BORROWED TIME

by Rabbi Label Lam

The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households and all the people who were with Korach and his entire wealth. They and all that was theirs descended alive to Sheol (the pit); the earth covered them and they were lost from among the congregation. All Israel that was around them fled at their sound, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us!" (Bamidbar 16:32-34)

Since they were swallowed they were crying out and saying, "Moshe is King and Prophet and Aaron is the High Priest and the Torah was given from Heaven, and their voice went throughout the entire Camp of Israel. (Midrash Tanchuma)

What is the etymology of this word "Sheol" that Korach and his household fell into? "Shoal" can mean to demand, request, or borrow. In the case of the pit or the grave it carries the same connotation. It demands the return of the body which is a borrowed item. King Solomon writes, "Anything that you find within your ability to do, do it because there is no doing, or calculating, or knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol- the grave that you are heading there. (Koheles 9:10) "Sheol", therefore is that place where the borrowed body, the vehicle of living and doing in this world, is returned. At that time and place the possibility of accomplishing is abruptly and absolutely punctuated with silence.

This may all be rather self-evident. However, it makes the Midrash more difficult to understand. If Korach and his group were the ones shouting out about the validity of Torah and the veracity of Moshe and Aaron's claims of authority, how and why can they do that in a place where it's all over and it's too late? Why is that such a stern warning to all of Israel to flee and avoid being swallowed up? You might think that hearing their voices screaming the truth would have the opposite chilling effect. Some might allow themselves to play brinksmanship and procrastinate longer reasoning it's never too late saying, "They were able to recognize the Truth even from "Sheol". We'll wait for our ultimate retirement before getting real about those critical spiritual issues."

Recently a woman told me that when she was younger she was on a date on the Lower East Side. They were growing a little hungry so they entered a Kosher Style Deli Restaurant. Before sitting down to order they realized that they had better investigate to find out if in fact it was a Kosher eating establishment. After an unsuccessful search for some letter of certification in the window they decided to seek out the owner.

There he was planted behind the cash register, a seemingly pleasant enough person, plainly attired, but without a Yarmulka or any head covering. He was reading the daily newspaper when they

approached. They asked him if he had a Mashgiach (Kashrus Supervisor) on the premises and if so could they have a word with him. The man glared at them indignantly and blithely pointed to a picture on the wall. There was the holy visage of a well- known and dearly departed sage proudly on the display.

The owner had a smug look of self-assurance on his face as if to say that that single picture of a great man on the wall spoke volumes about the nature of the place and its Kashrus standards. The then young man said to the owner, "That's very nice, but I don't think we're going to be eating here. If he (pointing to the Rabbi) was down here alive and sitting in your seat and it was your picture there on the wall I would be satisfied, but since you're here and he's up there in the picture it's time to leave."

It must have been that everyone realized that for Korach and his followers it was already too late to express devotion. If they had been up top, and shouting Moshe and the Torah are true and everyone else was down below listening, that would be a giant plus for their cause, but since Korach's company was below and those hearing the haunting cries were all up above, their legacy is a lasting reminder of what to do with borrowed time. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.