

Shabbat shalom. I work at Harvard Business School, where I write educational material for the classroom in the form of business case studies. For today's teaching, I thought it would be enlightening and a bit of fun to look at the story of Korach's rebellion in this week's *parsha* through the lens of a management problem, like we do at the business school.

So, here we go.

Sitting outside his tent, Korach *ben* Yitzhar frowned as he thought about the crisis of management at Twelve Tribes, Incorporated. About a year earlier, God had freed *Bnei Yisrael* from bondage. Since then, things had gone downhill, Korach thought. He had doubts about the leadership of the CEO, his cousin, Moshe, and he was unhappy about the promotion that had recently gone to his other cousin, Aharon. The executive chairman—God—had created a whole new department of *kohanim* and assigned Aharon as senior vice president, even giving him a bigshot title: *kohen gadol*, high priest. At the same time, corporate issued a memo stating that only Moshe and Aharon's immediate family would serve as *kohanim*—replacing the Levite Department and firstborn managers from throughout the company at the top of the organizational pyramid.

Frustrated, Korach sensed that the workforce—that is, the people—were restless. Should he pressure management to make changes to rules and regulations, personnel decisions, and the overall strategy for reaching Eretz Canaan? Gazing out at the dessert, Korach thought about the best way to raise his objections and lead Twelve Tribes, Inc. in a better direction.

If you've taken a business or management class, you might recognize the way I've set up the story. This is the classic format of a business school case study. It opens with a main character or protagonist contemplating an organizational challenge or management decision. The purpose of the case study method is to use a real scenario to prompt student discussion about leadership and management skills. After introducing the protagonist and dilemma at hand, a case study gives a brief history of the company, usually based on interviews with executives and employees. Since interviews weren't an option in this case, we'll look to the text and commentaries, instead.

Over the previous year, Twelve Tribes, Inc. had been through a series of major transitions. After the elation of the IPO—the Exodus—the organization had survived a hostile takeover attempt while the CEO and executive director were out of town on a leadership retreat (the incident of the Golden Calf, which, by the way, had not reflected well on the management skills of now-Senior Vice President Aharon). More recently, there had been an incident involving unauthorized personnel accessing the sacrificial system. Aharon's own sons, Nadav and Abihu, had been executed by God, evidently for improper use of company equipment.

The organization was adjusting to a new corporate charter—the Torah—with new bylaws and operating procedures. Top-down policies complicated everything in the supply chain, from ritual operations to *mishkan* maintenance and transportation. For example, employees used to be able to schedule sin-atonement offerings through their regional firstborn managers, and just cc the Levite Department. It was a simple procedure, and problems were handled at the tribal department level. Under the new policy, to get a sin offering on the agenda, employees first had to file the proper forms and

permissions with the Levites and then somehow get a slot on the Kohen master calendar, which was a total hassle. Local firstborn managers were completely cut out of the loop.

Now, this is a good time to emphasize that the analogy comparing the events of the Torah to a business case study can only be stretched so far. I am not making light of the serious events depicted in the Torah or implying that the same ethics and standards apply in today's corporate world as in the context of the narrative. However, the case study format is useful for understanding how this particular moment is indicative of a larger tension within *Bnei Yisrael*.

When the priestly class replaced the firstborns and the Levites at the top of the organization, Korach seized the moment to voice his own dissatisfactions. Some analysts, including the well-known 12th-century firm Ezra & Sons, Ltd.—i.e., Ibn Ezra—claimed that Korach started complaining after the dedication of the *mishkan*, the tabernacle, when Aharon and his sons were first promoted to *kohanim*. On paper, Korach was perhaps equally deserving of the promotion. He, like his cousins Moshe and Aharon, was a member of the Kohat unit within the Levite Department, which cared for the objects of the sanctuary, including the ark of the covenant, the *menorah*, the showbread table, the altars, and other holy objects.

After the priestly re-organization, the Kohat unit was relegated to a support function. They still cared for and transported the holy objects, but only the *kohanim* would operate the alter and consult on sacrifices. Korach's cousin Elizar ben Uzziel was appointed vice president in charge of Kohat operations, passing over Korach along with others who were sidelined, including the Reuben Department and firstborn managers from throughout the *kahal*.

Another view, published by the market pundit the Ramban, dated Korach's irritation to last week's *parsha*, *Shlach*, which related the failed pilot program of the spies. The spy mission was intended to provide proof-of-concept that the strategy of "Walk-Out-and-Wander" was a sound approach to reaching the Promised Land. But the spies' beta test of *Bnei Yisrael's* go-to-market strategy was a failure. When they reported that giant incumbents were already crowding the market—that is, occupying the land—the disgruntled employees complained to the bosses that Twelve Tribes would never be able to disrupt the competition and seize Canaan. In response, management held early performance reviews and decided that everyone over the age of 20 would be let go—or rather, they could continue with the company but the launch into the Promised Land would be delayed.

At this point, according to Ramban, Korach opportunistically seized on the unrest caused by the spies' reports. He and 15,000 fellow employees, including 250 managers, attempted to organize an executive coup. They demanded an emergency board meeting and, in Numbers 16:3, Korach called for Moshe's ouster from the chief executive post: "It is too much for you! Because all the assembly—*kulam*, all of them—are holy and God is among them. Why do you lift yourselves above God's congregation?"

In verses 8-11, Moshe replied by pointing out that Korach and the other rebels still retained important positions and responsibilities and were well-respected within the organization:

Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has segregated you from the assembly of Israel to draw you near to Himself, to perform the service of the

Tabernacle of Hashem, and to stand before the assembly to minister to them?  
 And He drew you near, and all your brethren, the offspring of Levi, with you—yet  
 you seek priesthood, as well! . . . And as for Aharon—what is he that you protest  
 against him?

Attempting to quell the dispute, Moshe even appealed to Korach’s lieutenants, Datan and Aviram, of the Reuben Department, who were known as “veteran provocateurs,” according to Stone Chumash News. In verses 13-14, they rebuffed him, asking:

Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk  
 and honey to cause us to die in the Wilderness, yet you seek to dominate us, even  
 to dominate further? Moreover, you did not bring us to a land flowing with milk  
 and honey nor give us a heritage of field and vineyard.

Seeing that Korach, Datan, and Aviram would not back down, Moshe proposed that they and Aharon each make their case to the board of directors. Instead of PowerPoint presentations, they each would place a fire-pan of incense at the entrance to the boardroom—the tent of meeting—to see which offering God accepted.

Analysis by Rashi Consulting Corporation concluded that Moshe scheduled the presentations for the following day in an effort to gain time and talk sense into his opponents, but reconciliation proved elusive. “The entire preceding night,” said Rashi, “Korach harangued the people, sarcastically accusing Moshe of hoarding all the glory for himself and his brother.”

A contributor on the online forum, Huffington Midrash, relayed that Korach “had his followers dress in garments of *techeilet*, turquoise wool, and confront Moshe publicly with the derisive question, ‘Does an all-*techeilet* garment require a single *techeilet* thread in its *tzitzit*?’” as had been commanded in chapter 15. When Moshe answered that, yes, the all-*techeilet* garment would indeed require the turquoise thread, Korach mocked him. “By means of such challenges,” Stone Chumash News reported, “Korach sought to convince the people that such ‘illogical’ laws must have been the products of Moshe’s own imagination.” R. Hersh Goldwurm, another analyst, reported that Korach accused Moshe of acting without a divine mandate from the board. “If Moshe could be suspected of appointing his brother Kohen Gadol in an act of gross nepotism,” R. Goldwurm asked, “why could he not be accused of fabricating commandments that had no basis in logic or God’s will?” The Ramban revealed that Korach’s tactics were effective, as workforce morale plummeted and employees began to doubt Moshe’s claim to the corner office.

Sitting outside his tent prior to the incense presentations, Korach thought about how to proceed. His gripes about Moshe’s leadership and the promotion of the *kohanim* were shared by a sizeable contingent—15,000 employees, including 250 managers, was nothing to sneeze at. As a desert wind whipped the sandy dunes in front of him, Korach considered his options.

A typical case study will end there, with the conflict unresolved. The intent is to give students the opportunity to put themselves into the shoes of the protagonist and debate during class how they would proceed under those circumstances. A good professor gets students to use the case material, along with theories and frameworks they learned in class, to recommend concrete actions. Frequently, students are

able to surface options and explore ideas that neither the professors nor the protagonists themselves might have considered.

In our Korach case study, some students might side with Korach, while others might see things from Moshe's point of view. For instance, a student might question whether Korach's claims had any merit in the first place, referring to [Pirkei Avot 5:17](#), "Every argument that is **לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם**, [for the sake of] heaven's name, is destined to endure. But if it is not [for the sake of] heaven's name—it is not destined to endure." Were Korach's objections to Moshe's authority "for the sake of heaven, **לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם**?" After all, he makes a reasonable point that the promotion of the priests over the Levites—particularly over others from the Kahat clan—seems arbitrary. A student might also point to Rabbeinu Chananel's take that the appointment of Aharon as *kohen gadol* indeed displays red flags of nepotism.

Another student might push back, though, by citing Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, who claimed that "leadership depends on personal merit, and it was in this that Aharon was superior." A student with this view might argue that Korach's ad-hominem attacks against Moshe revealed selfish motivations. Korach didn't actually know the Divine reason for the establishment of the priesthood, so questioning Moshe's leadership was a red herring, an excuse for Korach to make a power play. Pirkei Avot seems to agree with this view, stating, "What [is an example of an argument for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What [is an example of an argument not for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his followers."

A second pasture for classroom discussion could focus not on the substance of Korach's arguments but on his style of voicing dissent. As Pirkei Avot mentioned, we can learn about proper debate conduct from the legendary disputes between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. In the [Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b](#), it states:

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Shmuel, For three years, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai argued. One said, "The halakha is like us," and the other said, "The halakha is like us." A heavenly voice spoke: "These and these are the words of the living God, and the halakha is like the House of Hillel." A question was raised: Since the heavenly voice declared: "Both these and those are the words of the Living God," why was the halakha established to follow the opinion of Hillel? It is because the students of Hillel were kind and gracious. They taught their own ideas as well as the ideas from the students of Shammai. Not only for this reason, but they went so far as to teach Shammai's opinions first.

[Yevamot 14b](#) elaborates that although Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed they did not abstain from marrying women of the families of the other. "This is to teach you that they showed love and friendship towards one another."

Students might question whether Korach gave Moshe the proper respect during their dispute, for instance by stating Moshe's position first. Instead, we see that Korach was not "kind and gracious," and that he used caustic language and sarcasm to make his point. Entrepreneur and contemporary commentator [Rabbi Ethan Tucker](#) points out that Korach's poor conduct is particularly unfit for someone

who otherwise would be deserving of respect as a prominent figure in the community, a Levite, and a member of Moshe and Aharon's own family. "The more you consider someone an equal . . . worth sparring with," Rabbi Tucker writes, "the more you respect someone, the more your integrity probably demands classifying their transgressions as cases of a 'deliberate rebel,' like Korach and his supporters. One cannot truly take someone seriously as an equal in religious knowledge and judgment and then" accept their blatant transgression of the law.

In contrast, Moshe abided by the principles of Beit Hillel. He appealed to Korach, Datan, and Aviram to reconcile and offered Korach the opportunity to make his case in front of God via the incense offering, requiring Aharon to undergo the same test, as well.

If we had more time, we could more fully explore Moshe's own leadership and debate style, and even question why God chose to organize Twelve Tribes, Inc. as he did. Instead, let's skip to the B case. The B case, which the professor usually hands out about three-quarters of the way through class, reveals to students what happened after the initial scenario in the main case. In this B case, Aharon's incense offering was accepted, while Korach and his followers were not only rejected but swallowed up by the ground in an unmistakable sign of God's condemnation.

As I mentioned, the case study approach helps students take the perspective of key players in a real scenario in order to better understand the choices those people faced at the time. In this case, looking at Korach's rebellion as a management dilemma highlights *Bnei Yisrael's* leadership structure and the challenge of voicing dissent in an appropriate fashion within that context.

However, the events of the B case also underscore the limits of the case study method as a mechanism for Torah study. After all, *Bnei Yisrael* was not a corporation. Power was not distributed through a board of directors, CEO, and various managers and departments. Ultimately, authority flowed from God through the Torah and Moshe. The outcomes of bad management decisions, meanwhile—while consequential—are not truly comparable to the events laid out in the Torah. Still, I hope this exercise was a useful lens for understanding the organizational dynamics within *Bnei Yisrael* at the time of the parsha and give some context for Korach's decision to rebel, as well as his and Moshe's differing approaches to leadership and dissent. Shabbat shalom.