

HOLY HEIRARCHY

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At the beginning of our Torah portion this week, we learn that Korach took issue with the appointment of Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people, his brother Aharon as the High Priest, and Aharon's children as his successors. He said, "The entire congregation are holy people, and G-d dwells among them. Why do you elevate yourselves above G-d's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3) He gathered hundreds to join his rebellion and to confront Moshe. As is dramatically described in this week's parsha, G-d openly testified to the authority of Moshe and Aharon.

Korach's essential grievance does not appear to have been against the need for leadership. He did not campaign for anarchy or "free-range governing." Rather, he drew attention to the holiness of the congregation, and accused the leaders of claiming authority because they were holier than the rest. Of course this was false — Moshe did not claim authority at all. The Torah itself highlights Moshe's supreme humility. But the allegation struck a chord with many, nonetheless.

How could Korach accuse Moshe of "elevating himself" over the congregation, if Moshe was the paragon of humility? How could Korach's followers believe him?

We have a natural tendency to think that we are all cut from the same cloth, and that every person's inherent holiness cannot be measured against that of another. Everyone is holy, we say, and everyone has special qualities. Those statements are true, and thus there was a spark of truth to Korach's argument. But focusing only upon what we share in common blinds us to abundant opportunities to learn and benefit from others. Holiness is not merely inherent, but something we should endeavor to acquire — and like any field of endeavor, some have achieved more. Some are indeed born in a higher place, but others can grow to surpass them. In either case, these individuals can offer us guidance and leadership as we work to advance in our own spirituality. Since anyone can become great, these people are not "superhuman," but people who achieved greatness, and can contribute to the inner growth of the community as a result.

The fight for equality for the socially vulnerable or financially disadvantaged is a laudable one. Privileged classes often selfishly take advantage of those less fortunate, and it's important to advocate for the downtrodden.

This does not mean, however, that there are no legitimate hierarchies. We cannot erase the dividing lines between parents and children or teachers and students, for example. Children feel less secure without the authority of parents over them, and students cannot learn effectively without respect for

their teachers and the knowledge they possess. Likewise, those who seek to grow in their relationship with G-d cannot advance effectively in their spirituality without respect for the guidance and leadership of righteous mentors. An intelligent approach to equality is one that focuses upon opportunity, for that is what we should all have in common. That is what the Torah sets out for us. Through such an approach we can, with G-d's help, build a community of spiritual growth and dignity for all.