

On the heels of the debacle following the report of the scouts comes the tragic episode of the Korach rebellion. We know the story: Moses' nephew Korach foments discontent among a small group of men and churns it into a full-blown insurrection, ostensibly in the name of fairness. At first glance, they seem to have a point. Moses has appointed his brother Aaron as High Priest over his nephew Korach; On, Dathan, and Aviram, of the firstborn tribe of Reuben, feel slighted, probably because Moses has chosen the Ephraimite Joshua as his successor rather than one of them; and the 250 tribal leaders are likely angry because the Mishkan is solely in the hands of the Levites, the tribe of Moses and Aaron. But let's look a bit deeper. These manifestations of discontent in the guise of egalitarianism are mere pretext, especially the outlandish allegations of Dathan and Aviram, who add insult to injury by complaining that they have neither been brought to the land of milk and honey they were promised, nor have they received their land inheritance! However, this posturing is nothing more than an attempted coup, with ringleader Korach using them all to overthrow Moses and Aaron and assume power himself. Many midrashim delve into the reasons for Korach's destructive ambitions, largely focusing on how his immense wealth and prodigious intelligence have corrupted him. But midrashim in the Babylonian Tractate Sanhedrin 109-110 see Korach's wife as the driving force. Millennia before Shakespeare, they portray her as a veritable Lady Macbeth, juxtaposing her with the wife of On, whose wisdom and ingenuity kept her husband from joining the others the following day. It is easy to miss the fact that On was no longer with them. The only indication is what HaShem commanded Moses: "Withdraw from the dwelling of Korach, Dathan, and Aviram." (16:24) No mention of On. The midrash credits his wife for bringing about his absence. "On, son of Peleth, did not repent on his own; rather, his wife saved him. She said to him, 'What is the difference to you? If this Master, Moses, is the great one, you are the student, and if this master, Korach, is the great one, you are [still] the student.' On said to her, 'What shall I do? ... I too, took an oath with them ...' She said to him: 'I know that the entire assembly is holy ... and they observe the restrictions of modesty. ... Sit, for I will save you.' She gave him wine, caused him to become drunk, and laid him on a bed inside their tent. She sat at the entrance of the tent and exposed her hair as though she were bathing. Anyone who came and saw her stepped back. In the meantime, the assembly of Korach was swallowed into the ground, and On was spared." She knows her husband well enough to realize that he is too weak to withstand peer pressure, and she is willing to risk her reputation to prevent him from joining a cause she deems illegitimate. In contrast, Korach's wife is portrayed as a scheming, ambitious woman who will stop at nothing in her effort to manipulate her husband into fomenting a power struggle. She is willing to bend the facts, first stroking his ego by inferring nepotism and embarrassment, and ending with a flourish of trumped-up (pun intended) logic: "See what Moses is doing. He is king, he appointed his brother High Priest, and his brother's sons deputy priests. ... Furthermore, he shears your hair and waves you as if you are insignificant as excrement." To his objection, "Didn't he shave his hair like the rest of the Levites?" she counters, "... he was willing to humiliate himself in order to humiliate you. And furthermore, regarding what he said to you about preparing sky-blue dye for your tzitzit, one could respond, 'If it enters your mind, Moses, that using sky-blue dye is considered a mitzvah, ... then why not dress all your students in sky-blue robes without tzitzit and fulfil the mitzvah in this manner.' Clearly, Moses is fabricating all this." The midrash concludes with, "This is the meaning of that which is written: 'The wisdom of women builds her house' [Proverbs 14:1]; this refers to the wife of On, son of Peleth. And: 'Folly plucks it down with her hands.' [Proverbs 14:1]; this refers to the wife of Korach." The sages of the Talmud recognized the unique power of women, albeit not solely in a positive light. In Genesis 2:18 HaShem sees that "It is not good that man is alone; I shall make him a helpmate opposite him." The Hebrew term is *eizer kenegdo*, which unfortunately has often served to subjugate women. However, the root עזר also denotes military or divine aid, independent of gender roles, and often not subordinate, but rather, of superior or equal standing. Eve is intended to be Adam's helper and protector, not his mere servant. Her distinctive attributes complement Adam's, creating together a powerful force for good, or for evil. From time immemorial women have used their native abilities to influence the behavior of men, both behind the scenes and alongside. Tractate Yevamot 63a interprets *kenegdo* (opposite) thus: "If one is worthy his wife helps him; if he is not worthy she is against him." With her innate sense of perception, a wife is able to discern her husband's strengths and weaknesses, sometimes more acutely than he himself, and with her unique power of persuasion, she is able to guide his actions. If she has the spirit of On's wife, she can help him override his weaknesses and channel his strengths for good. But if she takes after Korach's wife, she can manipulate him by playing upon his strengths and his weaknesses, causing untold harm. Sisters, it's in our hands. Let's use it wisely!

Shabbat shalom!