replies his wife.

Her plan is clever and pragmatic. She gets him drunk, puts him to bed, and then she herself sits outside their tent in an immodest and dishevelled state. As Korah's band comes looking for On, they retreat at the sight of her immodesty. By the time On emerges, Korah and his company have already paid the terrible price for their folly.

In conclusion, the rabbis quote Proverbs 14:1: *"The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands."* The 'wise woman' refers to On's wife, they say, whereas the rest of the verse refers to Korah's wife who advised her husband very differently.

Doing Torah

How does this midrash compare with your reflections around the presence and absence of On? Continue to explore this theme, with attention to the observations at right. Note the use of the device of "absence" in exploring the Torah via traditional Jewish interpretative methods.



More on the midrash

At first glance, On's wife appears to be driven by pragmatism rather than virtue or principle. Yet contemporary commentators highlight a different view. Clearly her instincts forge a lifegiving path for her family. She displays a strong character. She can stand up and oppose the rebellion, whereas her husband seems to be captive to 'the group.' She is willing to humiliate herself in order to save her family.

1. TB San. 109b. Num.R. 18: 20
To read the midrash visit: http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_109.html#PARTb

Bibliography. Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol 2 (NY: Soncino, 1983); Kadari, 'Wife of On Ben Pelet: Midrash and Aggadah.' *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. www.jwa.org. Scripture: NRSV.