

Shabbat Korach ShaLom



A photograph of an earthquake in Italy

by Phyllis Chesler

I remember studying this parsha when I was teaching a writing workshop in Assisi, a region in Italy that had just experienced an earthquake in 1997, a few years before I arrived. Craters, rubble, and a good deal of dust were still everywhere. Indeed, that most haunting of phrases in Korach: the “earth opened up her mouth” (16-30, 16:32) had happened here, where I was teaching and sleeping and carefully side-stepping uneven walkways.

This parsha is difficult, mystical, filled with God’s miracles, but punitive, and it forces us to ask some heretical questions: Why does God punish—bury alive—the innocent women and children who belong to the clever, power-drunk, and envious Korach, whose questions have merit but whose aim is mainly for personal gain, not “lishem shamayim,” for the sake of heaven and harmony. And, why does God kill 14,700 more Israelites who also rejected God’s choice of Israel’s leaders? (I have no easy answers).

Ah, but reading the great Nehama Leibowitz, always, always enlightens the student.

Korach was clever enough by far but Datan and Aviram even went beyond the words of the ten slanderous spies who at least admitted that the Promised Land was “flowing with milk and honey.” But the sons of Eliav twist the truth in a very ugly and vicious way. They, Datan and Aviram, disobey Moshe because, in their words: “he-elenu m’eretz z’vat halav u-d’vash l’hemetaynu b’midbar...havetaynu v’teten lanu nahalat...you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey only to kill us in the wilderness...(you have not) given us an inheritance.” In short, they are characterizing Egypt, where we were slaves as the real, or as better, than the Promised Land. In doing so, they are mocking God.

Of course, Moshe is falling quite a lot on his face. (16:4, 16:22, 17:9). Aharon prostrates himself as well. How were they so limber, given their ages and the hardships they’ve endured so far?

I leave you with these questions and wish you a very sweet Shabbos.