

Argument for the Sake of Heaven? – June 11, 2021

“You have gone too far! The whole community are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above God’s congregation” (Num 16:3)

These are the words that Korach, son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, accompanied by his friends Datan and Aviram, said to Moses and Aaron. Ultimately the interaction ends with Korach, Datan and Aviram being swallowed up into the earth by God.

What exactly was wrong in what Korach, and his motley band of fellow agitators said? Is this not some sort of protest against something they see that they consider unfair or unequal?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l explains, “The Korach rebellion was not just the *worst* of the revolts from the wilderness years. It was also different in kind because it was a direct assault on Moses and Aaron. Korach and his fellow rebels in essence accused Moses of nepotism, of failure, and above all of being a fraud – of attributing to God decisions and laws that Moses had devised himself for his own ends. So grave was the attack that it became, for the Sages, a paradigm of the worst kind of disagreement:

"Any dispute for the sake of Heaven will have enduring value, but any dispute not for the sake of Heaven will not have enduring value. What is an example of a dispute for the sake of Heaven? The dispute between Hillel and Shammai. What is an example of one not for the sake of Heaven? The dispute of Korach and all his company." (Mishna Avot, 5:21).

The argument between Hillel and Shammai: In their debates, one of them would render a decision and the other would argue against it, out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of cantankerousness or a wish to prevail over his fellow. An argument not for the sake of Heaven was that of Korach and his company, for they came to undermine Moses, and his position, out of envy and contentiousness and ambition for victory.¹

One of my teachers, Reb Mel Gottlieb, teaches another reason of what was so unforgivable: Because Moses sent for Datan and Aviram, Korach's ambassadors,

¹ Menahem Meiri (Catalonia, 1249–1306)

to talk and they refused to come (Num. 16:12); therefore, there was no possibility of rehabilitation, no possibility of reconciliation! Refusal to dialogue leads to impossibility!

When dialogue is no longer possible, when the refusal to communicate, to listen, to learn, seeking shalom is also impossible.

Korach and company were not interested in resolution, they wanted revolution. They were not interested in the welfare of the people, their self-interest, seeking power and elevating themselves was their goal.

We don't all agree, and certainly not all the time.

When we argue for the sake of heaven, when we seek truth, and see the person across from us as fully human and not "the other," there is possibility for shalom. When an argument is not for the sake of heaven, when we seek to bolster and reinforce our own points of view, we sacrifice both our humanity and the humanity of the person across from us.

We are in an age of media wars, social media wars, cancel culture, and actual threats to people's wellbeing, careers, and lives. We have lost ourselves.

Humans lose their humanity when they cancel an accomplished news analyst for an embarrassing, stupid, unintentional mistake.

Humans lose their humanity when they vandalize stores, buildings, and places of worship.

Humans lose their humanity when people eating Sushi are attacked at their sidewalk table.

Humans lose their humanity when people post "Hitler was right" on their social media.

Rav Kook² teaches that we can be takers and we can be givers. Korach was an extreme example of a taker. Reb Gottlieb teaches, Korach always wanted everything, he was egocentric, narcissistic, and always disappointed, and this

² Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was an Orthodox Rabbi, and first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine in the Land of Israel, one of the fathers of religious Zionism.

came from an inner woundedness, an inner emptiness that can never be filled. His ego was insatiable, but his soul could be satisfied, if only it could be reached.

How to reach the soul? It is only through engaging in giving that the soul opens and can be satisfied.³

How can we become givers rather than takers?

Begin with an attitude of gratitude – this is the secret to happiness!

Add a dash of curiosity, be willing to hear or learn something new.

Add in a cup of undivided attention.

Add a spoonful of patience. If you can find it, add a dash of joy, too.

Recognize the humanity in others. We are each made b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of the Divine. We each bring a unique gift to bring to this world.

Most of all, endeavor to live a life consistent with our Torah teachings, live as though the Divine sees and records each moment of our lives. One of the most important Torah teachings is to love the stranger.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l wrote, "It is easy to love our neighbor. It is difficult to love the stranger. This is why the Torah commands us only one to love our neighbor, but on thirty-six occasions commands us to love the stranger. A neighbor is one we love because he is like us. A stranger is one we are taught to love precisely because he is not like us. That is the Torah's repeated and most powerful command. I believe it to be the greatest religious truth articulated in the past four thousand years."

Finally, add in faith: "The Bible commands us only once to love our neighbor. But it never tires of urging us to love the stranger. To have faith in God as creator and ruler of the universe is to do more than to believe that God has spoken to us. It is to believe that God has spoken to others, in a language which we may not understand."⁴

It is my hope and prayer that humanity can take these eight basic ingredients: gratitude, curiosity, listening, patience, joy, love, see the Divine in one another,

³ Teaching in a drash by Rabbi Mel Gottlieb

⁴ <https://rabbisacks.org/topics/stranger-2/>

and faith, and nurture a spiritual perspective that will bring healing and wholeness to all humanity and to all the world. Let us all become givers rather than takers, and live lives of Shalom and Shalem, peace and wholeness.

Shabbat shalom,

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