

Poor Korach! He has so much, and he still wants more. How very human, and how very sad. In a delightful Russian version of an old fable about greed, a Tsar wanted to learn what life was like for people in his country. He disguised himself as a poor wanderer and embarked on a walking tour. Hungry and cold, he arrived at a small, shabby hut that was so buried in snow that he could scarcely find the door. The owner, a poor peasant with many children, invited him in, sat him near the stove, and, seeing that he was beginning to cough, made him soup from the family's only chicken. Overwhelmed by their generosity, the Tsar counted the tiny drops of fat in his soup and gave the family a gold coin for each one. A rich man heard the story and decided to get some money too. When the Tsar arrived in his village, the man rushed out to invite him into his home, pretending he had no idea who he was. He too, served the Tsar chicken soup, but because he had told his cook to use the fattest chicken, the entire surface of the soup was one thick layer of fat, which amounted to only one gold coin. Greed got the better of him. According to Talmudic legend, Korach was immensely wealthy. Rabbi Levi (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 110a) taught that 300 mules were needed just to carry the leather keys to Korach's treasure chests, which held an inheritance from Joseph. Another midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 18:15) portrays Korach as Pharaoh's finance minister. But Korach wants more. He is certainly not an inconsequential man, nor is he ignorant. The same midrash (18:3) states, "Korach was a great sage and was one of the bearers of the Ark, as stated in Numbers 7:9." The midrash has him arguing with Moses over fine points of the Torah, exquisitely exposing his manipulative nature. What drives Korach to misuse his gifts so egregiously? Why is he not satisfied with all he has? We humans have a pernicious tendency to allow our material possessions to generate arrogance and feelings of entitlement, as well as the desire for power. And then, always wanting more, we become resentful and covetous. Korach uses his intelligence and position to gather a group of credulous supporters. Like many demagogues, he presents a persuasive argument: too much power lies in too few hands. He obviously feels slighted that as first cousin of Moses and Aaron, he has not been considered for the office of high priest. And he seems to have persuaded his two cohorts Datan and Aviram that they should stake a claim for more recognition because they are descended from the tribe of Reuven, Jakob's firstborn. And, like others of his ilk, he bends a few facts just enough to suit his purposes, but not enough to fool less gullible people or HaShem. "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy ..." (16:3) This is a cunning and dangerous misquote of Leviticus 19:2 (Parashah Kedoshim). "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." Immediately following the commandment to be holy, the Torah sets out the rules and regulations for achieving the very high standards that are to govern every aspect of life. Korach is wrong. We are not automatically holy just because we are Jews. All we can do is aspire to holiness by observing the *mitzvot* to the best of our ability. Holiness is neither a right nor a privilege; it is an ideal that requires our constant diligence. This is another very important aspect of adulthood, and as we have seen and will continue to see as our stories unfold, some people are better at being adults than others. We will learn from the census that takes place in parashah Pinchas a few weeks from now, that the sons of Korach do not die in the aftermath of the rebellion. Able to resist their father's persuasion, they continue to perform their duties of carrying the *mishkan*. It is noteworthy that Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87, and 88 are all attributed to Korach's progeny. Psalm 49 warns of the futility of wealth in an eerie reminder of Korach's fate. "Will he live forever and not see the Pit? For he sees that wise men die, together a fool and a boor perish, and leave over their possessions to others" (10-11) "Fear not when a man becomes wealthy, when the honor of his house increases, for he will not take anything in his death; his glory will not descend after him. (16-17) The other psalms in this series are full of praise, gratitude, and a profound desire to seek HaShem – the very attributes Korach lacks. Midrashim portray Samuel, who anoints Israel's first two kings, as a descendant of Korach. Samuel supports the leadership and never seeks power for himself. Our Haftarah reading points out the sharp contrast between the attitudes and behavior of Korach and Samuel. Samuel, now grown old, says to the people, "Here I am; bear witness against me before the Lord and before His anointed; whose ox did I take, or whose ass did I take, or whom did I rob; or whom did I oppress, or from whose hand did I take a ransom, that I hid my eyes therewith, and I shall restore to you." These words parallel Moses' reply to Korach's accusations: "Do not accept their offering. I have not taken a donkey from a single one of them, and I have not harmed a single one of them. (16:15) No, Korach, we are not holy; but our *mitzvot* offer paths to the kind of holiness we humans are able to achieve if we take them seriously. That is what Leviticus 19:2 means – striving to make wise, healthy decisions like mature adults – for our own good, for the good of our people, and for the good of the world.

Shabbat shalom!