

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Korach)

In Israel, even a bus ride can become an existential experience. There are many Jews with a more conservative approach to modesty within Jewish tradition, who are very uncomfortable sitting next to someone of the opposite sex. I recall once on a long, crowded bus ride from Haifa to Jerusalem, watching a fellow in a long black coat and black hat struggling with this issue.

He was sitting towards the rear of the bus, in a window seat, when the fellow sitting next to him suddenly jumped up, apparently about to miss his stop, and jumped off the bus. A woman standing in the aisle immediately seized the opportunity to grab the seat, and this religiously garbed fellow now found himself trapped next to the window with this woman in between him and the aisle. While one can never assume knowledge of what a person is thinking, I had the distinct impression that both she, and a number of people around them in the aisle were quite enjoying the situation.

Not wanting to give up his seat, and yet uncomfortable with the fact that this woman had chosen to sit down next to him, the fellow had a clever idea and opened the window wide open. It was a cold winter day and the wind gusting in was clearly upsetting the woman who immediately glared at the fellow, and in a loud voice said:

“Could you please close the window?”

To which he responded: “Could you please lengthen your dress?”

“You’re being ridiculous” the woman responded.

“Your dress is ridiculous” he replied.

“Why are you going to Jerusalem? He asked, eyeing her short sleeves and short skirt, you should go to a yeshiva!”

*“Why are **you** going to Jerusalem? She retorted; you obviously need to go to a kibbutz!”*

At which point various members of the ‘audience’ began to pipe in as well, and the bus ride very quickly degenerated into a full-fledged session of the Israeli Knesset!

Ever have the distinct impression that people are arguing just for the sake of arguing? While we often have the opportunity to take a stand on important issues, sometimes people seem to be arguing simply for the sake of arguing. Indeed, one wonders sometimes when seeing the issues over which people become embroiled, whether there is any logic to the debate at all.

Take for example, the issue of road rage, which has become a widespread phenomenon on our streets and highways. It is difficult to imagine what could motivate people to become so upset and get so serious about who passes whom on the highway.

Often, two individuals, driving two separate vehicles, both of whom have never met, and will most probably never have anything to do with each other again, can become so incensed about an issue that they will even come to blows over something as insignificant as the honking of a horn!

At first glance, this seems to be exactly what happens this week, in our portion of *Korach*.

Korach, who bursts onto the biblical desert scene, seemingly from nowhere, is obviously upset about something, but it is difficult to find logic as to what that really is.

Challenging the leadership of Moses, as well as the priesthood of Aaron, none of Moshe's attempts to enter into a dialogue with either him or his followers bear any fruit, and eventually, he meets a horrible end, as he and all those involved in this insurrection are destroyed, either by fire or by earthquake.

This story raises a number of challenging questions:

First of all, how could anyone in his right mind challenge the leadership of Moshe? After all Moshe has done, leading the Jews out of Egypt amidst a barrage of miraculous plagues, all capped off by the splitting of the Red Sea, one would have thought his authority to be unquestionable, especially after witnessing his direct communications with G-d at Sinai. So what is this rebellion all about?

Further, to be honest, when one considers the actual contention of Korach, it does not seem all that unreasonable:

"Ki Kol Ha'Eidah Kulam Kedoshim", "For the entire congregation are all holy." (Bamidbar 16:3) This seems to be the essence of democracy. After all, claims Korach, we all witnessed G-d at Sinai, and all of us are holy, so why do we need a priesthood? Why can't we all serve in the temple?

It is interesting to note that our portion begins with the words: *"Va'Yikach Korach", "And Korach took..."* (Bamidbar 16:1) however, the verse never explains exactly what it was that Korach actually took, and we are left without the end of the sentence. What does this mean? What exactly did Korach take?

Equally challenging is the fact that a closer examination of the story of Korach reveals quite clearly the inconsistency of Korach's claim. After all, the same individual rallying the people to the cry of 'we are all holy', challenging a system that creates a hierarchy of leaders and led, has no problem claiming that same leadership (the priesthood) for himself... (See Bamidbar, or Numbers, chapter 16, and compare verses 3, 5, and 10.)

Ultimately, G-d makes it clear that Korach's rebellion is so terrible, that it must be completely destroyed by earthquake, a punishment which the Torah points out here has never before been seen in the world, and is indeed a new form of punishment created for the express purpose (by G-d) of dealing with Korach.

So what exactly is so terrible about Korach's contentions? After all, this is not the first time the Jews have argued with, murmured against, or even challenged the leadership of Moshe? Why the need for a whole new form of punishment? And if what Korach did was so terrible, why is our portion named after him?

There is a beautiful teaching in the *Mishnah* in *Ethics of the Fathers* (*Avot* 5:20) which discusses the concept of debate or argument.

“Every argument (Machloket) which is for the sake of heaven (“Le’Shem Shamayim”) will ultimately endure, but every argument which is not for the sake of heaven will not endure. And what is an argument (or debate), which is for the sake of heaven? This is the ‘argument’ of the students of Shammai and the students of Hillel (literally: “Beit Hillel U’beit Shammai, the Houses of the great sages Hillel and Shammai.)

“And what is an argument which is not for the sake of heaven (and therefore which will, suggests the Mishnah, not endure)? This is the argument of Korach and his congregation.”

Interestingly, the argument fomented by Korach, says the Mishnah, *“Ein Sofah’ Le’Hitklayem”*, will not endure. And, more than any other debate in Jewish history, G-d himself makes this point by causing Korach and his followers to be completely swallowed up by the earth, perhaps as if to say that this debate needs to be obliterated completely.

Judaism here is taking an important stand. The issue is not what Moshe and Korach were arguing about; the issue is what really lies at the root of any debate. It is not only what we are arguing about, it is also how, and even more importantly, why, we argue at all.

The Torah does not tell me exactly what Korach took, because it isn’t important. Korach, says the Torah, was a taker. And in the end, the only cause Korach was fighting for, was Korach.

That is why, suggests tradition, the Mishnah calls this argument the argument of Korach and his followers; really it should have said the debate of Korach and Moshe. Korach was really thinking only of Korach, and in the end, there was no room for anyone else.

It is interesting that the Mishnah describes the argument, which is apparently a righteous, or legitimate debate, as one which is for the sake of heaven (*“Le’Shem Shamayim”*) .

Why does the Mishnah not say for the sake of G-d? Why describe the issue as being for the sake of heaven?

Indeed, the term ‘heaven’ (shamayim) is a term that has its counter in the earth or the ground.

“Ha’Shamayim Shamayim La’Hashem, ve’Ha’Aretz natan Li’vnei Adam”. The heavens belong to G-d, but the earth has been given over to mankind.

Heaven represents endlessness, that aspect of our selves which is truly unlimited. The earth, on the other hand, represents the finite limitedness of this material world. **Maimonides**, in his thirteen principles of faith, points out that G-d cannot be physical, because everything which is physical is ultimately limited; it is here and not there. But G-d is everywhere, and unlimited, so the heavens, representing the timeless endlessness of G-d, are juxtaposed to the earth which is all about the finite and the limited aspects of this world.

Judaism does not believe that in order to achieve a relationship with G-d, and the unlimitedness of spirituality, that we need to turn our backs on the physical; our challenge, rather, is to harness it in the service of heaven.

The question to consider then, when involved in any debate, is which of these two I am feeding: is the goal of the debate to further the cause of heaven, or in the end, is it really only about me?

Believing so strongly in a cause, that you are willing to sacrifice everything for that cause, does not, in and of itself, guarantee that the cause is just. The question is what motivates us to such a cause. If all that I do is about what I can give back to the world, then ultimately I am recognizing that there is a part of G-d inside every human being; I am recognizing the endlessness, the unlimited, in all of us. That is a debate for the sake of heaven and such a debate; whatever side of the fence we choose, ultimately serves to bring us all a bit closer together.

But a debate that is in the end only about me, and about feeding my own ego, will only serve to set us all further apart. Such a position does not recognize the fact that everyone has a part of G-d inside of them.

That is why Korach is swallowed up in the ground, because that is what his argument was all about; he was interested in Korach, and Korach only. And in the end, the world was better off without any Korach at all...

Which leaves us with the question we need to struggle with each and every day, and in each and every decision we make: Are we givers or takers? And is what we are doing in any given moment really an act of giving, or have we somehow become, even if for only an instant, a taker?

Shabbat Shalom,

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