

PARASHAS KORACH

One-sided Arguments

The stakes were high, the tension unbearable. Although Moses had his hands full from the very beginning, nothing like this had ever happened before. Contentious, argumentative, hard to satisfy, the “stiff-necked” Jewish people had tested him again and again, yet they had never challenged his authority. But now the aristocratic Korach and his followers were contesting Moses’s right to lead, and the budding conflict threatened to rip the community to pieces. Only the miraculous absorption of the dissenters into the bowels of the earth averted catastrophe.

The Torah portrays Korach’s dissension as the prototype of corrosive conflict, the paradigm of the type of arguments to be avoided; “you shall not be,” the Torah tells us, “like Korach and his assembly.” The Torah’s intent is certainly not to restrict the rights of Jews to express their opinions and engage in meaningful dialogue on any issue. What then are the particular characteristics of the Korach affair that brand it as an unacceptable expression of conflicting opinions?

The Mishnah gives us a clue. Arguments for the sake of Heaven, the Mishnah tells us, such as “those of the sages Hillel and Shamai,” have staying power, while arguments not for the sake of Heaven, such as “those of Korach and his followers,” do not. But why exactly is the staying power of an argument dependent on its motivation?

A close reading of the Mishnah reveals an additional clue. When speaking about arguments for the sake of Heaven the Mishnah mentions “Hillel and Shamai,” the two principal antagonists who squared off against each other on Halachic issues hundreds of times. When speaking about Korach, however, the Mishnah mentions “Korach and his followers.” Why doesn’t it refer to “Korach and Moses,” the two principals in the conflict? The commentators explain that these very words, “Korach and his followers,” hold the key to understanding the Mishnah.

When Hillel and Shamai argued points of Halachah, no matter how heated and intense the debate would become, there was never any personal rancor. Both were focused on one clear goal - the discovery of the absolute truth. Therefore, in a very real sense, they were not antagonists but allies in the noble quest for the truth. The clash of conflicting points of view only helped highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each argument, bringing everyone closer to the common

goal. In this light, these were truly the arguments of “Hillel and Shamai,” since both were equal partners in this intellectual enterprise.

On the other hand, Korach and his followers were not engaged in a quest for the power. They were motivated only by the quest for personal power. They were not interesting in engaging Moses in an intellectual debate to clarify the issues. They simply wanted him out of the way so that they could grab the reins of power. Therefore, Moses was not a partner in this argument, and the Mishnah rightfully refers to it as “the arguments of Korach and his followers.” Such an argument, which would readily sacrifice truth for personal gain, has no staying power.

A prominent member of a synagogue was persuaded by his rabbi to accept the demanding position of president. He took his responsibilities very seriously and devoted countless hours to the needs of the congregation.

“Well, how is it going?” the rabbi asked him one day. “Are you happy you accepted the position?”

“I find the work very fulfilling,” said the new president. “But there is one member who always finds fault with me and complains about everything I do. It bothers me no end.”

“Indeed?” said the rabbi. “Tell me, when you walk down the main street of town and a vagrant in front of a bar yells insults at you, are you personally offended?”

“Of course not. He doesn’t mean me. He yells at everyone.”

“Exactly,” said the rabbi. “The same applies to the fellow who’s pestering you. He is just venting his own frustrations and insecurities and taking it out on you. Don’t take it personally.”

In our own lives, we see the drama of the Korach incident replayed in many different settings, such as shul and office politics, family situations and the like. Ostensibly, the arguments are about all sorts of issues, but almost invariably, the real issues lie just beneath the surface - power, prestige and privilege. If only we could recognize these arguments for what they truly are, we could defuse potentially explosive situations and prevent untold pain and heartache. As Korach and his followers discovered, these arguments never have a happy ending.