

And the strife goes on! Last week's Parashah ended with instructions for wearing tzitzit (3rd paragraph of the *Shema Yisrael*) to remind us to stay focused on honoring the mitzvot. But seemingly oblivious to all that has transpired, Korach and his followers find new ways to sow discord. Now, a small group of men feels unfairly treated, and Korach knows how to churn this discontent into rebellion. Playing the perfect egalitarian, he reminds Moses and Aaron that the entire group is holy, with HaShem in their midst, and accuses the brothers of making themselves overlords. Then Dathan and Aviram go even further, reiterating and embellishing the old accusation that Moses and Aaron are inept leaders, because, as they say, they led them from a land flowing with milk and honey into the desert to kill them, and solely for the purpose of exercising authority over them. They are backed by 250 tribal leader with grievances of their own. What is the bone of contention? In their eyes Moses is a power-hungry nepotist! At first glance, they seem to have a point: Moses appoints his brother Aaron as High Priest over his nephew Korach; Dathan and Aviram, from the firstborn tribe of Reuben, probably feel slighted because Moses has appointed as his successor the Ephraimite Joshua rather than one of them; and the 250 tribal leaders are likely angry because the Mishkan is solely in the hands of the Levites, the tribe of Moses and Aaron. But let's look a bit deeper. These manifestations of discontent in the guise of egalitarianism are mere pretext, especially the outlandish allegations of Dathan and Aviram, who add insult to injury by complaining that they have neither been brought to this land of milk and honey promised them, nor have they received their inheritance! This is most certainly not a push for democracy, this is a good, old-fashioned power struggle, with ringleader Korach using them all to overthrow Moses and Aaron and assume power himself. History is full of examples, some of which we are seeing right now in various parts of the world.

Channeling discontent into a movement ostensibly in the interest of the aggrieved is a handy way for a would-be autocrat to rise to power. The lines between truth and untruth become blurred in the light of highly convincing arguments presented in tones of righteous wrath. Scapegoats are singled out to justify the people's grievances, which are magnified and exploited, playing on their deepest fears. The operative word here is **fear** – and this motley group of ex-slaves is driven by fear: Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and yes, even fear of success. Success obligates, while failure offers a safe haven. Success requires taking risks and being able to assume responsibility for failure along the way, while accepting failure at the outset provides a safe, risk-free haven. This is the easy path the 10 scouts choose when they present their negative reports, and once again the people are ready to return to their old, familiar lives as slaves in Egypt. Unnerved by the insecurity of freedom, they reject the positive reports of Joshua and Caleb and long for the comfort of what they know best. Korach, Dathan and Aviram know how to capitalize on this insidious form of nostalgia, which is an integral part of what we now define as fundamentalism. In the words of poet, priest, and philosopher John O'Donohue, "But we also share a desire for certainty that leads to fundamentalism, which invents a false nostalgia for a past that never existed. It's a caricature of tradition: a nostalgia for an ideal world [that] never really happened." [Third Way Magazine, Feb. 2000]

The accusations brought by Dathan and Aviram do exactly this. Portraying Egypt as the "land flowing with milk and honey" and Moses as an inept autocrat is the ultimate example of fact distortion, of turning the scapegoats' words against them. The gullible followers howl in approval, and the results are once again devastating – an all too familiar pattern, unfortunately. "Fake news" and "alternative facts," today's buzzwords, are simply new ways of defining the same old scheme used to build up one group by victimizing another.

How easily people forget the past when confronted with fears for the future! And how simple it is to find scapegoats to justify acting on those fears in ways that in less unsettling times would be unacceptable! Once again, our ancestors learn hard lessons about life as adult members of society, and it is not the last time they – and we – stumble and are forced to learn even more painful lessons. Our TaNaKh is the story of human fallibility, and we can easily see ourselves reflected throughout the ages in its mirror.

One of the strengths of Judaism is that we are able to learn from the past, to adapt, and to bring those lessons into the future, *ledor vador*, from generation to generation. The tzitzit that bind us to our mitzvot, whether we wear them on our garments or in our hearts, are the catalyst – if we remain aware. Once again, we are living in precarious times, with new demagogues offering enticing solutions. My dearest wish for us all is that we are able to resist succumbing to fear and easy answers, and instead continue seeking the positive opportunities our new world offers, to develop and carry forward into a hopefully better future.

Shabbat shalom!