

Article

Difficult Jewish Texts and Contemporary Political Crisis

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Abstract: This essay considers the phenomenon of public Jewish biblical quotation, such as, for instance, “justice, justice shall you pursue,” in times of contemporary political crisis. I argue that these references tend to employ a sanitized and selective hermeneutics which overlooks and bypasses the violent or otherwise “difficult” themes of these works and suggest that there is a parallel between our refusal to come to terms with the frequent violence in many texts, and our inability to acknowledge the intensity and scope of the “real world” crises we employ these texts to respond to. Delving into the complex biblical narrative of Korach as an example, I propose that particular attention to difficult texts invites Jewish communities not only to confront the darker parts of the textual tradition, but also provides a communal model for acknowledging the true depths of a crisis, textual or political, instead of turning quickly to palliative solutions.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Hebrew Bible; political crisis; interpretation

This essay proceeds from a common contemporary phenomenon: the use of biblical or other Jewish classical textual citations in instances of political crisis.¹ The reader is invited to consider instances where they may have seen, or employed, such citations themselves: on handwritten posters or screen-printed t-shirts at political demonstrations; from synagogue pulpits on Shabbat or the High Holidays; in a variety of print and social media sources. Although these textual invocations are common even in periods of relative societal calm, periods of widely recognized political crisis or transition are useful for revealing trends or tendencies in the broader Jewish world. In the outpouring of expression from different Jewish communities or advocacy groups at the same time, we are better able to observe these instances as a singular phenomenon. I open this essay by invoking one such biblical text ubiquitous in times of political emergency: Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Here, I consider this often-cited text as an example of the broader phenomenon, and argue that its political utility depends on Jewish readers’ transformation of the verse (intentionally or not) into a self-evidently ethical exhortation. For the text to be useful in these fraught political moments, it must be “easy.”

This essay also posits a relationship between methods of communal textual interpretation and those same communities’ considerations of and responses to political crisis. Following Paul Ricoeur’s language of “the model of the text,” I identify a relationship between methods of communal textual interpretation on the one hand and broader political consideration and material response in times of political emergency on the other. That is, I suggest that there is a parallel between a communal disinclination to grapple with the persistent interpretative difficulties of many classical texts, and the inability to acknowledge the intensity and scope of the “real world” crises we employ these texts to respond to. This paper, therefore, offers an extended analysis of one famously difficult classical text: the biblical narrative of Korach, whose wilderness rebellion against the authority of Moses and Aaron ends in mass violent death; a text that, whatever other conclusions we might come to, is not easily transformed into an easily understandable or “usable” text. Reflecting on Korach and the genre of “difficult texts,” I argue that such sources play an important role in substantive response to political crisis by insisting that Jews confront the darker parts of the textual tradition and refuse to look away or justify the violence. More broadly, in-



Citation: Filler, Emily. 2023. Difficult Jewish Texts and Contemporary Political Crisis. *Religions* 14: 652. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14050652>

Academic Editors: Elias Sacks and Andrea Dara Cooper

Received: 9 March 2022

Revised: 17 June 2022

Accepted: 3 August 2022

Published: 15 May 2023



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terpretation of such texts provides a communal model for acknowledging the true depths of disaster, textual or political, instead of turning quickly to palliative solutions.

1. Political Crisis and Textual Response: A Study in Deuteronomy 16:20

On 25 May 2020, a Minneapolis police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd for more than nine minutes, while Floyd begged for air, other officers stood by, and an increasingly appalled crowd urged the officer to withdraw. This very public murder inspired a massive wave of protests that continued through the summer and into the fall; Floyd's death was a catalyst for more mainstream and disputatious public conversation about systemic racism, ongoing police brutality, sustained poverty and inequality, and more. For many Americans, most notably middle-class white ones, Floyd's murder was said to serve as a notice or reminder of the depth and intransigence of racism, unequal resources, and unchecked state power. How could they have not seen it before?²

In the passionate and enraged protests, public events, and political violence that followed Floyd's murder, it was easy to see Jews protesting with the help of the classical Jewish textual tradition, or at least a few selective quotations from it. "Justice, justice you shall pursue" is perhaps one of the Hebrew Bible's best-known exhortations in contemporary political settings, even among people not otherwise especially proficient in biblical literature. It is undoubtedly a biblical verse that many contemporary Jews find eminently useful in times of political crisis. Combining the authoritative heft of "the Bible" with a (seemingly) general exhortation not only to broadly approve of justice, but to actively pursue it, we may not be surprised at its ubiquitousness in the American public sphere. In Jewish settings, it is common to see it rendered in its biblical Hebrew form as well: *tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*.³

In the autumn following this swell of political protest, this verse was invoked again in another moment of American political transition: the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year. For the consistently liberal community of American Jews, Ginsburg's death marked the beginning of another political reckoning, allowing Donald Trump to appoint, and the Senate to confirm, a much more conservative justice in Ginsburg's place.⁴ In liberal Jewish expressions of grief and political anxiety, "justice, justice you shall pursue" was perhaps the most frequently cited classical text: Ginsburg herself reportedly hung a piece of wall art in her Supreme Court chamber with these words on it (Shimron 2020). Here too, Ginsburg's death created an upsurge of debate, this time about the role and power of the Court, with few clear or collectively shared solutions.⁵

The invocation of biblical verses in the public square is neither a rare nor a new phenomenon, even if more consistently visible in moments of political crisis.⁶ Deuteronomy 16:20 is one of the most recognizable and distinctive examples of public Jewish biblical hermeneutics in service of contemporary political or social change, and of the limitations of this common practice. In cases of public hermeneutical citation, charges, and countercharges of selectivity and decontextualization are common.⁷ Deuteronomy 16:20, however, is notable as the exhortation to pursue justice is not even the entirety of the *verse*, let alone necessarily illustrative of any broader context. In this case, the uncited portion turns out to be, from the point of view of contemporary political discourse, potentially quite controversial.

Spoken to the Israelites as they prepare to cross into the land promised them by their God, the verse in its immediate context is a conditional statement toward a specific end, not a clear general exhortation: "Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." The preceding verse is one that most readers, regardless of theological orientation, would likely find laudable: "You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just."⁸ (Deut 16:19) The succeeding verses, however, are rather more specific and less obviously ethical: "You shall not set up a sacred post—any kind of pole beside the altar of the LORD your God that you may make,

or erect a stone pillar; for such the LORD your God detests.” (Deut 16:21–22) Between these, the full verse instructs the Israelites to pursue justice so that they might “thrive and occupy the land” promised them by God.

Even removed from its immediate context, this full verse is not uncontroversial. As Armin Langer puts it understatedly, referring to racial justice protests and oft-cited biblical verses in liberal Jewish political settings, “It is unclear how a Biblical verse on occupying the Land of Israel should encourage anyone to support B[lack] L[ives] M[atter]. (Langer 2022)” I would go further, noting that given the deeply contested relationship between Israelite biblical conquest and the institution of the modern State of Israel, the verse is even less self-evidently apropos. In her study of biblical conquest and modern Israeli politics, Rachel Havrelock notes, “In modern Hebrew, the word for the Israeli Occupation (כיבוש/*kibbush*) derives from the biblical Joshua’s systematic wars against Canaanite peoples. The word for settlement in the book of Joshua (נָחַל/*nahalah*) similarly forms the root of the word for Jewish settlements in the West Bank (התנחלות/*hitnahlut*).”⁹ In this linguistic context, a biblical verse setting out the conditions for successful “occupation” is complicated, to say the least.

Of course, it is doubtful that the protesters mean to retain the specific divine injunction of the verse. Even in the rare instances when the full verse is quoted, as in Tema Smith’s moving essay about Derek Chauvin’s conviction for the murder of Floyd, the verse is interpreted in a general way that glosses over its more controversial implications. Of the verse’s second clause, Smith says, “The pursuit of justice isn’t a choice. It is the condition of moving beyond mere survival into thriving. Justice is on the horizon and every last one of us is called forward to improve material circumstances not just for ourselves, but for everyone who lives among us” (Smith 2021). Of course, in its original narrative context, the biblical verse itself refers to an impending land conquest that will likely *not* improve circumstances for the Canaanites and others currently residing in the land. As Smith demonstrates, if the full verse is cited, it is necessary to “metaphorize” the material land soon to be occupied by the ancient Israelites in order for it to retain its applicability.

Despite the seemingly straightforward meaning of “justice, justice shall you pursue,” then, a significant amount of interpretation (intentional or otherwise) is actually required for it to come to seem self-evidently appropriate as a modern political exhortation. Either the phrase must be separated from the remainder of the verse (as is more common), or the interpreter must quickly recast the specific and potentially quite controversial condition “that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” in general terms, so the occupation of the land stands in for a general state of being instead of a material location. That is, for the text to be ostensibly helpful in moments of communal political uncertainty or change, it must be understood as a sufficiently uncomplicated exhortation with an easily recognizable message; otherwise, it simply does not function as intended. Whether emblazoned on a sign at a passionate political demonstration or invoked in grief at the loss of a Jewish communal icon, for the verse to “work” it must be as easily communicative as possible.

The putative communicative virtues of such textual citation in moments of political uprising or acute collective grief are not difficult to find. In their handbook for Jewish progressive political action, the non-profit Jewish political organization T’ruah includes a page of suggestions for biblical or classical rabbinic texts that can be emblazoned on signs at political demonstrations, noting that “bringing Jewish language to our signs sends an important message. We don’t just happen to be Jews in attendance; we are showing up as Jews, rooted in Jewish text and tradition, representing the Jewish community.”¹⁰ (The accompanying photo includes one man holding a Hebrew sign proclaiming *tzedek tzedek tirdof*). In this short introduction, T’ruah provides a clear account of why public biblical citation is important for Jews: first and foremost, because it marks the sign-holders or speakers as Jews themselves, as well as people whose political convictions are authorized or informed by their Jewishness. Perhaps the use of biblical or talmudic citation also assumes that these passages have some essential or inherent authority by virtue of their

ancient provenance, communal significance, or even their divine origins. The T'ruah handbook describes such citations as "short and simple enough to understand at a glance, with great depth and power to them."¹¹

It is emphatically not my intention to suggest that Jewish biblical texts are *de facto* inappropriate in political settings, or that de- or re-contextualization of biblical verses marks a necessary departure from conventional Jewish hermeneutics.¹² Rather, what I mean to call attention to is that Jewish textual quotation in moments of political extremity consistently depends on the putative *ease* of the citation. I suggest, however, that this reliance on ostensibly "easy" texts, easy to understand and easy to apply, may have other, less virtuous Jewish philosophical and political implications. Specifically, I argue that this "hermeneutics of ease" may inadvertently cultivate communal habits of broader political analysis that eschew interpretive and political difficulty in favor of pithier and less substantive conclusions. That is, I propose that the preference for textual ease, as strategically comprehensible as it certainly is, might encourage a communal unwillingness to confront and engage the most difficult questions outside the text as well. An insistence on interpretive honesty, even, or especially, of "difficult" texts, and a healthy skepticism of hermeneutical facility may indeed allow fewer invocations of selective Jewish sources in the public square. Perhaps, though, the complexity and intractability of contested political claims require precisely this commitment. To acknowledge the disastrous depth and breadth of political injustice, and the difficulty (even perhaps impossibility) of complete repair requires a thoroughgoing commitment to collective interpretive honesty all the way down.

One necessary clarification is in order: although this essay questions the political and ethical virtues of this interpretive practice, my argument is *not* simply that the conventional method of public biblical citation ignores "complexity." Rather, my focus here is on the collective philosophical tools for recognizing the true depths of suffering or structural injustice that call out for response and (efforts to) repair. The general appeal to "complexity" alone may itself function as a means of avoiding political and ethical demands; arguing that an issue or political claim is "complicated" can be a tactic of deferral as much as a tactic of repair.¹³ I am therefore not simply suggesting that the potential interpretive pitfall here is in underestimating the world's complexity. It is certainly true that humans often oversimplify difficult political and social issues, but this is a different question. Moreover, it is also frequently true that some political analysis can be said to *over*-complicate an issue, at least regarding fundamental moral questions, if not the structures that maintain them. The political economy of chattel slavery, for example, was extremely complex. The moral argument that owning human beings is wrong is not.

It is in the spirit of considering "un-easy" biblical interpretation that I turn from singular verses such as Deuteronomy 16:20 to the extended narrative of Numbers 16 and 17, which tell the (in)famous narrative of Korach and the ill-fated wilderness rebellions. The broad strokes of the narrative are familiar to many biblical readers, but I have chosen to dwell in this text for two reasons: First of all, the extended narrative of Korach and his fellows is an undeniably difficult and violent text, in the most neutral sense of the term; this particular wilderness incident ends with many people being swallowed by the earth while yet others are enveloped by a fire "from the Lord," and the subsequent Israelite protest results in a divine wrath that kills another 15,000. Whatever other conclusions we might draw about this episode, it is clear that God's rage is a massively destructive force. And unlike other, shorter passages or singular verses, the sustained narrative makes it perhaps more difficult than a shorter text to simply "skip over."

Among the many difficult or violent texts of the Hebrew Bible, Korach's narrative is distinctive: the rebels' putative critique of hierarchical authority is a difficult one for many modern readers to entirely dismiss. That is, it is quite possible that a reader of this biblical passage *could* conclude that Korach's initial critique was at least partially understandable or defensible, as indeed many modern readers have. To take but one introductory example: a reflection by Reform movement Rabbi Rex Perlmeter expresses sympathy for Korach's rebellious instincts even while concluding that he was perhaps ultimately mis-

taken. Distinguishing his modern perspective from the traditional rabbinic gloss, which evinced little sympathy for Korach, Perlmeter writes, “I’m convinced that it’s the legacy of Vietnam and Watergate that prevents me from joining the bulk of Rabbinic tradition in its absolute excoriation of Korah and his companions” (Perlmeter 2013). Korach’s skepticism and rebelliousness, Perlmeter suggests, are qualities to be emulated, at least in some cases; the willingness to publicly question authority, whether of Moses or the American state, is a virtue to be embraced.

The Korach text, therefore, is a narrative that appears to resist the “hermeneutic of ease” identified above. It is a passage with a great many fatalities and whose political questions may not be easily resolved, and its individual verses offer little inspiration, even divorced from their immediate context. The text itself, to say nothing of the some potentially broader political and social themes embedded in the narrative, remain complicated and unwieldy. Korach is a compelling text that readily invites extended reflection on its details, themes, and implications, but does not lend itself to confident interpretive conclusions or communal agreement about its significance.

Therefore, in this essay the following extended consideration of the Korach episode serves chiefly as a public exercise in carefully reading a complex and violent text and considering some of the modern political questions it educes, thus departing from the hermeneutic of ease described above. Ultimately, I will argue that communal methods of textual interpretation may indeed habituate readers to more general political and philosophical tendencies, and that if this is so, a distinctively difficult biblical narrative such as Korach may in fact serve as an important tool in Jewish responses to political crisis.

2. Textual Interlude: Reading a Difficult Biblical Text

In its canonical form, Numbers 16 is a story of an attempted rebellion. Importantly, I focus here almost exclusively on the redacted narrative, which text-historical analysis suggests is likely a combination of at least two separate narrative strands. In this essay about communal textual interpretation and political expression, however, I consider the text as a unified narrative in keeping with its traditional and popular reception.¹⁴ The narrative of Korach and his compatriots is a dramatic and exceedingly strange account amidst a series of struggles “in the wilderness,” as the book of Numbers is named in Hebrew. The biblical book begins with a census, the “numbers” in question, of the entire Israelite company, and God singles out the tribe of Levites for special responsibilities: “You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact [*mishkan ha’edut*], all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it: they shall carry the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they shall camp around the Tabernacle.” (Numbers 1:50) God instructs Moses and Aaron that the priest Aaron and his sons will be responsible for ensuring the Levites do their duty and claims them, repeatedly, as the “first-born” of the Israelites, saying “I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine.” (Numbers 2:12) This categorization ushers in a highly detailed account of the various levitical responsibilities, as well as broader commands to the Israelites, interspersed with descriptions of some commands being carried out. Thus do the Israelites begin their post-Sinai travels through the desert, led by Moses with God’s presence hovering above.

Of course, even before Korach enters the text, all is not well with the Israelites. Indeed, we might understand the entire book of Numbers as a departure from the revelation and immediacy of Exodus, and the location “in the wilderness” to refer to the Israelites’ collective existential state as well as their location. Chapter 11 describes the discontent from which the Israelites are rarely distant: “The riffraff [*asafsuf*] in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!’” (Numbers 11:4–6) In chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron inexplicably raise a harsh criticism against Moses for his marriage to a Cushite woman, resulting in God strik-

ing Miriam with a skin disease. And when God sends Israelite scouts into Canaan to learn about the land and its current inhabitants, the pessimistic reports of most of the men rouse God to declare that such a faithless people shall never set foot in the land: “In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who have muttered against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you—save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun . . . You shall bear your punishment for forty years, corresponding to the number of days—forty days—that you scouted the land: a year for each day. Thus, you shall know what it means to thwart Me.” (Numbers 14:30–31, 34)¹⁵ Most of those Israelites currently bemoaning their wilderness status will never know anything else.

Even following this series of catastrophes, however, the narrative of Korach is memorable, for it introduces specific actors leveling a specific critique. Korach’s introduction takes care to note that he is himself a Levite - “Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi” - and describes the actions of himself and his companions “Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben . . . together with two hundred and fifty Israelites, chieftains of the community, chosen in the assembly, men of repute.” Rising up against Moses, the group issues their charge: “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?” (Numbers 16:3)

Moses’ first response, however, is not to dispute the charge, but to immediately invoke God’s authority, confidently telling the rebels how God will answer their accusation: “Come morning, the LORD will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen.” (Numbers 16:5) This response, the beginning of the tests that will ultimately bring disaster to Korach and all the rebels, is distinctive both for what Moses does and does not say. Zvi Gitelman, for instance, notes that while Korach and his company make an argument, spurious or not - “all the community are holy, all of them,” - Moses does not respond in kind; his first act is simply to call upon God to arbitrate the dispute. Moses’ selection, Gitelman argues, is clouded in mystery, unlike a straightforwardly dynastic succession. In Gitelman’s reading,

The mystery and unpredictability of the process are emphasized in the resolution of the challenge posed to Moses by Korach and his group. Korach’s arguments are *prima facie* so powerful that Moses is incapable of defeating them on rational-legal grounds. Moses ‘falls on his face’ and begs for Divine guidance in meeting Korach’s challenge. Korach is defeated, not by logical argument nor by reference to constitutional provisions, but by a violent assertion by God of His right to choose leadership without fully explaining his choice. (Gitelman 1989)

That Korach’s argument is as compelling as Gitelman suggests is unclear. It is true that when the people stood at the base of Sinai, God famously made a general claim upon them: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5–6) However, special status of the priesthood has also long been established, setting Aaron, his sons, and the Levites above the general population; the political administration of the Israelites has never been a horizontalist operation. Still, Gitelman’s point about argumentative methods is reasonable; we see the extent of Moses’ power in his ability to bypass the debate on its own terms, and appeal directly to God as arbiter. The test Moses devises, “take fire pans, and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before the Lord. Then the man whom the Lord chooses, he shall be the holy one,” does not address the rebels’ argument on its merits.¹⁶

When Moses does finally directly speak to the charge, his assumption is that the rebels’ claim is largely one of self-interest. Addressing Korach, Moses demands, “Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you access to Him, to perform the duties of the Lord’s Tabernacle and to minister to the

community and serve them? Now that He has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?" (Numbers 16:9–10)

This assumption accounts for much of the critical evaluation, both classical and modern, of Korach's complaint. The Mishnah, for instance, declares Korach's rebellion to be "not for the sake of heaven," his intentions assuredly impure and self-interested instead of in pursuit of truth or divine service. (Mishnah Avot 5:17) The modern biblical commenter Nehama Leibowitz, meanwhile, sympathetically presents the classical rabbis' dismissal of Korach's charge. Leibowitz further cites a medieval midrash (Shocher Tov, a midrashic commentary on Psalms) where Korach is imagined as rousing his followers to anger by reporting a prejudicial account of one woman's difficulties navigating some commandments. Leibowitz concludes, "In the above excerpt [from the midrash], the Torah, whose ways are the ways of peace is seen through distorted spectacles. All Korach's ranting contains the familiar rabble-rousing of demagoguery." (Leibowitz 1982) Avivah Zornberg, considering the exchanges between Korach and Moses, similarly contrasts Korach's intentions and tone with Moses', arguing, "On the rebels' lips, the words are sarcastic jibes at the power hunger of the leaders. When Moses speaks them, however, they are less rhetorical; they frame a genuine questioning of the rebels' dissatisfaction with the roles assigned them by God." (Zornberg 2015, p. 219) Notably, the Gemara introduces one person sympathetic to Korach, his wife, who draws a rather ingenious analogy to illustrate the justice of the rebellion but, having introduced her argument, denies its validity simply by allying her with the second clause of Proverbs 14:1: "The wisest of women builds her house, But folly tears it down with its own hands." (B Sanhedrin 110a)

But is it self-evident from the text that Korach and his fellows' intentions are thoroughly selfish, or Moses' response curious and capacious? Or even if the insurgents' charges were indeed tainted by their own self-interest, does this invalidate their argument? As Mira Morgenstern notes, "a flawed advocate is not the same as a bad case."¹⁷ Political theorist Michael Walzer suggests an even more charitable reading. Although Moses understands Korach's rebellion as a matter of self-interest, "you and all your fellow Levites," Korach's actual words make a broader claim to advocate for all the Israelites. Moses, Walzer argues, "if he is prepared to deny Levitical holiness, must also be prepared to deny the holiness of all Israel ('every one of them'). How would his denial work? He might insist that the special consecration of the priests, whoever the priests are, is a permanent feature of Israel's religion: all Israel is holy, but some Israelites are more holy than others."¹⁸

Despite the thoroughgoing condemnation of the classical rabbis and some modern commentators, then, it is far from obvious that Korach's complaint as presented in the text is wholly without merit, or his intentions obviously unsympathetic. "Calls for equality resonate well in the twenty-first century," Morgenstern observes, suggesting that some readers might find more reason for sympathy with the claims of the rebels than Moses. (Morgenstern 2017, p. xxxvi) In fact, the critical commentators' instinctive focus on Korach's intentions perhaps underscores this point. If Korach's charge was clearly irrational on its merits, there would be no reason to ascribe to him bad faith motivations. It is only because Korach's invocation of the equality of all Israel potentially resonates that it becomes necessary to accuse the rebels of self-interested hunger for power. For traditional commentators, intent appears to matter just as much as impact.

The excoriation of the company's intentions also serves to justify what happens next. After Moses calls for Dathan and Abiram to come before him, which they vehemently refuse, Moses informs Korach how the test of God's response to the rebels will proceed: "Tomorrow, you and all your company appear before the LORD, you and they and Aaron. Each of you take his fire pan and lay incense on it, and each of you bring his fire pan before the LORD, two hundred and fifty fire pans; you and Aaron also [bring] your fire pans." (Numbers 16: 16–17) Gathering together with their pans before Moses and Aaron and the people, "the Presence of the LORD appeared to the whole community, and the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'Stand back from this community that I may annihilate them in an instant!'" (Numbers 16:19–21).

Before we learn how it ends, God then orders Moses to instruct the Israelites to move away from Moses, Dathan, and Abiram's homes to protect themselves, and Moses orders yet another test of God's favor: "'But if the Lord 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 these men have spurned the Lord.'" Scarcely had he finished speaking all these words when the ground under them burst asunder, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korach's people and all their possessions." (Numbers 16:30–33) The chapter closes by telling us, almost as an afterthought, what has become of the men with their fire pans, whom God promised to annihilate: "And a fire went forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men offering the incense." (Numbers: 16:34) And in Numbers 17, when the people rail against Moses and Aaron, saying "You two have brought death upon the LORD's people!" God responds by sending a plague that wipes out 14,700 of the Israelites. (Numbers 17:6,14).

Many readers might find themselves at least partially sympathetic to Korach or his argument for ritual equality, skeptical of God's dramatic response even if the rebels are mistaken, or horrified by God's pitiless response to the Israelites afterward. But these verses leave no doubt about where God stands, between the ashes of 250 men, the absence of those swallowed up by the earth, and the bodies of those afflicted by the plague. Whatever the potential virtues of Korach's arguments, God does not appear to entertain them or their proponents for even a moment. And although as a matter of the text-historical scholarship referenced above, the Korach narrative may be understood as a much more specific polemical debate between two biblical sources, in its final, "published" version, the gap between the putatively egalitarian critique and God's response is unbridgeable.

3. Conclusion: "Reading" the World

For the purposes of this essay, I offer this narrative and commentary as an example of a passage whose interpretive and political demands invite sustained consideration of its arguments and actors, and resist attempts to transform the text into an easily usable set of verses. A facile reading of this passage offers little, politically or literarily. But I argue that a meaningful engagement with a text such as the Korach disaster may serve as a useful contemporary Jewish political tool.

First of all, with its escalating violence and enraged divine response, the passage undermines any broad claims about the inspirational or politically sympathetic nature of the Jewish textual tradition. That the Bible contains narratives of violence and destruction surely surprises no one, at least in the abstract.¹⁹ But God's murderous response to what many readers might find a justifiable question challenges any broad claim about the Bible's uncomplicated orientation toward justice, at least as understood in modern western terms. Even readers unsympathetic to the putative goals of the rebellion might be shocked by God's dramatic response, to say nothing of the divine plague sent against the Israelites protesting after Korach and the other rebels are dead. The biblical text seems quite unapologetic on this point; neither God nor the Israelites' human leaders evince any hesitation or remorse for the destruction as the body count rises.

Of course, this is why verses from Numbers 16 rarely appear on political signs or are invoked as models for Jewish ethical response to political crises. But the more we engage with narratives such as Korach, the harder it may be to uphold the self-evident authority of a different classical text, any Jewish classical text, and imagine it as a meaningful contribution to a fraught public discourse. While the public citation of biblical texts might still function as a marker of an individual or community's Jewish affiliation, prominent communal acknowledgment of difficult texts such as Numbers 16 might (or should) cast a shadow over the confident display of textual authority.

I suggest that narratives such as Numbers 16 can be communally politically helpful in another, central way. Precisely for the same reasons that it would be difficult to reduce these texts to widely recognizable political slogans in times of political crisis, such pas-

sages may aid in deepening Jewish collective habits of intellectual honesty, clarity, and acknowledgment of the depths of a given catastrophe. I am aided in this argument by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's important essay, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," and his extended argument about the relationship between textual hermeneutics and the "social sciences." Indeed, his first concern regards the theories and methods of the academic social sciences, though the essay's questions extend well beyond the boundaries of the academy. Although the intricacies of Ricoeur's argument are outside the scope of this article, his elegant claim that textual hermeneutics provides a "model" for interpreting the world offers a foundation for my own claim that the practice of reading and dwelling within difficult texts may habituate Jewish communities to more substantive political response.

Ricoeur opens by noting that most hermeneutical philosophies assume the presence of a fixed, written text. Though its meaning, of course, may be perpetually contested or indeterminate, interpretation emerges from text first. Ricoeur's question, therefore, is whether the activity we call "hermeneutics" may be performed on something other than a fixed text. To respond, he turns to the notion of "discourse" as the linguistic phenomenon that moves from a page to the world. For Ricoeur, the idea of discourse is categorically different than "language," as a language system may exist outside of any given usage; language provides the signs or building blocks of discourse, but "Discourse is always about something. It refers to a world which it claims to describe, to express, or to represent. It is in discourse that the symbolic function of language is actualized . . . As a result discourse alone has not only a world, but an *other* -another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed." (Ricoeur 1973) What Ricoeur calls "discourse," is the three-dimensional act of describing a world. The "meaning" of that world may be infinitely disputed, but nevertheless there is some referent that a given discourse seeks to represent.²⁰ If classical hermeneutics is textual interpretation, then discourse might be called "world-interpretation."

To characterize the world as a fixed "text" is no small claim, and Ricoeur does not suggest that he has exhausted the question. But he does call attention to some intriguing features of human action in the world that are, as he says, "similar to the structure of the speech act and which make 'doing' a kind of utterance." (Ricoeur 1973, pp. 98–99) For instance, he argues, action "has the structure of a locutionary act" which is to say, actions work like declarations, containing "*propositional* content that can be identified and reidentified." (Ibid, p. 99. Italics are original.) Actions, that is, can "speak" and, similar to texts, the meaning of what he calls "action-sentences" is the subject of discourse.

Also similar to texts, actions may come to have meaning and consequences well beyond the intentions of the actor. The meaning of a fixed text may be difficult to discern even when we know the author, and even assuming that we limit "meaning" to the author's putative intentions. Yet even in these simple textual cases, there is a process of determining meaning; so too, even simple actions - Ricoeur suggests someone smiling or raising their hand - require interpretation, to say nothing of "complex actions," of which "some segments are so remote from the initial simple segments, which can be said to express the intention of the doer, that the ascription of these actions or action-segments constitutes a problem as difficult to solve as that of authorship in some cases of literary criticism." (Ibid, p. 101)

With these observations, Ricoeur builds his argument that the interpretation of texts also accurately describes the interpretation of the world, and that in some important respects the fixed text and the set of actions in the world are "readable" in the same way. Importantly, this claim is not merely for the sake of more precise characterization. For Ricoeur, the paradigmatic character of interpretation should compel social scientists (as well as all "readers" of the world) to much more critical consideration of their analytical methods and the certainties of their assertions. Ricoeur concludes, "Therefore what we want to understand is not something hidden behind the text, but something disclosed in front of it. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points toward

a possible world. Understanding has less than ever to do with the author [or “doer”] and his situation.” (Ibid, pp. 113–14)

In this essay I am compelled by Ricoeur’s consideration of the relationship between textual interpretation and “world interpretation” because this is close to how I wish to consider the communal political virtues of political texts. If, as Ricoeur suggests, we can “read” the world as we read texts, then it is no great leap to my suggestion that the communal habits of textual interpretation that we cultivate may also habituate us to broader practices of “reading.” Of course, as a general idea this can apply to any reading community. But given the primacy of classical text-based discourses in contemporary Jewish communities, as well as the ubiquitousness of textual citation in Jewish political expression, I intend the argument in a more specifically directed way. The common communal emphasis on Torah study as a meaningful part of contemporary Jewish political action suggests that textual interpretation is already understood to contribute to collective political formation.²¹ My argument, following Ricoeur, is that this may well be true—and, therefore, requires more careful theorization about the relationship between the ways we engage the texts we study and cite, and the political worlds we wish to see.

And my concluding argument is simply that “difficult” Jewish texts ask of their readers sustained consideration of their difficult elements. Such texts are often fascinating - no one has ever described the Korach narrative as dull - but by the same token do not facilitate easy “resolution” of the questions raised by the text: linguistic, hermeneutic, ethical, and political. Describing them as “difficult” in this context should be understood as an invitation to a long-term interpretive process that will yield meaningful insight into the texts’ depths.

Importantly, I do not mean to suggest that Jewish collective efforts to address political crises ought to be deferred until a community has sufficiently plumbed the depths of Korach. I do, however, propose that this process, the intentional cultivation of a “hermeneutic of difficulty” has true political significance. The extended process of substantively and creatively reading a text may itself serve as a “model” for responding to political emergency, or considering what “pursuing justice” in a given case might even mean. Such responses require, among other things, an appreciation for the depths of disaster and structural injustice that underwrite eras of widespread political unrest. Recognizing the extent of this disrepair demands a commitment to “reading” the world just as it is, refusing to look away or offer facile solutions to its glaring insufficiencies: to be willing to, as it were, wander in the political wilderness. In this way, the catastrophic narrative of Korach may be a very good teacher.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to the people, known and unknown, who have contributed to the betterment of this essay; the finished product owes a great deal to conversations with Dustin Atlas, Bill Plevan, and Blaire French, as well as the careful reading and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers.
- ² For a representative example of this phenomenon, see (Beason 2020).
- ³ For a useful critical overview of some Jewish textual tropes in contemporary progressive Jewish political expression, see (Langer 2022). In addition to “justice, justice,” Langer also addresses at length the common invocation of the “ger” trope, the invocation of the stranger in Jewish social justice contexts.
- ⁴ The generally liberal political orientation of American Jews is well-attested. The 2020 Pew survey about religious and political attitudes among American Jews once again affirmed this. See the section entitled (Pew Research Center 2020).
- ⁵ An edited volume of Ginsburg’s writings, co-edited with Amanda Tyler and released some months after her death was also titled *Justice, Justice Thou Shalt Pursue*. (Ginsburg and Tyler 2021). Here, the biblical verse (perhaps indicated by the use of “thou,” even for people unfamiliar with its biblical origins) is allied with a very particular kind of American legal justice.
- ⁶ Two relatively recent edited volumes reflect on historical and contemporary biblical usages, largely in the United States context: (Kittredge et al. 2008) and (Chancey et al. 2014).

- 7 For a discussion of the politics of selective biblical citation, see (Filler 2014).
- 8 All translated biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).
- 9 (Havrelock 2020). The Hebrew renderings and translations appear in the original quotation.
- 10 (Nelson 2021). The page on Jewish textual citation concludes the handbook, a detailed introduction to some major themes in American carceral policy, accompanied by textual interludes and questions for discussion.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 In fact, this kind of recontextualizing hermeneutic is arguably constitutive of classical rabbinic literature as a whole, though certainly not only in service of distinctively ethic-political claims. For a well-known and paradigmatic example, see Bava Metzia 83a, where Rav instructs Rabba bar bar Hanan on how to treat some workers simply by citing Proverbs 2:20: “So follow the way of the good/And keep to the paths of the just.” I do think that in the textual culture of classical rabbinics, this kind of hermeneutic might perhaps be understood differently than in contemporary settings where the textual tradition is less comprehensively or widely known. Nevertheless, I note that someone seeking to defend what I am calling a “hermeneutic of ease” might certainly find support for this method in classical literature and that such a citation would be extraordinarily helpful when debating, e.g., workers’ rights in a Jewish setting. Whether my conclusions are wholly discontinuous from the hermeneutics of classical rabbinic literature is a meaningful question, though beyond the scope of this essay.
- 13 Consider, for instance, Kieran Healy’s critique in his well-known (and aggressively titled) essay: “There is a strong tendency to embrace the fine-grain, both as a means of defense against criticism and as a guarantor of the value of everyone’s empirical research project. Relatedly, there is a desire to equate calling for a more sophisticated approach to a theoretical problem with actually providing one, and to tie such calls to the alleged sophistication of the people making them.” (Healy 2017).
- 14 Determining the historical composition of the Korach narrative is notoriously complex, as Numbers 16 appears to weave together at least two separate rebellions with distinct critiques: “One involves Korach, a Kohathite Levite who demands a share in the Aaronite priesthood; the second has three Reubenites, two brothers Dathan and Abiram, and a third individual, On, question the authority of Moses.” See the note in (Berlin and Brettler 2004). The two narratives can actually be separated fairly easily, as each insurrection has a distinctive trajectory and the two groups perish in different ways. Scholars tend to suggest that the chapter’s redacted form obscures the more probable source-critical interpretation of the chapter, in which the rebels’ deaths are part of polemical debate between the P(riestly) source and other textual strands, arguments that suggest other intriguing meanings of Numbers 16. See (Jeon 2015). See also Ethan Schwartz’s online reflection on the redaction of Korach and its political implications (Schwartz 2021).
- 15 Avivah Zornberg notes the narrative oddities of chronological time in the book of Numbers, observing, “The decree is given in chapter 14, just nineteen days from the beginning of the book and the first census. The final chapters of the book (Numbers 20:1–36:13) take place within the first five months of the fortieth year. Thirty-eight years apparently elapse within five chapters (which include the Korach rebellion and several laws).” (Zornberg 2015).
- 16 The fire pans are, of course, an essential element of priestly sacrificial practices before God; this test, therefore, tests the rebels’ ability to act “like priests” without incurring divine wrath.
- 17 (Morgenstern 2017). See also Morgenstern’s discussion of Korach and the biblical politics of leadership in (Morgenstern 2009).
- 18 (Walzer 2009). The reference, of course, is to Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.
- 19 For an overview of multiple modern responses to biblical violence, see (Davies 2010).
- 20 Particularly in the realm of modern Jewish thought, the relationship between what Ricoeur calls discourse and the central modern philosophical notion of dialogue is an important question. In general, I think Ricoeur’s notion of discourse is a more expansive social concept than dialogue, which often implies clearly delineated parties. However, there is not always a clear distinction between these two ideas. These questions are central to Steven Kepnes’ study of Martin Buber’s thought in the context of Gadamer and Ricoeur’s hermeneutic models (Kepnes 1992). See also Kepnes’ essay on Ricoeur’s discursive philosophy for modern Jewish thought (Kepnes 2021).
- 21 See, for instance, the “M(oral) Torah” initiative from T’ruah, which emerges from the organization’s claim that “The Torah offers a blueprint for how to build a just society.” The initiative offers a series of extended Torah commentaries on “democracy, human rights, and how we can make the world we want to see.” <https://truah.org/moral-torah/> (accessed on 1 October 2021).

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