

## To Revolt or to Revolutionize

### Topic

*Mitzvot* and *Middot*

Rebellion and Revolutions

### Grade Level(s)

5<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup>

### Big Ideas

Rebellion and revolution need to be used wisely but can be important tools against oppressive rule.

Righteous protest should be done for the greater good and not just to help the few.

### Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Compare the rebellion of Korah with the American Revolution
2. Explore why people engage in rebellions and revolutions
3. Evaluate when rebellion and/or revolution is an appropriate solution to a perceived problem

### Relevant Vocabulary

מָרַד ( <i>Mered</i> )	Rebellion
מַהֲפֵיכָה ( <i>Mahpeichah</i> )	Revolution
שֵׁבֶט ( <i>Shevet</i> )	Tribe
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ( <i>B'nei Yisrael</i> )	The Israelites
מִדְבָּר ( <i>Midbar</i> )	Wilderness, Desert
בְּמִדְבָּר ( <i>Bemidbar</i> )	The Book of Numbers
מֹשֶׁה ( <i>Moshe</i> )	Moses
כֹּהֵן / כֹּהֲנִים ( <i>Kohein/Kohanim</i> )	Priest(s)

### Materials / Technology Needed

- [Revolution playlist](#) on Spotify
- Paper, poster boards, pens/pencils, markers

### Background for Teachers

#### **Korah**

As *B'nei Yisrael* made their way through the *midbar*, the people were often restless and unhappy about their situation. Often, they would complain to Moshe about lack of food and/or water and they would ask Moshe why he took them out of Egypt. One particular event, though, stands out in these protests against Moshe. Korah, another member of *Shevet Levi*, rose up against Moshe and Aaron's leadership and, along with 250 other leaders, tried to take a place close to God as he wondered why Moshe and Aaron put themselves above the rest of the holy community ([Bemidbar 16:1 – 3](#)).

In response, Moshe demonstrated that he understood Korah's motivation to be that all of *Shevet Levi* should be kohanim along with Aaron and Aaron's family; and he instructed

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Korah and his cohort to come the following day with their firepans to make an offering, along with Aaron, to God as a test of whom God chose to be the spiritual leaders of *B'nei Yisrael*. The result was that God opened a hole in the ground that swallowed up all of the rebels, and God sent forth a fire that consumed the 250 of them ([Bemidbar 16:4 – 35](#)).

Midrashim, as distilled through Rashi, explain that Korah's rebellion was not one of righteousness but rather one of selfishness because Korah acted out of jealousy and a desire to elevate himself ([Rashi on Bemidbar 16:1](#)). Thus, his pursuit failed.

### The American Revolution

The American Revolution was the culmination of years of discord between the colonists and England. On a very basic level, the colonists were upset that they were subject to heavy taxation and other draconian measures without having any say in how their land was run. After years of protest on the part of the colonists and responses/retaliation from England, things came to a head with the Battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775. A year later, the colonists would declare their independence from England and form a more perfect union that would be the first modern democracy.

### Rebellion vs. Revolution

Resistance against authority can take many different forms. Rebellion is usually an act of defiance against authority that focuses on a specific issue. It is an action done with the goal of fixing that problem but is not concerned with changing the overall structures of society.

Revolution also aims to fight against authority. However, revolutions have wider aims than rebellions do. Revolutions seek a fundamental change to the current situation and look to bring about significant change.

In both cases, successful resistance is not meant to simply destroy or what exists or to avenge perceived wrongs but rather to build something better. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points out that successful revolutions like the American Revolution are based on a “template for a society of justice, freedom, and human dignity” ([Rabbi Sacks, “Evolution or Revolution?”](#)).

### A Note About the Korah Narrative

There was another rebellion that occurred at the same time as Korah's. Datan and Aviram refused Moshe's calls to meet and called his leadership into question. While there is a line of thinking that Datan and Aviram joined Korah in his rebellion, close reading could also indicate that, although their protest against Moshe occurred at the same time as Korah's rebellion, their complaints against Moshe were different from those of Korah and thus a different protest. (An example in favor of this line of understanding is that Datan

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and Aviram were not among those who brought out their firepans.) This is a point that can be debated. However, this activity is from the point of view that Datan and Aviram acted separately from Korah.

### Language Note

The Hebrew words מָרַד and מְהַפֵּכָה are presented as possible Hebrew enrichment opportunities. While rebellion and revolution are written out in English in this activity, the Hebrew can be substituted with learners to help them expand their vocabulary. It could also be worth pointing out that the root of מְהַפֵּכָה is ה-פ-ר, which means “turn over” or “turn upside down.”

### Prepare in Advance

Review the [Korah narrative](#).

Create flyers to protest an element of your institution’s power structure. The protest should be about something absurd so that no one would actually take up the complaint. Some examples include that the leadership should be replaced because the flooring of the building is ugly, because the leadership allows it to rain too often, or because the institution needs someone who can help purchase a professional sports franchise.

Optional: Create picket signs for learners to carry in protest of the leadership. Learners could also create the signs themselves as part of the activity. (See below.) Note that these signs will be a lead-in to discussion, and they will not actually be used to march against leadership.

### Description of Activities

1. Post flyers to overthrow your institution’s power structure for an absurd reason. (See Prepare in Advance for more details.)
2. Play JTeach’s Revolution playlist as learners arrive and while they engage in this activity.
3. Give learners picket signs to engage in protest, or learners create their own signs. Before actually going to picket, ask learners for their opinions about the campaign. Do they support the campaign? Why might this seem like a reasonable quest? Why might it seem inappropriate? Why did they go along with it? Does the reason for overthrowing a power structure matter? If anyone objects to the rebellion, engage in a discussion about this rebellion seems inappropriate.
4. Explain that learners will compare two rebellions/revolutions: Korah’s efforts to overthrow Moshe and the American Revolution.
  - a. For the Korah narrative, choose one of two options:
    - i. Learners read the narrative.
      1. What is Korah’s complaint?

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2. What is your opinion of Korah's complaint?
3. How would you defend Korah's position? How would you attack his position?
4. What is the result of Korah's rebellion? How could he have succeeded? Why does it fail?
- ii. Summarize the Korah narrative.
  1. Explain that Korah was from the same *shevet* as Moshe and was not happy that Moshe and Aaron were chosen to be the spiritual leaders of *B'nei Yisrael*. Korah, along with 250 other chief members of the community, challenged whether Aaron and his family should be the sole *kohanim*, arguing that the whole community was holy. In response, Moshe had Korah and his followers bring out their firepans to make an offering; and God opened up the earth, which swallowed Korah and his cohorts and then engulfed them in fire.
5. Survey what learners know about the American Revolution. Fill in important points that the learners do not hit. Relevant highlights here include:
  - a. A group of colonists wanted to be free from the rule of England.
  - b. They were not happy about taxes that they thought were unfair.
  - c. They felt that the English rule was draconian.
  - d. The revolutionaries saw themselves as separate from the people and government of England, who lived across the ocean.
  - e. Explain that many monarchs claimed the divine right of kings, which meant that they were accountable only to God because their power came from divine authority. It could be worth pointing out that the democracy that followed would reject this idea of divine right.
6. Discuss:
  - a. How are the rebellion of Korah and the American Revolution similar? Some possibilities include:
    - i. Korah and his followers rebelled against Moshe and Aaron while the colonists rebelled against King George III.
    - ii. Korah and his followers argued for the holiness of the entire community. The colonists wanted to create a nation in which the entire community had a voice in how things were run.
  - b. How are they different?
    - i. Korah and his followers already had standing in the community as members of *Shevet Levi*. The colonists had no standing in the British hierarchy.

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- ii. According to Moshe's reaction ([Bemidbar 16:10](#)), Korah wanted for the rest of *Shevet Levi* to be Kohanim along with Aaron. The colonists wanted equal rights for everyone.\*
7. The Big Question:
  - a. Why has history looked favorably on the American Revolution but unkindly on Korah's rebellion?
8. Learners brainstorm some things that they would like to see change at their institution and come up with peaceful ways that they can approach leadership to make change.

\*Depending on the abilities of the learners, one area that could be ripe for debate is whom each side represented. Korah was fighting for a small group of *B'nei Yisrael* to enable *Shevet Levi* to be among those who would do direct service with God. The American revolutionaries were fighting for the population as a whole. It could be argued, however, that they too were fighting for only a segment of the population as an argument could be made that white Christian males were the primary beneficiaries of the American Revolution.

### Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

#### **For learners who need more assistance**

- Learners name one reason why Korah was defeated and one reason that the colonists were successful.

#### **For learners who need extension opportunities**

- Learners rewrite history. Learners present arguments for why Korah and his group should have won. Learners present arguments for why England was the righteous side in the American Revolution.