

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Korach, Numbers, Chapters 16-18 | July 6, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Jabotinsky and the Love of the Land

In 1903, the Sixth Zionist Congress debated what was inaccurately called the “Uganda Plan.” Specifically, the delegates argued about whether to authorize an investigative committee to journey to Kenya to examine the feasibility of establishing a preparatory Jewish refuge in land offered to the Zionist movement by the British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain. In Basel, where the very First Zionist Congress had met six years prior, Theodore Herzl emphasized that even as he supported the proposal, his vision remained directed to the Holy Land:

Zion it is not and can never be. It is merely an expedient . . . founded upon a national and political basis.

The proposal caused a firestorm. When the majority of the Congress voted to authorize an exploratory committee, many of those opposed stormed out of the auditorium. This was the first major debate that threatened to split the Zionist movement, and when the Congress came to a close, with all delegates returning to the auditorium, Herzl, in his closing address, sought to assure all attendees of his love of the Land of Israel, and concluded with the words, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning.” A committee was eventually dispatched to Kenya, and the final report was decidedly negative. From that moment onward the Zionist movement focused only on the Land of Israel.

My goal here is not to criticize either side of this debate, but rather to ponder what those in Basel discovered about themselves at that moment. In the auditorium, one of those who had voted “no” to the proposal, and who had stormed out, was a young man attending his first Congress, one who had not originally planned to make the Zionist movement his signature cause, but who had recently become obsessed with Jewish nationalism. This man was Vladimir Jabotinsky.

Though they were very different in both personalities and careers, there were some striking biographical similarities between Herzl and Jabotinsky, the latter being something akin to the East European version of the former. Jabotinsky, like Herzl, was raised in an atmosphere of assimilation; like Herzl, he became a journalist; like Herzl, he was driven by the plight of Jews; and like Herzl, he discovered within himself a profound Jewishness that he may not have known was there before. Jabotinsky also discovered, at that moment in the Congress, a bond to a land in which he had never set foot. It is this bond that, rightly understood, lies at the heart of the drama not

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only in last week's *parashah*, but also in our own. Indeed, only when we take the two *parshiyot* in tandem can we discover how each informs the other.

The central details of our reading are well known: a group of demagogues, which includes Moses' cousin Korach along with Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben, accuse Moses of hoarding the roles of leadership for himself and his brother Aaron. These demagogues entice a number of Israelites to rally to their call. What is striking in this story is not the complaints leveled against the faithful servant of God; that, alas, is a central theme in the Book of Numbers. Rather, what makes this tale so memorable is the particular punishment visited on the rebels:

And Moses said, Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. If these men die the common death of all men, or if they are visited by the fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth, and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.

And as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth, and swallowed them up, with their households, and all the men that belonged to Korah, and all their goods. (Numbers 16:28–32)

Devoured by the earth itself; no other punishment akin to this is found in the Torah. Why does it appear here? Rabbi Dr. Yonatan Grossman points to a striking way in which close examination of last week's reading allows us to understand our own.

There are those who might see last week's *parashah*—the story of the spies and their sin—as utterly unrelated to our tale here. But for the medieval Spanish sage Moses Nahmanides, it is all one story. The spies undermined the people's faith in Moses, and in their own destiny in the Holy Land. The punishment that followed—the Israelites being doomed to wander the wilderness for 40 years—allowed for the discontent with Moses, and with the promise regarding the Land, to fester further. We see the demagogues play on this mistrust and unhappiness at the beginning of our own *parashah*, as they level complaints in which the Holy Land plays central stage:

And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab; and they said, We will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have **brought us up** out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also make yourself a prince over us? Moreover you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards. Will you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up. (Numbers 16:12–14)

Here Dathan and Abiram take the promise of the “Promised Land” and seek to turn it on its head. In their twisted rhetoric, it is Egypt that is the “land of milk and honey,” and the “going up” toward Canaan is, for them, actually a regression.



The sin of the spies, and the story told this week, are, in other words, entirely intertwined. It is with this in mind that Yonatan Grossman explains the punishment in our *parashah*. Those who derided the virtue of *ascent* to the Holy Land in the ears of Israel were punished with a *descent* instead. And their being swallowed up by the desert, their being almost literally eaten by the earth, takes on, for Grossman, new resonance when we realize that these rebels capitalized on the sin of the spies. Note the precise words of the latter:

So they brought to the people of Israel an evil report of the land which they had spied out, saying, The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, **is a land that devours its inhabitants** . . . (Numbers 13:32)

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stories of these two sins are essentially one tale about the consequences of a lack of love for the Holy Land, and a lack of faith in the way in which the destiny of God's covenantal people is bound up with it. The memory of these sins has marked Jewish consciousness for generations, as, over the centuries, a love of the Holy Land was inculcated in so many Jews who never saw its soil and who lived so far away from it.

At times, some who had never professed this love for the land suddenly discovered it within themselves. Why did Jabotinsky react so strongly to the Uganda Plan? Something within him forced him to connect, for one moment, to the Holy Land. As he writes in his memoir, excerpted in English in the *Jewish Review of Books*:

I realized that my task in that congress was to keep silent and to observe, and that is what I did. I found a lot of things to observe there. The Sixth Congress, the last in Herzl's life, was perhaps the first congress of adult Zionism. The name of that examination of maturity is known as Uganda. I was one of the minority that voted against Uganda and, together with the rest of the "*Neinsagers*" ["the no sayers"], walked out of the hall. I wondered myself at the motive hidden deep within my soul that prompted me to vote against, in spite of what I had told my electors.

Jabotinsky further understood that his own actions were all the more striking considering his own reverence for Herzl:

Nobody tried to persuade me to vote as I did. Herzl made a colossal impression on me—this word is no exaggeration, no other description would fit: colossal—I am not one of those who will easily bow to a personality. In general I do not remember, out of all the experiences I have had in my life, one man who made any impression on me whatsoever either before Herzl or after him. I felt that truly there stands before me a man of destiny, a prophet and leader by the grace of God, deserving to be followed even through error and confusion. And even today it seems to me that I hear his voice ringing in my ears, as he swore to all of us, "*Im eshkachekh Yerushalayim*. . ." ["If I forget thee, o Jerusalem"]. I believe his oath; everyone believed. Yet still I voted against him, but I do not know why: "just so"—that same "because" that is stronger than a thousand reasons.



So Jabotinsky writes. What are we to make of this? Here, as with Herzl, we have a man who has grown up with little Jewishness, and yet, when push came to shove, suddenly this assimilated Jew found out what the Holy Land meant to the essence of his hopes and dreams. Jabotinsky, recalling that moment, reflected that both sides of the debate discovered how important *Eretz Israel* itself was to them:

It is a strange thing: I felt that, after that vote, the congress reached such a height that the level at which it began simply could not be compared to it. In spite of the split, the tears, and the indignation, some deeper inner cohesion between the “*Neinsager*” and the “*Jasager*” [“the yes sayers”] came about. Perhaps they learned to have more respect for one another or for the movement than they had before; and it seems to me the movement as a whole also attained greater elevation on that day, when the delegates of the people mourned their first political victory. I am sure that Chamberlain, the author of the Uganda proposal, and Balfour and many more statesmen in England and in other countries, only on that day realized what Zionism meant, and that the same is true also of many veterans of the movement.

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I think what Jabotinsky means is that in that moment, in Basel in 1903, many discovered the mysterious link between the Holy Land and the Jewish soul. And this link would always remain in Jabotinsky’s soul. Thirty-five years later he would make it manifest at the conclusion of the eeriest speech he would give. The speech was delivered in Warsaw on Tisha b’Av, beginning with a prophecy of doom, and concluding with one of redemption. Foreseeing the destruction of European Jewry, Jabotinsky said,

It is already three years that I am calling upon you, Polish Jewry, who are the crown of world Jewry. I continue to warn you incessantly that a catastrophe is coming closer. I became gray and old in these years, my heart bleeds, that you, dear brothers and sisters, do not see the volcano which will soon begin to spit its all-consuming lava. I know that you are not seeing this because you are immersed in your daily worries. Today, however, I demand your trust. You were convinced already that my prognoses have already proven to be right. If you think differently then drive me out from your midst! However, if you do believe me, then listen to me in this 11th hour: in the name of God let any one of you save himself as long as there is still time.

This was the eerie, terrifying prophecy of doom. But then Jabotinsky added the following:

whoever of you will escape from the catastrophe, he or she will live to see the exalted moment of a great Jewish wedding—the rebirth and rise of the Jewish state. I do not know if I will be privileged to see it, but my son will! I believe in this, as I’m sure that tomorrow morning the sun will rise.



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Theodore Herzl himself was brokenhearted after the intense opposition he faced in Basel in 1903, and he died soon after, in 1904. He could not have known that the Zionist Congress's focus on the Holy Land would eventually lead to the Balfour Declaration.

Our *parashah* concludes with Moses reemphasizing the election of Aaron by stressing that the first fruits of the Land's bounty would be presented to the priesthood. The point, perhaps, is to stress that in contrast to the claims of the doubters, who spoke of a "land that devours its inhabitants," the Promised Land will instead be one in which its inhabitants will eat from the land. And long after the exile from the Land began, the love of the Land, and its fruits, did not disappear. Many Jews after Jabotinsky would discover as well that link between themselves and the Land. The miracles we have seen in the past many decades are a testament to Judah Halevi's prediction:

Jerusalem can only be rebuilt when Israel yearns for it to such an extent that they embrace her stones and dust.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Dr. Yonathan Grossman on the Connection between the Story of the Spies and Korach, "The Symbolic Significance of the Earth 'Opening Its Mouth,'" March 29, 2017. [Click here to read.](#)

Vladimir Jabotinsky on the 'Uganda Proposal,' "Your Time Is Up: Jabotinsky at the Sixth Zionist Congress," Excerpted from *Story of My Life* and Translated by Brian Horowitz and Leonid Katsis, Published in the Winter 2016 *Jewish Review of Books*. [Click here to read.](#)

