

Shabbat Korach 5786

June 20, 2026

Responding to Sophie Wasserman and Daphne Nierenberg

Sophie and Daphne, thank you for helping us to see how the conflict between Korach and Moses has direct implications for how we argue and how we lead. Sophie, you found that both in approach and in intent, Korach's claim against Moses shows us how not to be. Using Korach as a counter-example, Jewish tradition is very clear that when arguing or challenging authority we must demonstrate respect and we must challenge with the intent of discovering truth, rather than with the intent of accruing power. Daphne, you agreed with Sophie, and you asked a different question: what does this story teach us about leadership? You found that *both* Korach *and* Moses were wrong – Korach because he was challenging Moses out of jealousy, and Moses because, in your reading, his response was defensive and punishing instead of seeking the opportunity to learn.

All of the shortcomings you both identified in the behavior of Korach and Moses – jealousy, defensiveness, the desire to win and to punish, aggressiveness, disrespect, and the quest for power – are shortcomings to which we're all susceptible. We all have the potential to feel these feelings and to act in these ways. And that brings me to want to dig a little deeper into an interesting turn of phrase that you both quoted. You both founded your arguments on a teaching from Talmud that we are to argue – and we might extrapolate that we are more generally to behave – “for the sake of heaven.” What does that mean?

When I was a kid and didn't know much about Judaism, one of the only things I thought I knew was that Judaism doesn't believe in heaven. I thought that Christianity had an idea that when you die you go to heaven, but in order to go to heaven you have to be Christian, to believe in Jesus, and also you have to have lived a good life. I remember a lot of cartoons on television that included a realm above the clouds with pearly gates and angels, and then a red, fiery place called hell with a devil in it. But Jews, I was told, we didn't have heaven. We focused on this world, on doing good in our lives for its own sake, not for a reward after we die.

So if that's true, what does “for the sake of heaven” mean in Judaism? Well, it turns out that it's not totally true. It is true that Judaism focuses on this world and does not focus on a promise of reward after we die. Judaism's ideas about what happens when we die are complex and varied, and require their own sermon. But in short we do have an idea called Olam Haba, the world to come, in which our texts do imagine a kind of paradise for our souls after we die in which we have total unity with G-d. But it's still true that Olam Haba is not the focus of Judaism. Many Jews have never even heard of it. And it is true that we are supposed to live a life of mitzvot, and of tzedek, righteousness or justice, because we're G-d's partners in healing the broken world, not because we're trying to get a reward.

But the Hebrew Bible does contain images of heaven – of a divine realm where G-d has a throne and a royal court with angels. The prophet Isaiah describes having a vision in which he

visits that court and sees the angels. The midrash describes Moses visiting the court and arguing with the angels. However, it was very important to the great rabbi Maimonides that we understand this imagery as metaphoric storytelling, and not believe that an actual personified G-d sits in an actual throne above the clouds.

Instead, the idea of heaven in our usage, “makhlokhet l’shem shamayim” or “argument for the sake of heaven,” means something closer to argument for the sake of G-d, or G-dliness, or holiness. This would be argument for a higher purpose; argument that strives to elevate our understanding. Note that our language continues to contain vertical imagery – “*higher* purpose”, “*elevate* our understanding.” These are remnants of the idea of heaven – that something better is happening “up there.”

This relates to our parasha in another way. Korach refers to the idea of holiness in his accusation against Moses. He and his band of rebels say this:

רַב־לְךָֹם נִי כָל־הָעֵדָה כֻּלָּם קִדְשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קִהְלֵי יְהוָה

“You have gone too far! All of the community are holy, all of them, and G-d is in their midst. Why do you [Moses and Aaron] raise yourselves above G-d’s community?”

This is an excellent populist argument meant for the ears of the masses. It is an argument against hierarchy, and it is drawing on this very question of verticality when it comes to ideas of holiness.

Let’s break it down. Here’s the main accusation: “Why do you raise yourselves above G-d’s community?” OK, so Korach is saying that Moses is illegitimately above the people. He’s basing that argument on the idea that G-d is not necessarily or only above the people, but is **בְּתוֹכְכֶם** “In their midst”. This is a reference to G-d’s promise back in the book of Exodus that if the people would build a mishkan or Tabernacle as a dwelling place for G-d, which they did, G-d would reside in their midst.

So if G-d’s down here with us, how dare you, human Moses, place yourself above us? That’s pretty compelling.

But here’s where Korach’s argument starts to go off the rails. He claims that all of the people are holy, an assertion that must have been very well received by his listeners. Who doesn’t want to be called holy? But his claim isn’t quite right. This brings us to the question of what holiness is and how you become holy.

It is true that the Torah tells us that every human being is created in the image of G-d, which means that we have some G-dliness in us. This is an important idea for human dignity, worth, value, inalienable rights. And Judaism has the idea that we are loved by an unending love for exactly who we are. And Judaism has the idea that everyone has a soul, a pure part of us that transcends our body and connects us to G-d. But these things are different than holiness. What

we know about holiness is that in Leviticus 19 G-d tells us that G-d is holy and that we should strive to be holy. And then G-d immediately goes on to give us a bunch of examples of how to be holy. These things include loving our fellow human beings as we love ourselves, not hating or bearing a grudge, caring for the most vulnerable and the stranger in our society, never discriminating against or harming a person with disabilities, showing deference to the elderly, giving a portion of what we have to those who are hungry, and more.

So holiness is not something that you automatically have just by being alive – that is dignity, worth, lovability, and a spark of divinity. To be holy you have to put in effort. To be holy you have to do things proactively to make the world around you a kinder, more just, more respectful place. You wouldn't, for example, bring aggressive accusations against your leaders in an attempt to overthrow them because you want more power. The fact that everyone can and should strive to be holy doesn't mean that we should never have hierarchies, that we should never have leaders, that there should never be appointed or elected people who govern or judge. As long as those people lead with integrity and wisdom, they are helping our society to flourish.

You could say that an argument for the sake of heaven is an argument that strives for holiness.

In many ways, Korach's argument was ahead of its time, in its anti-hierarchical repositioning of G-d and holiness. Today's theologies are much more interested in immanence, ideas of the aspects of G-d that are within us, or in relational transcendence – ideas of G-d that connect everything that exists, whether at the subatomic level or at the cosmic level – than they are with some separate, altitudinous realm where G-d resides.

Korach's message against hierarchy was populist gold, but it was harmful and misleading. As you argued, Sophie and Daphne, he taught us what not to do through his aggression and disrespect, and through his intent to seize power. Instead, we should seek to engage in arguments for the sake of heaven, for greater understanding and greater good, arguments for the sake of making human life heavenly. In other words, we should use arguments to bring humanity closer and closer to the divine ideal of holiness – right here, right now, on earth and in our time.

Shabbat Shalom.