**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT KORACH**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Mishna in *Pirkei Avot* (5:17) famously draws a distinction between two types of “*machaloket*” (“conflict,” or “controversy”) – the conflict between the great sages Hillel and Shammai, who disagreed about many halakhic matters; and the conflict waged by Korach and his followers against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. The conflict between Hillel and Shammai, the Mishna teaches, represents the quintessential “*machaloket le-shem Shamayim*” – “conflict waged for the sake of Heaven,” whereas Korach’s uprising marks the quintessential “*machaloket she-einah le-shem Shamayim*” – “conflict which is not for the sake of Heaven.”

Rav Yerucham Levovitz raised the question of why the Mishna deemed these two examples of *machaloket* worthy of being contrasted with one another. Usually, the difference between two entities is noted because they bear some similarity, or at least parallel one another in some way. What resemblance could there possibly be between the Hillel-Shammai controversy, which involved two righteous scholars genuinely striving to determine the will of God as expressed through the system of *Halakha*, and Korach’s audacious assault on Moshe and Aharon, outrageously accusing them of arrogance, nepotism and disregard for the people? How can these two be contrasted with one another, if they have nothing in common?

This question led Rav Yerucham to a novel approach to understanding Korach’s revolt. He suggested that Korach and his followers were at first driven by sincere motives. Their initial complaint stemmed from their genuine desire for a closer relationship with God, which translated into the desire to serve as *kohanim* in the *Mishkan*. And if it were only this sincere ambition which drove them to question the system which reserved the priesthood for Aharon and his sons, Rav Yerucham writes, then this controversy would have been classified as a “*machaloket le-shem Shamayim*.” However, he explains, their ambition quickly became tainted by ulterior motives, by a craving for prestige, and this element of self-interest undermined the validity of their campaign, thus rendering it a “*machaloket she-einah le-shem Shamayim*.”

Rav Yerucham concludes by noting the “halakhic” conclusion yielded by this analysis. The Gemara in Masechet Pesachim (50b) establishes the well-known principle, “A person should always involve himself in Torah and *mitzvot* even out of insincere motives; for as a result of [his involvement] with insincere motives he will end up [involving himself] out of sincere motives.” The ideal, of course, is to devote ourselves to Torah study and *mitzva* performance out of the sincere desire to serve our Creator, and not any self-serving motives, but nevertheless, even if we have ulterior motives, there is value to our Torah study and *mitzva* observance. Rav Yerucham teaches, however, that the exception to this rule is *machaloket*. Instigating an argument or conflict for anything other than pristinely pure motives is wrong. Although holy pursuits with unholy motives are generally acceptable, arguing and fighting – even for a noble cause, and even with sincere motives – is not acceptable if there is even a smidgen of self-interest involved. In Rav Yeucham’s view, the difference between a “*machaloket le-shem Shamayim*” and a “*machaloket she-einah le-shem Shamayim*” is not the difference between a fight waged with noble intentions and one waged with ignoble intentions. Rather, it is the difference between a fight waged with pristinely noble intentions, and one which is waged with noble intentions but with a tinge (or more) of selfish interests. A fight, no matter how intrinsically noble the cause, is legitimate only in the exceptional case of one who is driven by perfectly pure motives, without any additional, ulterior motives whatsoever.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Korach of how Korach, a cousin of Moshe and Aharon, led an uprising against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. They argued, “For the entire nation, they are all holy, so why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?” (16:3). Two prominent figures in this uprising – Datan and Aviram – later sent a message of contempt to Moshe, saying, “Is it not enough that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey [Egypt] in order to kill us in the desert, that you also assert your authority over us?!” (16:13).

Moshe responded to the challenge by instructing Korach and his followers to offer incense together with Aharon in the *Mishkan*, and God would then visibly accept the offering of the one chosen to serve as the *kohen gadol*. This would prove whom He had chosen for this role. Moshe then turned to God and begged Him not to accept the offerings of the rebels, explaining, “I did not take even a single donkey from them, and I did no evil to even one of them” (16:15).

Rav Yerucham Levovitz understands this verse as implying that Moshe, in response to the challenge mounted against him, reviewed his conduct in his mind to determine if perhaps there was some truth to his challengers’ allegations. Although they were clearly driven by jealousy and greed, nevertheless, Moshe did not dismiss their accusations out of hand. He thought carefully if perhaps he may have been guilty of any injustice, if perhaps he had abused his leadership in some way, however slightly. He then turned to God and affirmed, “I did not take even a single donkey from them, and I did no evil to even one of them,” that the charges leveled against him had no basis in reality.

Rav Yerucham writes: “When you are criticized, [and accused] even of the strangest things, before anything else, listen attentively. Do not rush to respond, ‘I am innocent of this’ and that’s it. Rather, examine your actions…pass them through the crucible of scrutiny, to assess and clearly determine what is there.” Our instinct when we are criticized is to stubbornly defend ourselves and affirm our innocence. Moshe’s response to Korach’s uprising, as understood by Rav Yerucham, teaches that criticism should be an occasion for honest self-assessment. We do not need to accept every word of criticism we hear, but we should take each word seriously – even if it comes from the likes of Korach and his cohorts – and approach it as an opportunity to scrutinize our conduct and determine where we might have room to improve.

Monday

We read in Parashat Korach of the uprising led by Korach against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. After addressing Korach and his fellow *Leviyim* who sought the privileges of the priesthood, Moshe sent a message to two other leaders of the uprising – Datan and Aviram – summoning them to meet. Datan and Aviram brazenly refused Moshe’s invitation, and delivered a message of scorn and derision in response. They concluded, “Even if you gore those people’s eyes, we will not come up [to meet with you]” (16:14). A number of commentators, including the Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Seforno, explain this as a euphemistic reference to deception. Datan and Aviram were saying to Moshe, “Do you really think you can blind them” – referring to what they considered Moshe’s deceiving the people into submitting to his leadership.

Rashi, however, explains differently, claiming that the expression “these people” actually refers to Datan and Aviram themselves. They were saying to Moshe, “Even if you gore out our eyes, we will not come up.” Rashi explains that rather than make reference to even the hypothetical loss of their eyes, they said instead, “these people’s eyes,” but the intent was their own eyes. They were expressing to Moshe how adamantly they refused to speak to him, that no matter what pain or harm he might want to inflict, they will still refuse his summons.

The Chafetz Chayim (cited in Rav Matis Blum’s *Torah La-da’at*) noted the significance of the fact that Datan and Aviram emphasized their refusal to come meet with Moshe to resolve their conflict even if this meant losing their eyesight. It shows us the unfortunate tendency that people have to persist in a fight even when the fight is to their detriment. People sometimes prefer pursuing conflict even when their own interests are far better served by yielding. They are prepared to endure the tension and stress of a fight for the sake of triumphing over the other party – just as Datan and Aviram declared their willingness to lose their eyes rather than end their uprising against Moshe. Their example reminds us to think very carefully before instigating an argument or conflict to determine whether this will serve our long-term interests. More often than not, the comfort and serenity of peaceful relations are far more valuable than anything we potentially stand to gain by initiating or continuing a conflict.

Tuesday

Parashat Korach begins by telling of Korach confronting Moshe together with 250 cohorts, whom the Torah describes as men who filled leadership roles in the nation, and as “*anshei sheim*” – “men of prominence.”

Rabbi Natan of Breslav (*Likutei Halakhot*, *Hilkhot Shavuot*, 2) commented that this description provides the basis for the mistake made these men who challenged Moshe’s authority.  It was their desire for “*sheim*” – to make a name for themselves, to earn respect and prestige – that led them to oppose Moshe.  The term “*anshei sheim*,” according to Rabbi Natan, refers not only to these men’s current status of prominence, but also to their hopes and aspirations for the future – to achieve more honor and fame.

Korach and his followers couched their claims in noble, idealistic terms, exclaiming, “For the entire congregation, they are all sacred, and the Lord is in their midst, so why do you elevate yourselves over the people of the Lord?” (16:3).  By introducing this group as “*anshei sheim*” – people driven by the lust for honor and stature – the Torah reveals this group’s charade, that the idealistic image they projected was really a disguise, concealing their selfish, egotistical interests.

Moreover, as Rabbi Natan here explains, their interest in self-promotion is what led them to underestimate Moshe’s greatness.  When a person seeks prestige, he naturally feels threatened by the great achievements of famous, accomplished figures, as their reputation and renowned results in their crowding the public sphere, making it more difficult for others to successfully assert themselves and draw attention.  An instinctive response to this uncomfortable sense of insecurity is to underestimate that person’s achievements, and to imagine oneself on equal footing with that individual, or at least to perceive the gap between them as much smaller than it really is.  It was because Korach and his men were “*anshei sheim*,” people who sought fame and notoriety, that they convinced themselves that Moshe was not that much greater than themselves, to the point where they could ask, “For the entire congregation, they are all sacred, and the Lord is in their midst, so why do you elevate yourselves over the people of the Lord?” – denying Moshe’s qualitatively superior stature.

Furthermore, as the *Midrash Tanchuma* (cited by Rashi to 16:1) famously tells, they approached Moshe dressed in garments made entirely from wool dyed in *tekheilet*, and posed the question of whether such garments required *tzitzit* strings with a *tekheilet* thread.  When Moshe answered in the affirmative, they ridiculed him, scoffing at the idea that a *tekheilet* garment is enhanced to any degree with small threads of *tekheilet* on its corners.  This was, quite clearly, an allegorical depiction of how they perceived themselves vis-à-vis Moshe.  They convinced themselves that Moshe was no more special than they were, that Moshe’s position was just another *tekheilet* thread affixed to a *tekheilet* garment.  And so they rejected his leadership.

When we are consumed by the desire for admiration and fame, we can easily end up doing a variety of foolish things – including failing to properly appreciate and respect great people.  If earning respect is our priority, then the respect received by other people will upset us, and cause us to undervalue their achievements.  But when we are driven by a genuine desire to live life properly and grow, without seeking prestige, then we hold truly great people in esteem and seek to learn and gain from them.  We view them not as threats to our ambitions, but rather as priceless assets and sources of inspiration and guidance in our quest for real, meaningful achievement and true greatness.

Wednesday

One of the more famous Mishnayot in *Pirkei Avot* (5:17) points to the uprising led by Korach against Moshe as the quintessential “*machaloket she-lo le-sheim Shamayim*” – “fight waged not for the sake of Heaven.” The Mishna refers to this fight as “*machaloket Korach va-adato*” – “the fight of Korach and his group,” and sees it as the prime example of a conflict instigated out of impure motives. This is in contrast to “*machaloket Hillel ve-Shammai*” – the halakhic disagreements between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, which the Mishna regards as the quintessential “*machaloket le-sheim Shamayim*” – fight waged for the sake of Heaven.”

Many writers raised the question of why the Mishna refers to Korach’s uprising as “*machaloket Korach va-adato*” – “the fight of Korach and his group.” The expression used by the Mishna in reference to the argument between Hillel and Shammai is “*machaloket Hillel ve-Shammai*” – “the fight of Hillel and Shammai,” mentioning the two parties in the conflict. By contrast, Korach’s conflict with Moshe is described as “*machaloket Korach va-adato*,” an expression which makes reference to only one of the two quarreling parties.

An insightful explanation of the Mishna’s phraseology is offered by Rav Shimon Schwab (cited by [Rav Yissachar Frand](https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5760-korach/)). If a conflict is waged sincerely, by two parties driven by pure, genuine motives, then the two parties will listen attentively to one another, and take the other’s perspective and arguments into careful consideration. A “*machaloket le-sheim Shamayim*” is pursued by “Hillel and Shammai” – by two parties who are listening to each other, questioning one another, responding to one another, and acknowledging one another. By contrast, when a conflict is fought “*she-lo le-sheim Shamayim*,” with impure, egotistical motives, then each party sees only itself and its arguments. They are not likely to listen to one another, as they are interested only in advancing their respective agendas, and not in arriving at the truth. And so when Korach and his cohorts launched their uprising against Moshe, this was not “*machaloket Korach ve-Moshe*” – a conflict between Korach and Moshe, with two sides taking each other’s opinions into consideration, but rather “*machaloket Korach va-adato*” – a conflict instigated by a group that had no interest at all in what the other believed.

Arguments are certainly valid, and even critical, but only if they are waged in the sincere pursuit of truth, which will lead us to listen to and carefully consider the opposing viewpoint. If we argue “*she-lo le-sheim Shamayim*,” for selfish reasons, then we do not see the other side, as we have no interest in questioning our own assumptions in order to determine the truth. The Mishna here teaches us the importance of honesty, humility and objectivity, of pursuing the truth with an open mind, which requires that we acknowledge other viewpoints and give them consideration.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Korach of the tragic events that occurred in the wake of Korach’s brazen uprising against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. After the rebels themselves were killed by God – some through a supernatural fire which consumed them, and others when the ground opened underneath the tents of Datan and Aviram, two of the leading instigators – the people continued protesting against Moshe and Aharon. They complained, “*Atem hamitem et am Hashem*” – “You killed the nation of the Lord” (17:6), referring to Korach and his cohorts. The people insisted that Korach was correct in challenging Moshe, and they blamed Moshe and Aharon for the deaths of the rebels, whom they regarded as sincere, righteous individuals. God responded angrily, informing Moshe of His plan to annihilate the people, and proceeding to unleash a deadly plague. Moshe promptly instructed Aharon to offer incense, which had the effect of ending the plague, but only after the death of over 14,000 people.

Rashi (17:11), citing the Gemara (Shabbat 89a), explains that when Moshe was atop Mount Sinai receiving the Torah, he was taught a “secret” – that the offering of *ketoret* (incense) has the ability to bring atonement and end a plague. This is how he knew to instruct Aharon to offer incense to end the devastating plague that threatened to annihilate *Benei Yisrael* for their complaints after Korach’s failed uprising.

How might we explain this connection drawn by *Chazal* between plagues and the *ketoret*? Why would specifically *ketoret* have the effect of ending a plague?

The common denominator between the scent of the *ketoret* and plagues is that they both rapidly spread, covering vast distances in a short period of time. Infectious diseases can quickly affect large number of people, and the fragrance of incense wafts through the air and can be carried by even a slight breeze. This comparison becomes more compelling when we consider the ancient belief in the miasma theory, which saw plagues as the result not of contagions passing from one person to the next, but rather of pollutants in the air over a certain region. A plague, then, might symbolize a “polluted” environment, a situation where people have generated an aura that caused the proliferation of evil. The way we combat such a “plague,” the Gemara teaches, is with the “*ketoret*,” by working to create a “fragrant” environment, an aura of joy and positivity. We counter the “contamination” of the atmosphere resulting from negative, harmful attitudes by spreading goodwill, kindness, and optimism.

Korach, as the Midrashim describe, poisoned the atmosphere in the Israelite camp through his cynicism and negativity. He bred anger and discontent by accusing Moshe and Aharon of selfishly asserting their authority for their own interests. He created a “contaminated” environment of tension and rage, and thus God responded by unleashing a plague, which was seen as the result of contaminated air. The antidote was the *ketoret*, which signifies the pleasant, joyful atmosphere that is to characterize Torah life, the precise opposite of the aura created by Korach and his followers.

The Mishna in Masekhet Tamid (3:8) states that the scent of the *ketoret* offered in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* reached all the way eastward to the city of Jericho. What this might be saying is that the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was to create an aura of sanctity that would extend far and wide, having an impact throughout the nation. The fragrance of the *ketoret* wafting through the air from Jerusalem perhaps represents the spread of the influence of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and what it represented. Torah observance is to generate a pleasing “fragrance,” an aura of joy and positivity, which is to spread far and wide. Committing ourselves to Torah requires us to strive to offer the “*ketoret*,” to create a pleasing atmosphere that impacts the people around us and that will, hopefully, spread far and wide, so that we all do our small share in making the world a happier and more pleasant place.

Friday

The Torah introduces Korach, Moshe’s cousin who led an uprising against his authority, as “*Korach ben Yitzhar*” – “Korach, the son of Yitzhar.” As we already know from Sefer Shemot (6:18-21), Yitzhar was one of the three brothers of Amram, Moshe’s father, and he had three sons, including Korach.

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (109b) finds in the name “Yitzhar” an allusion to the destructive effects of Korach’s brazen revolt. Associating this name with the word “*tzohorayim*” (“afternoon”), the Gemara comments that Korach is identified as “the son of Yitzhar” because “*hirtiach alav et kol ha-olam ka-tzohorayim*” – he made the entire world “scorching” like the afternoon sun. His revolt inflicted a great deal of pain and suffering, comparable to the discomfort of the searing midday summertime sun.

The sun, of course, is the source of life, the source of warmth and comfort on a cold day, and an indispensable component of the natural order without which life cannot exist. The punishing heat of the afternoon sun perhaps alludes to the fact that even precious and vital qualities and skills can be destructive when used excessively. Korach, as *Chazal* describe, was an impressive and talented individual. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by Rashi (16:7), comments that Korach felt confident challenging Moshe because he prophetically foresaw the accomplishments of his descendants. The prophet Shmuel, who led *Benei Yisrael* to return to the service of God and paved the way for the Jewish dynasty, descended from Korach. After the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built, Korach’s descendants were the ones who sang beautiful praises to God as the *kohanim* performed the service. Korach said to himself, in the words of the Midrash, “Is it possible that all this greatness is destined to emerge from me, and I will be silent?” This might mean that Korach saw the great potential within him, his special skills and talents, and concluded that he must assert himself and displace Moshe and Aharon. Like the sun, Korach had the ability to “shine” upon the world, to have a profound impact. Tragically, however, he went too far. His capacity for greatness led him to overstep his bounds, to assert himself where he did not belong. And so instead of “illuminating” the world and providing “warmth,” he “scorched” the world. He “shone” too brightly, seeking to assume roles which were not meant for him.

Korach’s mistake demonstrates the delicate balance that must be maintained between bold ambition and recognizing one’s limits. We are, certainly, to recognize our potential and utilize it to its fullest so we can “shine” brightly upon the world around us. However, our ambition must be tempered by a humble awareness of our boundaries and limits. Not everything we are uniquely capable of doing should necessarily be done. As in the case of Korach, when a person directs his talents in the wrong direction, he can cause destruction. We must ensure to use our God-given skills for beneficial, constructive purposes, with the aim of “shining” upon the earth, and avoiding misusing them in a destructive manner.

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