

The book of Numbers is a catalog of Jewish character flaws.

Up until *parashat korah*, we've seen the Jewish refugees fall victim to nostalgia for a past that was, in reality, a kind of hell (the מַתְאוּנָיִים); to intrafamilial resentment and position-jockeying (Miriam); to cowardice, and (as we've learned recently) its no less disastrous reaction, rash and poorly-planned feats of bravery (the scouts and the מַעֲפִילִים); and, of course, throughout the book, we'd succumbed to endemic, unremitting *kvetching*. Numbers reads like a cutting letter from someone who knows you too well; like a Philip Roth novel, which even its fiercest critic is forced to acknowledge succeeds at skewering its subject.

In fact, Korah and recent events brought me in mind of Philip Roth, and especially his two great novels dealing with Israel and modern Jewish identity: *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. In these two books, Roth seems to have anticipated, uncannily, the course of the last 20 years, and to have said everything there is to say about it, from every angle. The novels are מחלקות -- dialectics, arguments -- through and through: Roth's imagination runs riot, arguing with itself, with his alter-ego, with his alter-ego's alter-egos. He gives the charismatic leader of a religious settlement a speech more eloquent or persuasive than anything I've heard from the real things; his Palestinians plead their people's cause with more nuance and pathos than their best advocates can muster. And, 20 years before Helen Thomas told Israelis to "get the hell out

of Palestine" and "go home" -- which, in her confusion she mistakenly identified with "Poland and Germany" -- Roth created, in Operation Shylock, a crank who sets himself up as the Herzl of "Diasporism" - that is, a movement calling for Israel to close up shop and for its Ashkenazi inhabitants to decamp at once for the lands of the Diaspora. (Roth's fraud was aware, at the least, that more than half of all Jewish Israelis are not even distantly descended of Jews who sojourned in Europe).

This character calls himself "Philip Roth," and impersonating the author himself holes up in the King David hotel giving interviews to the press.

"Registered in Suite 511" writes Roth was, "the other me, the second me, the irresponsible me, the deviant me, the opposing me, the delinquent, turpitudinous me." Roth dubs him: "Moishe Pipik: the little guy who wants to be a bigshot . . . someone who is a bit ridiculous, a bit funny, a bit childish, the comical shadow"

This is about as good a description of Korah as I can think of. Korah is not so much Moshe's enemy as his comical, deviant shadow -- Moshe's Moishe Pipik. Where Moshe is painfully modest and humble, Korah is extrovert and ambitious. Moshe, in a moment of weakness four chapters earlier, confessed a secret wish to Joshua:

מי יתן כל עם ה' נביאים, כי יתן ה' את רוחו עליהם!

"If only every Jew were a prophet! If only God's spirit rested on all of them!"

If only, that is, I didn't have to bear this all-but-intolerable burden of leadership on my own. It is the kind of wistful fantasy truly gifted, and therefore profoundly lonely people will sometimes allow themselves.

And here is Korah -- Moshe's first cousin -- hurling Moshe's own words in his face, insinuating that Moshe's lonely fantasy is fact, and that Moshe, by denying it, has shown himself a power-mad, nepotistic tyrant:

"רַב-לָּכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה בָּלִם קְדוֹשִׁים וּבְתוֹכָם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-קֹהֶל יְהוָה"

"You've gone too far. For the entire community is holy -- all of them; and ה' is in their midst! Why, then, have you elevated yourselves above the Lord's assembly?"

The biblical Korah's speech was stirring stuff: Indeed, by verse 19, Korah appears to have whipped up every Jew in the camp against Moshe and Aaron. And it's no wonder: Egalitarian and democratic; suspicious of religious and political authority; admiring of the common holi-

ness of all human beings. It's the sort of thing, I'd venture, with which many of us would be inclined to agree.

A few years ago, after a long career in public relations, Greta Berlin -- an LA native with a Masters in Theater Arts -- founded the "Free Gaza Movement". As she explained to *The New York Times*, she discovered that she "happen[s] to be passionate about the Palestinians." She also happens to oppose the existence of the Jewish State of Israel -- "though she contends," reported the *Times*, "that this is part of a larger philosophy which opposes all national borders."

Berlin struggled at first to find financing; but various organizations in Turkey, Malaysia and elsewhere soon came to her aid; and it was with their money, support and infrastructure that, two weeks ago and with, her group set sail to break Israel's blockade of Hamas.

Like Berlin's so-called "Peace Flotilla," Korah's phony "revolt" was a piece of political theater, a play performed for an audience whose smoldering prejudices and resentments it aimed to stoke.

Korah's populism, his declaration of the common holiness of every Jew, was not aimed at Moshe, but rather to the gathered onlookers, whom it flattered and incited. It was a piece of demagoguery, aimed to disguise the insurrection of a handful of oligarchs as a popular rebellion.

Korah is no man of the people: He is a senior Levite, filled with rancor for losing the priesthood to his cousin, Aaron. And the elites behind him -- whom the Torah calls נשיאי העדה and אנשי שם - - understood that whatever Korah might say, they, and not the common Jew, would benefit from the coup.

Likewise, neither the Turks, nor the Malaysians, nor the various Islamist and Jihadist charities that funded and orchestrated the Flotilla Show, paid much mind to Greta Berlin's "larger political philosophy." They understood quite clearly that her movement was not really about human rights and the end of the nation state. Her benefactors gave without any fear they might end up helping Kurdish guerillas, or supporting Armenian rights-groups, or Malaysian religious minorities, or contributing to the defense of political prisoners languishing in Turkish and Malaysian prisons. Nor were they concerned that, after dismantling Israel, Berlin would train her sights on the Turkish or Malaysian state. Berlin's patrons gave because they understood she aimed to discredit the Jewish State and the Jewish State alone -- and because this was in their own, narrow interests.

It is our Jewish naiveté, just as it was the naiveté of the crowd Korah whipped up, that causes us to take the Free Gaza movement at face value, as anything more than cynical theater.

So Korah powerfully illustrates yet another Jewish character flaw: our weakness for idealism and the language of principle, even when it's cynically deployed in the service of unworthy, and even evil causes.

A wonderful midrash gives Korah a second speech, this one delivered before all the Jews he mustered against Moshe and Aaron (*see* Num. 16:19).¹

Korah speaks of a poor widow and her two daughters, who owned only a single field. He casts Moshe and Aaron as thieves and tyrants who, citing *pasuk* after *pasuk*, take everything the widow had for themselves, all under color of law.

Korah concludes:

אריך כדין, הא בזתא לעלובתא!? כלהן עושין, ותולין בקב"ה

'[Now I ask you:] was it right -- was it proper? -- to misuse this unhappy [woman] so?!

All this Moshe and Aaron do, and they hang the blame it on God!

1. The Midrash is reproduced and translated in full on pp. 10-12.

Korah's tale is obviously a fabrication. The laws he cites are quoted out of context, and many of them in fact specifically provide for the welfare of the widow and the fatherless. And the midrash itself calls Korah's antics לִיצְנוּת -- clowning, buffonery. It is demagoguery posing as a call for justice. It is not to be taken seriously. Only the most callow mistake a clown for a hero.

But this is just what we do. A friend of friend, no doubt sincere and good hearted, echoed both Korah and Greta Berlin's words when commenting on a Facebook post about the Flotilla Incident. She wrote:

When I close my eyes and get to the Grace, I understand that we're all one, there are no boundaries, there are no territories, . . . and G-d did not draw any lines in the sand.
I believe in Love and trying to really listen and understand others. I believe in working on solutions to problems. [!] I believe in trying to be Peace and in wishing the best for the whole World.

To say that Korah or the Free Gaza Show should not be taken seriously is not in any way to deny the deadly seriousness of what is at stake: The lives of Palestinians living in a giant open-air prison; the failure of Israeli political and military leadership; the continued legitimacy of Israel's use of force; and the uncertain future of the Jewish State. It is, rather, to insist that

these hugely serious issues have been coopted and made into the toys and props of clowns and cynics.

According to Ramban, even Moshe was not immune to this Jewish weakness for meeting cynicism with reason and principle. He points out that just after Korah assails Moshe and Aaron, the Torah says:

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו

And Moshe listened [to what Korah said], and fell on his face. (16:4)

But Korah spoke against both Moshe *and* Aaron. Why then did Aaron not "listen" to him as well?

Ramban explains:

כי אהרן, במוסרו ובקדושתו, לא ענה דבר בכל המחלוקת הזו,

Because Aaron, in his self-restraint and holiness, did not utter a single word throughout this entire conflict.

ויהי כמחריש וכמודה שמעלת קרח גדולה ממעלתו,

Rather, to all appearances he behaved like someone who'd gone deaf; or even as if he were deferring to Korah

אבל הוא עושה כדבר משה ומקיים גזירת מלך:

But though he didn't argue, and didn't even appear to disagree with Korah, Aaron quietly followed Moshe's' authority, and obeyed the law of the Heavenly King.

That is, if it was Moshe's equivocal honor to be chosen as the mediator between God and His people, it was Aaron's special faculty, alone among all the Jews, to be able to see through Korah, and to take him for what he really was: A clown, and a fraud.

Midrash Tehillim (Parma MSS), Ps. 1, 15

Happy is the man

Who has not followed the counsel of the
wicked

Nor lingered in the path of sinners,

Nor sat in the company of hecklers.

(Ps. 1:1)

This is Korah, who would make a laughing stock of Moshe and Aaron.

What did Korah do? He assembled the entire community against them -- as it is said, *And Korah gathered every group against them. . .* (Num. 16:19) -- and he began to make a disparaging speech before [the assembly], saying:

'There's a widow in my neighborhood, who has two orphaned girls; and she had [only] one field.

'Now, when she went to plow it, Moshe told her, *You may not plow it with an ox and a donkey together.* (Deut. 22:10) When she went to seed it, he told her *You may not sow with two kinds of seed.* (Lev. 19:19) When she went to reap and bundle [the stalks of grain], he said, "[Be sure you leave the] gleanings, the overlooked sheaves, and the corners of the field." (cf. Lev. 19:9) When she went to [store the wheat in the] silo, [Moses] said to her, "Give me the heave-offering, the first tithe, and the second tithe." (cf. Num. 15:19; 18:21-27; Deut. 14:22-29, 26:12)

'She submitted to the law, and gave Moses [what he demanded].

אֲשֶׁר־יֵאֱמָר

אֲשֶׁר לֹא הִלֵּךְ בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים

וּבְדֶרֶךְ חַטָּאִים לֹא עָמַד,

וּבְמוֹשָׁב לְצִים לֹא יָשָׁב.

(תהלים א, א)

זה קרח, שהיה מתלוצץ על משה ועל אהרן.

מה עשה? כינס עליהם כל הקהל, שנאמר "ויקהל עליהם קרח את כל העדה" (במדבר טז יט), והתחיל לומר לפנייהם דברי ליצנות, ואמר:

'אלמנה אחת יש בשכונתי ועמה שני נערות יתומות, והיה לה שדה אחת.
'באתה לחרוש – אמר לה משה: "לא תחרוש בשור וחמור יחדו." (דברים כב י) באת לזרוע – אמר לה: "שדך לא תזרע כלאים." (ויקרא יט יט) באתה לקצור ולעשות ערימה, אמר לה: "לקט שכחה ופאה." (עי' ויקרא יט ט)
באתה לעשות קורן, אמר לה: "תני תרומה ומעשר ראשון ומעשר שני." (עי' במדבר טו יט; יח כא-כז; דברים יד כא-כט, כו יב)

'הצדיקה עליה את הדין ונתנה לו.

'What did this destitute woman do [then]? She sold her field, and bought two sheep, so she might clothe [herself and her daughters with the wool shorn from them], and make a little money [by selling] their offspring.

'But as soon as [her sheep] delivered -- along comes Aaron and says, "Give me their first-born, for thus has the Holy One, Blessed be He, instructed me: *Every first-born male of the herd or flock you shall dedicate to the Lord your God.*" (Deut. 15:19)

'So she submitted to the law, and gave [Aaron] her lambs.

'When the time for shearing came, and she sheared [her sheep] -- along came Aaron [again] and said to her: "Give me the first portion of the shearing." (cf. Deut. 18:4)

'The widow said [to herself], "I haven't the strength in me to endure this man (*lit.*, "to withstand"; cf. Ps. 1:1) I'll slaughter [the sheep instead] and eat them."

'But once she slaughtered them, here comes Aaron [once again], and says to her: "Give me the shoulder, and the jaws and the stomach." (cf. Deut. 18:3)

'She said: "Even by slaughtering them I'm not free of your demands -- here, I'll declare [the sheep] donations [to the Temple]!"

'But, Aaron replied: "If they're donations, then they're mine entirely, as it is said, *Everything dedicated in Israel shall be yours.*" (Num. 18:14)

And Aaron snatched up the sheep and went on his way, leaving the woman weeping, along with her two daughters.'

'[Now I ask you:] is it right -- is it proper? -- to misuse this unhappy [woman] so?!

'All this Moses and Aaron do, and they pin it on God!'

'מה עשתה עניה? ומכרה את השדה, וקנתה שתי כבשות כדי ללבוש מגזותיהן וליהנות מפירותיהן.

'כיון שילדו – בא אהרן ואמר לה: 'תני לי את הבכורות, שכך אמר לי הקב"ה (דברים טו יט): כל הבכור אשר יולד בבקרך ובצאנך הזכר תקדיש לה' אלוהיך וגו'.

'הצדיקה עליה את הדין ונתנה לו את הולדות.

'הגיע זמן גזיזה וגזזה אותן – בא אהרן ואמר לה: תני לי ראשית הגז (עי' דברים יח ד)

'אמרה: "אין בי כח לעמוד באיש הזה (עי' תהלים א א), הרי אני שוחטתן ואוכלתן."

'כיון ששחטתן, בא אהרן ואמר לה: "תני לי הזרוע והלחיים והקבה." (עי' דברים יח ג)

'אמרה: 'אחר ששחטתי אותן, לא נוצלתי מידך – הרי הם חרם עלי!'

'אמר לה: 'אם חרם הן, כולן שלי, דכתיב (במדבר יח יד): "כל חרם בישראל לך יהיה."

ונטלן והלך לו, והניחה בוכה עם שתי בנותיה.

'אריך כדין, הא בזתא לעלובתא!?

'כלהן עושין, ותולין בקב"ה!"