

2 Tammuz 5785 I June 28, 2025

Parshat Korach: Smart Women Anna Veronese '28

This dvar Torah is dedicated to the many smart women of Yeshivat Maharat, with whom I have the honor to learn.

A well-known verse from Proverbs 14:1 states: "The wisest of women builds her house, but the foolish one tears it down with her hands."

This verse is perhaps best embodied in the incredible story of the wives of Korach and On, son of Pelet. At the beginning of this week's parsha, we see Korach gathering people to challenge Moses and Aaron's leadership. The men answering his call seem to be part of different factions. The text soon tells us that they do not share the same motives and goals. We have Korach, son of Izhar, from Levi's tribe; Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliab; and On son of Pelet, from Reuben's tribe, "together with 250 Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute" (Numbers 16:2).

On immediately disappears from the story. He is not mentioned further and, contrary to the other mutineers, he does not seem to perish in either of the two punishments sent by God—neither the earth swallowing the rebels nor the fire consuming them.

In Sanhedrin 109a-110b, an extraordinary midrash presents us with the dialogue between Korach and his wife, revealing the destructive power of foolish counsel.

Korach's wife said to him: "See what Moses is doing! He is king. He made his brother high priest. He made his brother's sons deputy priests. If terumah comes—he says: 'It shall be for the priest.' If first-tithe comes—he says: 'Give one-tenth to the priest.' Moreover, he cut your hair and makes you roll around like donkeys, as if he had an evil eye on your hair."

Korach's wife employs all the tricks of demagoguery to foment rebellion. She appeals to the basest arguments, accusing Moses of corrupt leadership, embezzlement, nepotism, and despotism. Instead of appreciating and giving valor and honor to his subordinates, she claims that he harasses them.

When Korach tries to reason with her, saying that Moses also works hard, she strikes with two unopposable arguments. First, she accuses Moses of being foolish—so eager for his name to be remembered that he is willing to die a hero just for the sake of his reputation. The second argument, more interesting, is a halakhic one.

He [Korach] said to her: "But he [Moses] also did the same!" She [Korach's wife] said to him: "Since everything is for his own greatness, he also said: 'Let me die with the Philistines.' Moreover, he told you to make blue [fringes] on the tzitzit. If you think blue is important for the commandment—take out garments that are entirely blue and cover all your students with them!"



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Through these manipulative arguments, Korach's wife demonstrates how destructive counsel can tear down not just a household, but an entire community. Her words fuel Korach's rebellion and ultimately lead to his destruction.

The same midrash tells us the reason for On's disappearance from the story. Just as Korach's wife is responsible for his downfall, so it is On's wife who saves him from death.

She said to him: "What difference does it make to you? If Moses is the leader—you are a student. If Korach is the leader—you are a student." He said to her: "But what shall I do? I have already been counted among them and cannot separate myself!" She said to him: "I will save you."

This dialogue attributes to On's wife the same wisdom that the great leader Moses displays. She has understood something that neither her husband nor all the other people joining the rebellion have grasped. This is not a mere challenge to Moses and Aaron's leadership for the sake of "democracy." It is true that, at first glance, when hearing Korach's words, one could think he is rightfully challenging the idea of hierarchy. When he says "we are all holy," he speaks truth—God himself declared this in Leviticus 19:2. Therefore, his rhetorical question to Moses and Aaron—"Why did you put yourselves above everyone else?"—seems to argue: you should not be superior to us, have more power and special privileges, because we are all equal before God.

But On's wife, like Moses, understands that Korach's claim is a challenge thrown only to serve his own purposes. Korach does not want a different political structure; he does not want everyone to cooperate, work together, and share equally the same responsibilities and privileges. He simply wants to seize power for himself. "What difference does it make if the leader changes?" On's wife asks. In any case, you will always be subject to a higher authority." Korach is leading you to believe you will be a chief, but you are wrong. It will not be like that.

The poor On is immediately convinced by his wife's words, but feeling a certain commitment to the rebel group he joined, he does not know how to extricate himself from the situation. Here comes the double wisdom of his wife. After correctly interpreting Korach's secret motivations, she takes matters into her own hands, orchestrating and carrying out a meticulous plan to get her husband out of harm's way. She understands that this rebellion could have no other outcome than failure.

The Midrash elaborates:

She gave him wine to drink and he fell asleep on the bed, and she sat at the entrance of her courtyard and uncovered her hair and was combing her head. She said: "It is written: For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them." And so it was, that



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when one of them came to ask about On, he would see the woman with uncovered hair and turn back. Meanwhile, he was saved.

What a smart woman! What does she do? She literally puts her husband to sleep so that he cannot be tempted to join the rebels and put himself in danger. Then, in a shocking move, she uses her knowledge of halakha to drive away the rebels from her husband. She uncovers her hair and begins to comb it. Now, we have just learned in chapter 5 of Numbers that a married woman's hair is only uncovered in a very specific case: as a sign of public humiliation when a husband suspects his wife of adultery and subjects his wife to the Sotah ordeal. But On's wife is still in her courtyard—technically, she is in a semi-private space and does not need to cover her hair. However, the men coming to seek On to carry out the rebellion do NOT have the right to penetrate this intimate space and see her like that. And so they are forced to retreat.

The Midrash is particularly powerful because it puts in On's wife's mouth the same words that Korach said, but with a different meaning. Yes, we are all holy. This means that everyone has the power to become holy, not through seizing power, but through Torah study.

Thus, On's wife becomes part of a lineage, a legacy of "wise women"—thus called in our tradition—who take action at different times and in different ways: Miriam, Zelophehad's daughters, Deborah, Abigail, and the wives of many Rabbis, whose names are often forgotten, like On's wife, but whose wisdom is not.

The Midrash concludes with our verse from Proverbs, stressing the following: "And about her Solomon said (Proverbs 14): 'The wisest of women builds her house'—this is the wife of On ben Pelet. 'And folly tears it down with her hands'—this is Korach's wife who incited him to rebel against Moses."

Women may have been nameless, but they forged and influenced the destiny of many. Thank God we are not nameless anymore. Let us continue and follow the path of On's wife on our way to holiness.

Anna Veronese was born in Venice, Italy. Since 2009, she has been living in Paris with her husband and three children. She holds a BA in Archaeology, an MA in History from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and an MA in Information Science from the CNAM Institute in Paris. She is Project coordinator at Ta Shma, an independent French Beit Midrash in Jerusalem and the vice-president of Kol-Elles, a Beit Midrash in Paris offering Jewish learning for women. She studies issues of gender, equality, and social justice within Orthodox Judaism. She is passionate about Italian Jewish traditions, rich and composite in both customs and liturgy, which she studies and passes on to the next generation.