

Parshat Korah: Beyond Mrs. On? Dr. Wendy Zierler

Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track

The very first verse of this week's Parsha raises two significant questions:

Korah the son of Yitzhar the son of Kehat the son of Levi
and Datan and Aviram the sons of Eliav and On the son
of Pelet –the sons of Reuven—took. (Bereishit 16:1)

א וַיִּקַּח קֹרַח, בֶּן-יִצְחָר בֶּן-קֵהָת בֶּן-לֵוִי;
וְדָתָן וְאַבִּירָם בְּנֵי אֶלְיָאָב, וְאוֹן
בֶּן-פִּלֵּת--בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן. (במדבר טז:א)

- 1) What did Korah and his retinue take?
- 2) And who is this On Ben Pelet, who appears only once in this opening verse and who is never mentioned again?

The Gemarah in BT Sanhedrin 109b, amidst a string of commentaries about the sinning behavior of various scoundrels—the people of Sodom, the spies on Bamidbar 14, and then Korah and his clique— steps into the interpretive breach to answer both questions.

With regard to what Korah and his minions took, the Gemarah offers the following in the name of Reish Lakish:

“And Korah, son of Yitzharr, son of Kehat, son of Levi, took
[*vayikkah*]” (Bamidbar [16:1](#)), Reish Lakish says: He purchased [*lakah*] a bad
acquisition for himself, as through his actions he drove himself from the
world. (BT Sanhedrin 109b)

ויקח [קרח] אמר ריש לקיש
שלקח מקח רע לעצמו.
(סנהדרין קט:)

The exact nature of this bad purchase or acquisition is not specified in Reish Lakish's commentary. Rashi intervenes and interprets the words “*mekah ra*” simply as “*hitil biketatah*,” – he stirred up a fight, but supplies no additional explication. A midrash brought further down the page in the name of Rav, however, sheds additional light:

Rav says: On, son of Pelet, 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, Korah, is the great one, you are the student. Why are you
involving yourself in this matter? On said to her: What shall I do? I
was one of those who took counsel and I took an oath with them that I
would be with them. She said to him: I know that the entire assembly is
holy, as it is written: “For all the assembly is holy” (Bamidbar 16:3), and
they observe the restrictions of modesty. She said to him: Sit, for I will
save you. She gave him wine to drink and 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 Korah was
swallowed into the ground [and On the son of Pelet was spared]...

אמר רב און בן פלית אשתו הצילתו
אמרה ליה מאי נפקא לך מינה אי מר
רבה אנת תלמידא ואי מר רבה אנת
תלמידא אמר לה מאי אעביד הואי
בעצה ואשתבעי לי בהדיה אמרה
ליה ידענא דכולה כנישתא קדישתא
נינהו דכתיב (במדבר טז, ג) כי כל
העדה כולם קדושים אמרה ליה תוב
דאנא מצילנא לך אשקיתיה חמרא
וארויתיה ואגניתיה גואי אותבה על
בבא סתרתה למזיה כל דאתא חזיה
הדר אדהכי והכי אבליעו להו

This oft quoted midrash comes to answer question two above, namely, what happened to On and how it is that he does not appear among those who perish as a result of Korah's rebellion, but it indirectly answers the first question too. Insofar as biblical marriage is signaled by way of the verb *lakah*-- וַיִּקַּח (Devarim 24:1)-- Rav's story about On's wife implies that while Korah made a bad matrimonial acquisition, On's was good and helped saved his life. The Gemarah goes on to specify in great detail the ways in which

Korah's wife goaded her husband on to rebel against Moses' authority, while On Ben Pelet's unnamed wife undertook to dissuade and prevent him from further involvement in Korah's campaign. For this reason Mrs. On is associated at the end of the midrash with the first part of Mishlei 14:1 -- חִכְמוֹת נָשִׁים, בְּנִתָּה בֵּיתָה -- the wisdom of women builds her house—whereas Mrs. Korah is associated with the second, opposing half of the verse: וְאִלֵּיתָּ, בְּיָדֶיהָ תִּהְרָסֶנּוּ -- folly destroys it with her hands.

Given the obscurity of On Ben Pelet, it is remarkable, and surely a mark of the influence of feminism on current religious discourse, that this particular midrash about his unnamed wife appears in so many current internet Divrei Torah about this Parsha. The salutary influence of the wife of On ben Pelet as opposed to the malign influence of Korah's wife is trumpeted all over the blogosphere as evidence of the life-or-death importance of choosing the right wife. Indeed, On Ben Pelet's consort demonstrates laudable initiative, smarts, and insight all of which save her husband's life.

Why is it, then, that this midrash leaves me with something of a sour, uncomfortable taste in my mouth?

Is it because the supposed excellence of the wife of On Ben Pelet seems to depend on her husband having absolutely no agency, personality, or capacity to learn? The midrash opens with the assertion that On Ben Pelet never repented for his part in the rebellion and thus played no role whatsoever in his own salvation. *Geveret On Ben Pelet*, as she is referred to in a Mercaz Harav blog,¹ takes complete charge of his fate. An attentive reader cannot help but discern the irony in the appellation, *Geveret On*, given that one of the meanings of the word "אֵן" is power or strength and that the title "*Geveret*" derives from the root גבר or man. In this midrash On Ben Pelet entirely lacks conventionally masculine "אֵן," hence his wife's ability and need to assume it herself.² On's rank powerlessness is reinforced by all of the details of their exchange in the midrash, beginning with Mrs. On's opening statements to her husband in response to his having joined Korah's uprising. "What difference is any of this going to make to you?" she asks him. "Either Moses will be the master or it'll be Korah. Either way, you'll be but a student." The use of the terms "*rav*" and "*talmid*" transfer this whole power struggle to the context of a *beit midrash*, heaping on additional irony. Given the esteem accorded in the rabbinic tradition to the relationship of student and teacher, and the importance of acquiring a "*rav*," there would certainly be much at stake in choosing the right teacher or master. But not for On, who responds simply by claiming that he has given his word to Korah and thus there is nothing he can do to change his current course of action.

Mrs. On takes further steps that demonstrate the intellectual and moral acumen her husband so shamefully lacks. Her decision to get On drunk, and then to sit at the entrance of the tent with her hair exposed unveils the hypocrisy at the heart of Korah and Co.'s claim that the whole congregation is holy: so holy that they won't dare approach the tent for fear of violating the norms of (sexual) modesty, even as they make a bold and immodest grab for Moses and Aaron's power. The reference in the midrash to a woman perched by a tent in a sexually provocative guise brings to mind the biblical Yael (Shoftim 4-5) sitting by her tent and luring an unsuspecting Sisera to his death. Here are brave Korah and his men so easily frightened away by Mrs. On's ruse, while On himself is dead drunk, completely unconscious of what is going on around him.

Viewed from one angle, this Talmudic midrash presents an admirable image of an unnamed, unheralded woman who nevertheless takes control of a situation so as to save her hapless husband's life. Viewed from

¹ <http://www.mercazharav.org.il/default.asp?pg=3&id=617>

² The other potential meaning of the word אֵן in the Bible is lamentation or pain, which might explain Jacob's decision when Rachel names her second son "Ben-Oni" at the very moment of her death, to rename him Binyamin—son of my right (read, strong) hand, thereby resolving the potential ambiguous meaning of the name. Jacob doesn't seem to want his child named "Son of Lamentation," even though his birth coincides with great bereavement. Jacob asserts the strength of naming and interpretation over that of his departed wife, adding an association of gender competition to the name "On," that might figure in the background of the talmudic story.

another angle, however, Mr. On's agency and smarts become less about women's capacity and more about the shameful of On, and by extension all of all those who followed Korah, in the same way that in the book of Judges, the feminine bravery of Devorah and Yael and the perspicacity of the wife of Manoah (the unnamed mother of Shimshon), cast doubt on the honor of men in their community and buttress the argument for a centralized alternative to the free-for-all known as the era of the judges.

To be sure, the Talmud's willingness to imagine a woman who has the brains and moral clarity to save her husband is a welcome alternative to those who would see these traits as completely incompatible with femininity. The Meshivat Nefesh (Yohanan Luria, 15th-16th century Alsatian Talamudist) on Bereishit 18 refers to Mrs On's having distanced her husband from this conflict as an act that contradicted her basic, feminine nature:

because women tend to be jealous and to foment argument כי הנשים נוטות תמיד לקנאה ולחרחר ריב ולהסיט
and to send their husbands astray את בעליהן

Forced to choose between these two alternatives, I'll gladly take the wife of On Ben Pelet, as depicted in BT Sanhedrin, over the version presented by the Meshivat Nefesh. Given my druthers, though, I'd look beyond both toward another model entirely. Writing in this day and age, at a time of great women scholars and professionals, whose Torah learning and attainment are seen as augmenting and complementing rather than undermining that of their partners, whose power and agency present themselves not in the form of tricksterism and sexual provocation, but in wise leadership and collaborative problem solving, the Talmudic story of Mrs. On Ben Pelet emerges for me less as a source of pride and more a mark of how far, indeed, Jewish women have come. There are so many stories that have yet to be written, that our new generation of women scholars, activists, leaders, and partners will need to pen so that we can write ourselves back into our own tradition and become a true part of its "holy congregation."



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