

Torah Study
Parashat Korach
June 28, 2025
Temple Beth Am Pinecrest

Numbers 16:20-17:24

The Ethics of Reading and Ethical Criticism

The Ethics of Reading can be summarized in three main questions:

1. What are we reading?
2. How are we reading?
3. What do we do with our reading when we are done?

Ethical criticism is a reading strategy that is used to understand the sense of right and wrong and how the world works, according to a particular text.

Literary critic Wayne Booth sums up ethical criticism as reading that is sensitive to the “sense of life” that is expressed by a text and how does the text answer the question “How should one live?”

Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep*

Questions of Leadership

<p>במדבר ט"ז:א-ד'</p> <p>(א) וַיִּקְנֹחַ לְקֹרַח בֶּן־יִצְחָר בֶּן־קֹהָת בֶּן־לֵוִי וְדָתָן וַאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב וְאֹן בֶּן־פִּלֶת בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן: (ב) וַיִּקְמוּ לִפְנֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַנְשֵׁים מִבְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲמִשִּׁים וּמֵאתַיִם נָשִׂיָאֵי עֵדָה קְרָאִי מוֹעֵד אַנְשֵׁי־שָׁם: (ג) וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לֶכֶם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה כָּלָם קֹדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם יְהוָה וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קֹהֶל יְהוָה: (ד) וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל־פָּנָיו:</p>
<p>Numbers 16:1-4</p> <p>(1) Now Korah, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, betook himself, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben — (2) to rise up against Moses, together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute. (3) They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and יהוה is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above יהוה’s congregation?” (4) When Moses heard this, he fell on his face.</p>

במדבר ט"ז:כ"ב

(כ) וַיִּדְבֹּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: (כא) הִבְדְּלוּ מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה הַזֹּאת וְאֲכֹלָה אֹתָם כְּרִגְעַ: (כב) וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל־פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל אֱלֹהֵי הָרוּחַת לְכָל־בָּשָׂר הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחָטֵא וְעַל כָּל־הָעֵדָה תִּקְרָץ: {ס}

Numbers 16:20-22

(20) and יהוה spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, (21) "Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!" (22) But they fell on their faces and said, "O God, Source of the breath of all flesh! When one member sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?"

1. Who are the rebels? How are they differentiated and why does that matter?
2. According to the rebels, who should have the power of leadership?
3. How does the Bible handle corporate or collective identity?

The First Rebellion: Korach and Priestly Leadership

במדבר ט"ז:כ"ח-ל"ב

(כח) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תִּדְעוּן כִּי־יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל־הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי־לֹא מִלְּבִי: (כט) אִם־כִּמּוֹת כָּל־הָאָדָם יִמְתְּנוּ אֵלֶּה וּפָקַדְתָּ כָּל־הָאָדָם יִפְקֹד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא יְהוָה שְׁלַחְנִי: (ל) וְאִם־בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא יְהוָה וּפָצְתָה הָאָדָמָה אֶת־פִּיהָ וּבִלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֻתָם כִּי נֶאֱצַן הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת־יְהוָה: (לא) וַיְהִי כַכֵּלָתוֹ לְדַבֵּר אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּבְקַע הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תַּחְתֵּיהֶם: (לב) וַתִּפְתַּח הָאֶרֶץ אֶת־פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם וְאֶת־בְּתֵיהֶם וְאֶת כָּל־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר לָקָרַח וְאֶת כָּל־הָרִכָּוֶשׁ: וַיִּרְדּוּ הֵם וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַתִּכַּס עֲלֵיהֶם הָאֶרֶץ וַיֵּאבְדוּ מִתּוֹךְ הַקָּהָל:

Numbers 16:28-33

(28) And Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was יהוה who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: (29) if these people's death is that of all humankind, if their lot is humankind's common fate, it was not יהוה who sent me.

(30) But if יהוה brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that those involved have spurned יהוה

Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, (32) and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol, with all that belonged to them; the earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.

1. Who is responsible for Korah, Dathan, and Abiram's punishment?
2. Why is the punishment so dramatic and harsh?

Civil Leadership and the Test of the Staffs

במדבר י"ז:ט"ז-כ"ו

(טז) וידבר יהוה אל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (יז) דַּבֵּר | אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְקַח מֵאֵתָם מִטָּה מִטָּה לְבֵית אָב מֵאֵת כָּל־נְשֵׁי־אֲהֵם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת אִישׁ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מִטָּהּ: (יח) וְאֵת שֵׁם אֶהֱרֹן תִּכְתֹּב עַל־מִטָּה לְיָ כִּי מִטָּה אֶחָד לְרֹאשׁ בֵּית אֲבוֹתָם: (יט) וְהִנַּחְתָּם בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת אֲשֶׁר אוֹעֵד לָכֶם שָׁמָּה: (כ) וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אֲבָחֶר־בּוֹ מִטָּהוּ יִפְרֹחַ וְהִשְׁכַּתִּי מֵעָלָי אֶת־תְּלֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵם מְלִינִם עָלַיְכֶם: (כא) וידבר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנוּ אֵלָיו | כָּל־נְשֵׁי־אֲהֵם מִטָּה לְנָשִׂיא אֶחָד מִטָּה לְבֵית אֶחָד לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר מִטּוֹת וּמִטָּה אֶהֱרֹן בְּתוֹךְ מִטּוֹתָם: (כב) וַיִּנַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמִּטָּת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה בְּאֹהֶל הָעֵדוּת: (כג) וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיֵּבֶא מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֹהֶל הָעֵדוּת וְהִנֵּה פָּרוּחַ מִטָּה־אֶהֱרֹן לְבֵית לֵוִי וַיֵּצֵא פָּרוּחַ וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שִׁקְדִּים: (כד) וַיֵּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּטָּת מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה אֶל־כָּל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ אִישׁ מִטָּהוּ: {פ} (כה) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה הֲשִׁב אֶת־מִטָּה אֶהֱרֹן לִפְנֵי הָעֵדוּת לְמַשְׁמַרְתָּ לְאוֹת לְבְנֵי־מִי וְתִכַּל תְּלוֹנוֹתָם מֵעָלָי וְלֹא יָמָתוּ: (כו) וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֹתוֹ כֵּן עָשָׂה: {פ}

Numbers 17:16-26

(16) spoke to Moses, saying: (17) Speak to the Israelite people and take from them—from the chieftains of their ancestral houses—one staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house: twelve staffs in all. Inscribe each one's name on his staff, (18) there being one staff for each head of an ancestral house; also inscribe Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. (19) Deposit them in the Tent of Meeting before the Pact, where I meet with you. (20) The staff of the candidate whom I choose shall sprout, and I will rid Myself of the incessant mutterings of the Israelites against you. (21) Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. Their chieftains gave him a staff for each chieftain of an ancestral house, twelve staffs in all; among these staffs was that of Aaron. (22) Moses deposited the staffs before יהוה, in the Tent of the Pact. (23) The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Pact, and there the staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had sprouted: it had brought forth sprouts, produced blossoms, and borne almonds. (24) Moses then brought out all the staffs from before יהוה to all the Israelites; each identified and recovered his staff. (25) יהוה said to Moses, "Put Aaron's staff back before the Pact, to be kept as a lesson to rebels, so that their mutterings against Me may cease, lest they die." (26) This Moses did; just as יהוה had commanded him, so he did.

1. Why do Moses and Aaron need the Test of the Staffs? What do they show with this test?

Much of the book of Numbers can be read allegorically. The stories of rebellion represent real life conflicts that the Israelites must have confronted. Certainly the question of leadership in Exile is important. In an ethical reading of text, we want to be sensitive to the world as understood by the text AND try to apply the text to our own situation, using the rules of the world according to the story.

1. How do we understand rebellion and leadership today in the context of our parashah?