Parshat Korach is primarily associated with the popular rebellion against Divine Authority centered upon the appointment of Aharon, brother of Moshe, as High Priest (BaMidbar 16:1-18:5). The majority of the Tora reading for this Shabbat describes the challenge as well as the dire and miraculous consequences of this short-lived mutiny. The end of the Parsha (Ibid., 18:6-32) discusses the ostensibly more prosaic issue of the privileges that will be accorded the Kohanim and Leviim in exchange for their ongoing service in the Tabernacle and the Temple.

But it is important not to take any part of the Tora for granted, and it is in this latter section of the Parsha that a most curious and evocative phrase appears. (Ibid., 7) “Therefore you and your sons with you will guard your priesthood with regard to everything that concerns the altar and the area beyond the curtain, and you shall serve; I have given your priest’s office to you as an Avodat Matana (lit. service of gift), and the non-Kohen who comes near will be guilty of a capital offense.” Generally, demanding from someone that s/he work is neither viewed nor described as a gift and a privilege. Furthermore, the incident that resulted in the deaths of Aharon’s two oldest sons, Nadav and Avihu (VaYikra 10:1-11), clearly demonstrates that Divine Service is fraught with literal danger and tolerates only the narrowest of margins for error.

Commentators offer a number of suggestions regarding how to best understand the connotations of the phrase in question. RaShBaM posits that the phrase introduces the end of the verse, i.e., since service in the Tabernacle has been completely assigned as a Divine Gift to the Kohanim, it is for this reason that a non-Kohen who attempts to serve in a priestly capacity is deserving of death. One of the understandings proffered by the Midrash Halacha Siphre, #14 maintains that when the Jewish people give the Kohanim any of the 24 gifts listed at the end of Parshat Korach, although these gifts will be consumed outside the Temple precincts, nevertheless when Kohanim eat and use what they are given as gifts from the people, it is deemed equivalent to the other more standard forms of Divine Service. And once the people realize that such gifting will afford them a far more convenient opportunity to engage in presenting offerings to HaShem than traveling to wherever the Tabernacle or Temple is located, a powerful incentive is created to assure that the Kohanim will consistently and generously receive such support. But, in my opinion, the most interesting and suggestive comment is contributed by RaMBaN, who states, “…‘I have given your priest’s office to you’ not so that this will constitute a state of servitude like the service of slaves to a king, but rather ‘I have given you a great service of gift for (your own) honor and glory…” The commentator draws our attention to the fact, that despite our intuitive inclination to perceive a work responsibility as burdensome and onerous, in fact, Divine Service is just the opposite, a means by which the “worker” is afforded the opportunity to engage in great and important activities that are not only beneficial to others, but also ultimately to himself.

While RaMBaN’s approach for understanding the terminology of “service of gift” obviously applies to all of the tasks associated with the Tabernacle and Temple, and by extension, all activities that can be construed as Divine Service, such as serving the
Jewish people, and/or seeking any and all means by which God’s Creation can be perfected, a case can be made that in fact all forms of gainful work engaged in by human beings should be viewed as “service of gift.” The Biblical account of the origins of man relates that when Adam is placed in the Garden of Eden, his role is defined as “to serve it and to guard it” (Beraishit 2:15), thereby defining not only the purpose of Adam, but that of all of Adam’s descendents for eternity. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel in Mishna Ketubot (59b) maintains that no matter how many servants one has or how much a spouse wants to spare his/her significant other from any work-related responsibility, s/he must find meaningful work to do, because “idleness leads to Shi’amum” (usually defined as “boredom”, but interpreted here by RaShI to mean Shiga’on—insanity.) Included among the insights offered by Avot D’Rabbi Natan Chapt. 11, when expanding upon the statement in Pirkei Avot attributed to Shemaya, to the effect that one should “…love work and hate Rabbanut…” is: “Just as the Tora was given Be’Vrit (in the form of a binding covenant) so too work was given Be’Vrit, as it is stated, (Shemot 20: 8) “Six days shall you work and complete all of your creative physical activity; the seventh day is the Shabbat for the Lord, your God.” According to such an approach, it is as much of a responsibility for a person to engage in productive work for six days, as it is for him/her to rest on the seventh!

But in addition to the existential reality of the need to feel that one is productive and contributing to the world around him/her, there is another dimension of work, whereby one who has meaningful and fulfilling work to do, ought to view such a situation as a gift and a privilege. If one is even slightly introspective about his/her sense of self, s/he will quickly realize that self-image, as well as how one is viewed by others, is often deeply connected with one’s occupation and means of support. People are driven at times to even abandon aspects of their religion when economic pressures become inordinate. In Shabbat 118a, R. Akiva is quoted to have said, “Make your Shabbat like a weekday, in order to avoid depending upon charity.” Although R. Akiva’s intention is clear as stated by RaMBaM, Mishna Tora, Hilchot Shabbat 30:7 to the effect that one should minimize the number of courses served at the Shabbat meal if s/he is economically hard-pressed, I once heard an interpretation offered by a Ba’al HaBayit that one can violate Shabbat if that is the only way that one can find employment. My father, Hareini Kapparat Mishkavo, told me numerous times that at the time when he first came to the United States, many European Jews were discouraged from being Shomer Shabbat when they were told by potential employers that any job available would entail working on Saturdays. An even more extreme case is cited in Bava Batra 110a, where we read the following:

(Members of the tribe of Dan, upon interviewing a candidate for becoming a priest in their idolatrous temple, ask him) (Shoftim 18:3)
“… ‘Who brought you here? What are you doing in this place? What do have to do here?’ —Aren’t you a descendent of Moshe (based upon an interpretation of Shoftim 18:30, where the genealogy of the idolatrous priest is traced to someone named “Menashe” with the “Nun” written above the line, and possibly an attempt to alter the true name of the man’s grandfather—Moshe)…? Are you interested in becoming an idolatrous priest?” He said to them, “I have the
following tradition from my grandfather’s family: At all times one should hire himself out to *Avoda Zara* rather than becoming dependent upon the charity of others.” He thought that *Avoda Zara* actually meant idolatry, but it is not so. It means work that is strange to him, as Rav said to R. Kahana, “Flay a carcass in the street and earn a wage, and say not ‘I am a great man and such work is demeaning to me.’”

An obvious everyday indication of the importance that we attribute to how one earns one’s living, is that among the first things that is asked upon meeting a new person is "What do you do?” While such a question might be understood to constitute nothing more than an “ice-breaker”, i.e., a means by which a conversation is begun, it is simultaneously an attempt to get the measure of the person before whom one is standing, figuring out whether this individual is worthy of respect and deference, whether it is likely that there exist any common interests or pursuits that might constitute the basis of an ongoing friendship and relationship. Our society has even developed euphemisms to try to elevate and enhance occupations that might otherwise be derided, as in the examples of the “managing executive”, the “sanitary engineer”, and the “sales representative” Such a sensibility lies at the heart of the unfortunate ambivalence experienced by some women when introducing themselves, they state that their profession is to raise their children and manage home affairs. I remember Yitz Greenberg once saying that on *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*, when you first make someone’s acquaintance, "What do you do?” should not be a question posed. Since we are prohibited from discussing matters that cannot be engaged in on *Shabbat*—“Nisht on Shabbat Geret”—then why define each other and ourselves by those very things on such a holy day? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to describe ourselves by our families, our children, our background, our spiritual interests and aspirations, or our avocations, rather than our vocations?

An argument could be made that not only on *Shabbat* should we strive to de-emphasize status and “what we do” when we interact with one another, but rather this should be an operating principle at all times. If embarrassing an individual in public is considered such an egregious transgression, how can we risk possibly humiliating someone who at least in his/her own mind, feels that s/he doesn’t “measure up”, and is therefore unwillingly humbled by having to answer such a question?

However, in order to avoid setting the bar so high that taking seriously the question of how to enhance the dignity of others in terms of the work that they engage in will become moot, it is important to realize that there are things that we can all do naturally and painlessly. One such project that has been undertaken by the entire Silver Spring Orthodox community, is called the “Kemp Mill Employment Assistance Initiative”. In direct response to the rising national unemployment rate, which according to a front page story in *The Washington Post* of July 4th, 2003 passed the 9,000,000 mark for the first time in ten years, an online database is being assembled whereby available employment can be publicized and hopefully taken advantage of by the currently estimated twenty local families which are plagued by either unemployment or underemployment. We urge everyone who either can be of assistance or is seeking employment opportunities, to fill out the forms that will be sent by email as well as available in the KMS office. In addition, specific information about this program can be
obtained from the KMS representatives for the initiative, Jon Fink and Ed Tolchin. There is no greater Chesed that one can extend than restoring another individual’s dignity, and hopefully all those in need can find some relief through our joint efforts.