

And the strife continues! Now, Aaron's nephew Korach conspires with Reubenites Dathan and Aviram to churn the discontent of a small group of 250 tribal leaders into a full-blown rebellion. Playing the perfect egalitarian, Korach reminds Moses and Aaron that the entire congregation is holy, and accuses them of setting themselves above the group as overlords. Then Dathan and Aviram escalate by reiterating and embellishing the old accusation that Moses and Aaron are inept leaders, because, as they put it, they led them from a land flowing with milk and honey into the desert to kill them, and did so solely for the purpose of subjugating them. In other words, they call Moses a power-hungry nepotist! At first glance, they seem to have a point: Moses has given the priesthood to Aaron and his family; Dathan and Aviram from the firstborn tribe of Reuben likely feel slighted because Moses has appointed the Ephraimite Joshua rather than one of them as his successor; and the 250 tribal leaders may also feel snubbed 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 complaints skillfully couched in 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 hardly a push for democracy; this is a good, old-fashioned power struggle, with ringleader Korach cunningly using them all to overthrow Moses and Aaron and assume power himself. History is full of such examples, and some are playing out 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 are intentionally blurred through highly convincing arguments containing a tiny kernel of truth and presented in eloquent tones of righteous wrath. Scapegoats are chosen to justify the people's grievances, which are in turn magnified and exploited in order to play upon their deepest fears. The operative word here is *fear* – and this motley group of former slaves is driven by fear: Fear of the unknown, fear of failure, and even fear of success. Success entails taking risks and assuming responsibility for failure, while accepting failure at the outset offers a safe, risk-free haven. This is the defeatist mentality of the ten scouts in last week's parashah, which infects the people with intense longing for Egypt. Their fear of the unknown focuses their minds firmly on the comforting predictability of their former lives while suppressing their negative memories of slavery. Korach, Dathan and Aviram know how to capitalize on this mindset, 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, those congenital troublemakers we met in midrashic stories back in Parashah Emor (May 5, 2023), do exactly this. Portraying Egypt as the "land flowing with milk and honey" and Moses as an incompetent autocrat is a prime example of fact distortion, of turning the scapegoats' words against them. Their gullible followers howl in approval, and the results are predictably devastating – sadly, an all too familiar pattern that still prevails. "Fake news" and "corrupt mainstream media," today's buzzwords, are simply new ways of defining this age-old scheme used by despots the world over to influence public opinion for the purpose of building up one group by victimizing another. Korach, like others of his ilk, bends a few facts just enough to suit his purposes. "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. It is our duty as Jews to 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. It is deceptively easy to forget the past when confronted with fears for the future and to find scapegoats to justify acting on those fears in ways that in less unsettling times would be unacceptable. Our ancestors must learn some more painful lessons, and it is not the last time they – and we – will stumble and have to endure the consequences. Once again, we are living in precarious times, with new demagogues offering enticing solutions to problems they contrive to lure us into their fold. It is upon us all to resist succumbing to the fear and easy answers they promulgate. No, dear Korach, no one is intrinsically holy, but the terms of our eternal covenant obligate us to aspire to holiness through seeking positive, life affirming solutions not only for us, but for the benefit of our entire world.

Shabbat shalom!