5 Ways Korach Shows How Communities Avoid Hard Truths

Your 18Forty Parsha Guide is a weekly newsletter exploring five major takeaways from the weekly parsha. Receive this newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Your spouse calmly points out something you've been doing for months, with evidence, and you ignore her because you refuse to listen. Before she has finished speaking, you are already composing your defense, cataloguing every weakness in her argument so you do not have to internalize her words. Your instinct to blame the messenger when confronted with hard truths is the most reliable reflex in human psychology, and Korach's aftermath is the Torah's most sustained examination of that reflex.

In Parshat Korach, God's divine judgment sweeps through the camp in full public view, the ground opening beneath Korach's household, fire consuming 250 men, a plague killing thousands. Without pausing to ask why God judged so harshly, the next morning the community turns on Moshe and Aharon, saying, "You have killed the people of the Lord." By sunrise they had rewritten the whole sequence as Moshe's fault. If you have ever recited the Vidui on Yom Kippur, beating your chest through a list of sins you know are yours, and walked out of shul having performed the confession without absorbing it, you recognize the reflex on which this community was acting. The question the Torah presses across the rest of this parsha is whether you can hold yourself responsible for your failures without letting those failures define who you are.

1. When the Evidence Is Undeniable

The community had just watched the earth swallow Korach's household and fire consume 250 unauthorized incense-bearers, and by the next morning they had turned on Moshe and Aharon with the accusation in Bamidbar 17:6, saying, "You have killed the people of the Lord." They were not blaming Moshe for God's judgment but denying that God had judged at all. Psychologist Leon Festinger spent his career documenting this kind of reflexive denial. In *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Festinger demonstrated that when undeniable evidence contradicts a deeply held belief, people construct rationalizations rather than update the belief. What the Israelites had witnessed threatened their conviction that God was on their side, and denial allowed them to preserve that conviction by redirecting blame toward Moshe.

Ramban reads the accusation as a specific form of that rationalization. In his account, the people constructed a narrative in which Moshe engineered the incense test to eliminate his political opponents, recasting the fire and the plague as Moshe's orchestration rather than God's judgment. The community could not accept that God would punish their allies, because accepting divine punishment meant accepting their own share of guilt. Moshe and Aharon did hold enormous unilateral authority, and the community's suspicion was not entirely baseless, but the total denial of what they had witnessed goes beyond political critique. If you have ever watched a conflict end badly and reflexively concluded that someone must have manipulated the outcome before examining your own role, you were reacting in the same manner as Korach's supporters.

Dovid Bashevkin, in his book *Sin-a-gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought*, adds a communal dimension. Communities built on shared spiritual identity are especially vulnerable, because examining failures feels like an attack on the community's reason for existing. A school that cannot ask why a teacher was allowed to harm students for years, or a family that cannot name the dynamic everyone sees but no one mentions, will find the evasion deepening because the cost of honesty is measured in collective survival. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto offers a similar reading in *Mesillat Yesharim*, describing spiritual blindness as a genuine condition in which a person in the dark does not see the obstacles they create. You cannot argue someone out of a blindness they do not know they have, and when that blindness deepens into deliberate rewriting of the past, it produces revisionist history on a communal scale.

2. Rewriting the Past to Protect the Present

The second stage of the distortion is more audacious than the first. Datan and Aviram accuse Moshe, saying, "Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness?" They have taken the Torah's own language for the Promised Land and applied it to Egypt, rewriting history to win the present argument. Ibn Ezra identifies the sarcasm as deliberate rhetoric designed to reframe Moshe as tyrant and themselves as victims, even though Datan and Aviram remember the bricks, the beatings, and the drowning of children.

The community's earlier denial was reflexive, but this revision across generations is constructed deliberately. Once the constructed version takes hold, contradictory evidence does not challenge the narrative but confirms it, because the contradiction itself becomes proof that the other side is lying. Psychologist Dan McAdams, in *The Redemptive Self*, demonstrated that the stories we tell about our lives do not merely describe who we are but constitute who we are, with identity itself revised as experience demands. By constructing an identity as victims of Moshe's tyranny, Datan and Aviram are doing exactly what McAdams describes, and every piece of evidence against that identity becomes further evidence of the persecution they perceive.

Sarah Hurwitz identifies shame as the force driving this narrative construction. Blame narratives, Hurwitz explains, are built to shield us from admitting that we caused our own suffering. A person who describes a divorce as something that happened to them has constructed a similar narrative, accounting for every provocation and acknowledging none of the moments where a different choice was available. They cannot access the self-knowledge required for genuine change because they are locked into a narrative designed to ensure responsibility never arrives at their door.

In his landmark book *Halakhic Man*, Rav Soloveitchik offers a reframing that clarifies what was at stake in Parshat Korach. Teshuva, Rav Soloveitchik explains, requires the kind of introspection that turns revision toward the future, insisting that past failure does not foreclose future growth. Blame-shifting turns the same revision against the past, reconstructing events until the failure was never one's own to begin. Teshuva and blame-shifting use the same psychological faculty, but teshuva makes change possible while blame-shifting may make change impossible. The direction the revision takes depends on whether a person can hold guilt without collapsing into shame.

3. The Difference Between "I Did Wrong" and "I Am Wrong"

Moshe's plea in Bamidbar 16:22 addresses that collapse directly: "O God, Source of the breath of all flesh, when one person sins, will You be angry with the entire community?" Moshe is asserting a foundational principle, that accountability must be proportional and directed at specific actions by specific people, or it ceases to be accountability at all. If the entire community is condemned for one group's rebellion, admitting any degree of involvement becomes indistinguishable from self-annihilation, and no rational person will choose self-annihilation when denial is available. The Talmud in Berakhot 10a sharpens this principle. When hoodlums tormented Rabbi Meir and he prayed for their death, Beruriah corrected him and insisted that he pray for the sins to cease rather than the sinners. The distinction between condemning the act and condemning the person is, in the Talmud's telling, the difference between a prayer God accepts and one God does not.

Midrash Tanchuma elaborates on this principle, detailing how God distinguishes between the instigators and those who were misled. Brene Brown arrived at a version of this distinction through empirical psychology. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brown demonstrates that guilt, the recognition that I did something bad, motivates behavioral change because it leaves the core self intact, while shame, the conviction that I am bad, produces defensiveness and collapse because the threat is existential. The community in Korach cannot admit fault because in their framework, admitting fault means admitting they are fundamentally on the wrong side of God. Guilt has collapsed into shame, and shame has made honesty psychologically impossible. This collapse has real casualties in religious communities today, among them people who internalize the idea that their failures reveal their spiritual essence and who are driven from observance by shame framed as divine judgment.

Mark Moskowitz lived this distinction at stakes higher than most of us will face. Moskowitz, who went to prison and rebuilt his life through teshuva, had to find the narrow ground between the denial that says “what I did was not that bad” and the shame that says “I am beyond repair.” The challenge he describes, holding “I did something terrible” alongside “I am still capable of becoming someone worthy,” is exactly the challenge Moshe’s plea preserves for the community. Rav Kook holds that sin is not an expression of the core self but a temporary alienation from that self. If the framework holds, admitting fault becomes a homecoming rather than a degradation. What remains unresolved is what this looks like when the community is still blaming, still furious, and someone has to go first.

4. Running Into the Plague

Aharon goes first. The plague has begun, people are dying, and the community is still directing its fury at Moshe and Aharon. Aharon’s response in Bamidbar 17:11-12 bypasses defense and argument. Moshe tells him to take the fire pan, put incense on it, and go, and Aharon runs into the middle of the assembly, standing between the living and the dead. Rashi identifies the detail that carries the entire theological argument. The community had claimed the incense killed the 250 men, and Aharon uses that exact instrument to heal, taking the thing they fear and demonstrating through action that it saves rather than destroys. When a blame narrative has hardened to the point where argument only reinforces it, demonstrated care is the only force capable of breaking the pattern.

Rene Girard, working from anthropological and Christian theological frameworks, offers a vocabulary for what Aharon disrupts. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard argues that communities under stress resolve internal anxiety by converging on a target onto whom the community's guilt and fury can be projected. Aharon's act of running into the center of the plague refuses that scapegoat role. The parallel in your own life is the moment in a family argument when someone stops defending their position and says "I can see you're in pain, and I want to help," and the dynamic shifts because the expected pattern has been broken.

Rav Judah Mischel identifies the internal posture that makes Aharon's response sustainable. When a person absorbs hostility from weakness, Rav Judah argues, they erase themselves, but when they absorb it from a secure sense of their own worth, the act becomes leadership. Aharon can run into the plague because his sense of self does not depend on the community's approval. Martha Minow qualifies the heroism model, arguing that personal courage can halt an immediate crisis, but heroic character is not a sustainable basis for institutional accountability. Aharon's incense run saved the moment without changing the community's underlying disposition toward denial. The question is what structure can accomplish what personal courage cannot, making it possible for the next community to admit failure without waiting for a hero.

5. Building Communities That Can Hear Hard Truths

The lasting sign God creates after the plague addresses a problem every community faces. In Bamidbar 17, God tells Moshe to collect a wooden staff from each of the 12 tribal chiefs, with the staff for the tribe of Levi carrying Aharon's name. The staffs are placed overnight in the Tabernacle before the Ark of the Covenant, and by morning, 11 sit exactly as they were left, dry wood. Aharon's staff has sprouted in the night, producing buds, blossoms, and ripe almonds, and God instructs Moshe to place it permanently before the Ark as a lasting sign that Aharon's priesthood is divinely chosen.

You do not need to witness a miracle to live inside the problem the staff was designed to solve. Without some established fact about legitimate authority, every disagreement turns into a fresh argument about credibility. Rashi reads the staff's placement as exactly this kind of permanent settlement. The ordinary-life equivalent is the shared track record a couple or a business partner builds across years of honest dealing, a history that settles questions of credibility before each new disagreement turns into a fresh inquisition. Institutions without that accumulated record find themselves relitigating trust in every new conflict, and the process wears down the very trust it was meant to preserve.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his essay “Power versus Influence,” names the shift the staff represents, calling the earlier response power and this one influence. The earlier punishments compelled obedience through fear. The blossoming staff earns acceptance of Aharon’s priesthood through visible evidence of life rather than evidence of death. Governing through fear produces surface compliance while driving mistakes underground, because a person who admits a mistake invites the very punishment they are trying to avoid, so concealment becomes the rational choice. Governing through demonstrated trust allows a person to admit fault without fearing the admission will destroy their standing. If you have ever stayed quiet about a significant mistake at work because you could not predict how your manager would respond, you already know what the first kind of governance demands of a person.

Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor, initially assumed that medical teams reporting more errors were the weaker teams, but found the opposite pattern in the data. The teams reporting more errors had built enough internal trust that a nurse or doctor could admit a mistake without expecting to be fired. In *The Fearless Organization*, Edmondson names this condition psychological safety and argues it is the strongest predictor of whether a team improves or quietly accumulates unreported failures. The principle that care-shaped environments produce honesty while punishment-shaped environments produce concealment is a Torah insight that management research eventually confirmed through data.

Structural safety works only when the most senior people model the behavior the structure is meant to produce. Michael Eisenberg argues that institutional safeguards accomplish nothing when senior people refuse to model honest admission of their own mistakes. The blossoming staff has meaning only because Aharon first ran into the plague, risking his life to save the community accusing him of murder. The structure validates Aharon’s character, and his character gives the structure its credibility. Whether the institutional staff in your family, workplace, or synagogue blooms or becomes an empty monument depends on one question. Does the person holding the most authority admit fault in public before demanding accountability from everyone under that authority?

Questions for Reflection

1. **In your closest relationships, can you identify a moment where you rewrote the history of a conflict to make yourself the injured party, and what does the honest version of that story require you to admit?**

---

2. **What would it cost you, specifically, to say “I was wrong” in the situation where you most need to say it, and is the cost you are imagining real or a projection of shame?**
3. **In the communities you belong to, is admitting failure treated as an act of courage or a liability, and what would need to change for the answer to shift?**

This project is made possible with support from the Simchat Torah Challenge and UJA-Federation of New York. Learn more about the Simchat Torah Challenge and get involved at their website.