

OF MICE AND MEN

by Rabbi Label Lam

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and their entire wealth. They and all that was theirs descended alive to the pit; the earth covered them over and they were lost from among the congregation. (Bamidbar 16:32-33),

I only open my mouth to change my feet! (My Uncle Al)

Why is said that the earth opened its "mouth" and then it "swallowed"? Is this some poetic personification or does the earth really have a mouth that swallows?

I still recoil in disgust when recalling a scene I witnessed as a child. A friend of mine showed me his new pet snake. "Neat!" I thought. It was OK but then came feeding time and I lost my appetite. A poor little mouse was dropped into the glass cage. He tried to hide but there was no place to go. The snake snatched him alive! The cruelty continued all the while struggling lump was swallowed whole. Ugh!

Sorry for the crude and unappetizing description. But- is the Torah any less delicate in describing Korach and his family being swallowed alive and whole into the earth?! They didn't just fall into a pit. No! It was deliberate and sudden- like the mouse. We should feel sorry for Korach, perhaps! But the greater purpose in giving color to this ugly episode is to learn "not to be like Korach and his followers." So why did the earth open its mouth and swallow him alive?

The Chovos HaLevavos in the Section called Cheshbon HaNefesh- "Personal Accounting", there are listed not less than thirty matters one might meditate about. Number nine he suggests that one should imagine that a prince is sent by his father the king on a dangerous mission into hostile territory with a huge entourage to care for his every need. The prince should reckon for himself how his servants and attendants would behave if they become aware that the prince himself is not strictly following the rules of the king. If he stays up late and drinks they too will take his queue.

We similarly find ourselves vulnerable and delicately positioned. We are surrounded by attendants, including 60 trillion cells. If one rebels, G-d forbid, the whole system could crash. There are huge hospitals struggling to tame clusters of unpredictable erratic cells. The oceans, the earth, and all things are part of the friendly support system- that is, as long as the prince behaves accordingly.

Someone once asked Rabbi Avigdor Miller ztl., "Why did the earth open its mouth and swallow Korach? What are we to learn?" In typical fashion he gave the most direct and clear answer possible.

"Korach had opened his big mouth and so the earth opened its mouth to swallow him alive." Wow! Korach had everything in life! He was wealthy and wise and enviable in every way. He had it all! When he opened his mouth, though, he dug his own grave. Such is the fragile state of our existence and so go the best laid plans of mice and men. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.