

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Controversies For and Against “Heaven’s Sake”

Parshat Korach, Numbers 16:1 – 18:32

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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One of the most serious challenges to Moses’ and Aaron’s authority during the years in the wilderness was waged by Korah, a fellow Levite and cousin. Korah and his party challenge the leaders’ authority. They make an audacious claim: “Surely the entire nation is holy and listened to the voice of God at Sinai! What right do Moses and Aaron have to lord over the nation?” Of course the first part of their claim is correct: the entire nation is holy and all of them stood at Mount Sinai! Korah, however, ignores the fact that Moses not only stood at Sinai, but ascended the mountain and spoke to God ‘face to face.’

In reality Korah and the Reubenites had ulterior motives for rebelling against Moses and his brother. As a fellow Levite, Korah resented Aaron’s right to the priesthood. Datan and Aviram, of the tribe of Reuben, may very well have resented Moses since they were descendents of the first born son of Jacob and should have logically been members of the ruling tribe of Israel. It would appear, then, that while Korah, Datan and Aviram may have had common opponents, they had different reasons for rejecting Moses’ and Aaron’s authority.

In *Pirke Avot* ‘Korah and his company’ is an example of a controversy that is not waged “for the sake of heaven.” Korah and the others sought personal gain and aggrandizement rather than seeking to better the lot of the people or to arrive at the truth. Holiness and authenticity are not measured by the content of a disagreement or the effectiveness of one’s argument but by the intentions underlying a disagreement. While Hillel and Shammai disagreed on literally hundreds of points of law, they continued to pursue the truth with mutual respect for one each other. It is not who is right but how we arrive at the truth that is the ultimate measure of a controversy.

Pirke Avot 5:20 Any controversy waged for heaven’s sake shall in the end be of lasting worth, but any that is not for heaven’s sake shall not lead to permanent result. Which controversy was an example of being waged in the service of God? Such was the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which was not for the sake of heaven? Such was the controversy of Korah and all his company.

Pirke Avot 4:14 Rabbi Yochanan the sandal-maker said: ‘Every assembly that is for a hallowed purpose shall in the end be established. But any assembly that is not for a hallowed purpose shall not ultimately be established.’

Sources

Rabbi Pinchas Kahati, *Mishnah Mivu’arot* Commentary

Korah and all his company: They challenged Moses and Aaron in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement and power. They did not succeed in their intentions: “And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their whole households, all Korah’s people and their possessions. They went down alive into She’ol with all that belonged to them. The earth closed over them and they vanished from the midst of the congregation.” (Num. 16:32-33) Why didn’t the author of the Mishnah mention the other party involved in the controversy, that is Moses and Aaron, as it did previously when it mentioned: ‘Hillel and Shammai?’ In the case of Hillel and Shammai, both parties saw themselves as equals; Korah and his company were not equals to Moses and Aaron since Moses and Aaron were concerned with acting for heaven’s sake and not out of self interests.

Another explanation: In the future, students would rise up to challenge their teachers; they might even speak disrespectfully to them. How does one know if it was the students’ intention is to disrespect their teachers or if their actions were motivated for the sake of heaven? We can distinguish between the two controversies (by the type relation the students have with their teachers): if there is a sense of unity in their fellowship and disagreements conclude with mutual respect, it is a sign that the students are speaking truthfully and acting for the sake of heaven (even if the student takes exception with his teachers). If, on the other hand, the students show hatred and jealousy toward their teachers, then it is a sign that this disagreement is not for the sake of heaven (even if it is a valid controversy). That is what we see in this statement in *Pirke Avot*: “Which was not

‘for the sake of heaven?’ Such is the controversy of Korah and all his company.” The fact that Korah and his company were constantly disagreeing and treating each other with disrespect is a sign that here too, in the disagreement with Moses and Aaron, they were not motivated in the name of heaven. All two hundred and fifty people were out to promote themselves!

Midrash Rabbah 18:3

"Now Korach . . . took men . . . and they assembled themselves together against Moses, etc." (Num. 16). What is written directly before this passage? "Instruct them to . . . attach to the fringe at each corner a thread of blue" (Num. 15:38). Korah jumped up and asked Moses, "If a cloak is entirely blue, what is the law? Should it be exempt from the obligation of fringes?" Moses replied, "It is still subject to such obligation." Korah retorted, "The blueness of a cloak entirely blue cannot free it from the obligation, yet four blue threads can do so?" He went on, "If a house is full of *Torah* scrolls, what is the law? Should it be free from the obligation of having a *mezuzah*?" Moses replied, "It is still under the obligation of having a *mezuzah*." Korach snapped back, "The entire *Torah* cannot exempt a house, but the two sections in a *mezuzah* exempt it? These things, you have not been commanded concerning them; you are just making them up."

The sages said that Korah was a man of great subtlety and one of the bearers of the Ark. When Moses commanded "that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue" (Num. 15:38), Korah instantly ordered that 250 cloaks of blue be made, in which the 250 heads of the Sanhedrin who rose against Moses were to wrap themselves. Then Korah made a feast for them, before which they wrapped themselves in their blue cloaks. When Aaron's sons came to receive their dues, the 250 rose against them, saying, "Who told you that you are entitled to take these? Was it not Moses? We will give nothing. He who is everywhere said no such thing."

Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 24-25, Berachot 27b-28a

On another occasion, two witnesses came and said, "We saw the new moon at its proper time," but on the night that should have been New Moon, it was not visible. However, by that time Rabban Gamaliel had already accepted their testimony [and declared the thirtieth day as New Moon]. Rabbi Dosa ben Horkinas said, "They are false witnesses. How can it be testified that a woman has given birth if on the next day her belly is still swollen?" Rabbi Joshua said to him, "I agree with what you say." Then Rabban Gamaliel sent word to Rabbi Joshua: "I order you to come to me with your staff and your money on the day that according to your reckoning should be Yom Kippur . . ."

Our masters taught: A certain disciple came before Rabbi Joshua and asked him, "Master, is the evening *Tefillah* optional or obligatory?" He replied, "It is optional." Then the disciple presented himself before Rabban Gamliel and asked him, "Is the evening *Tefillah* optional or obligatory?" He replied, "It is obligatory." "But," said the disciple, "what if Rabbi Joshua told me that it is optional?" Rabban Gamliel: "Wait until the expert debaters enter the house of study." When they came in, the disciple arose and inquired, "Is the evening *Tefillah* optional or obligatory?" Rabban Gamliel replied, "It is obligatory," and then asked, "Is there anyone who disputes me in this matter?" Rabbi Joshua: "No." Rabban Gamliel: "Was not the answer optional reported to me in your name?" . . . He then went on: "Joshua, stand on your feet and let the facts as reported testify against you!" . . . In the meantime, while R. Joshua remained standing on his feet, Rabban Gamliel, seated, continued his discourse, until all the people there began to grumble and finally said to Hutzpit, Rabban Gamliel's interpreter, "Stop interpreting his words," and he stopped. . . Then they said, "How long is Rabban Gamliel to go on insulting Rabbi Joshua? On New Year's Day last year, he insulted him; in the matter of the firstborn in the affair of Rabbi Zadok, he insulted him; now he insults him again! Come, let us depose him! Whom shall we appoint in his place? Shall we appoint Rabbi Joshua? [No], because he is one of the parties involved. Shall we appoint Rabbi Akiva? [No], because since he has no ancestral merit, Rabban Gamliel may bring a curse on him. Let us then appoint Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, who is wise and rich and tenth in descent from Ezra."

Commentary

There is no shortage of controversies in the Torah and in the later Jewish tradition. In the years of wandering in the wilderness, the people repeatedly questioned Moses and rebelled against him. Yet it is only here that the rebels were punished for challenging Moses and Aaron.

In the *Etz Hayim* Commentary we learn: “In Jewish lore, Korach is the arch-demagogue lusting for power to inflate his own prominence, not to serve the people.” In the later tradition we have literally hundreds of controversies between the sages which were settled amicably. Indeed, we saw just two weeks ago in Torah Table Talk that even though the disciples of Hillel and Shammai often disagreed with one another, they still married into each other’s families and God said of the two of them, “Both these and these are the words of the living God!”

But not all controversies were so easily settled. Rabban Gamliel was the head of the *Sanhedrin* in the first century CE. When Rabbi Joshua disagreed with Rabban Gamliel over a number of different matters including when Rosh Hashanah occurs, Rabban Gamliel ordered his colleague to appear before him with his staff and money belt on the day that Rabbi Joshua considered to be Yom Kippur. In the end, his disrespect for his colleague backfired – the sages were so outraged at his treatment of Rabbi Joshua that they deposed Gamliel and appointed Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah as the new head of the court! The issue here was not the correctness of one point of view or the other but the treatment of a colleague. The validity of a controversy, then, has nothing to do with the righteousness of the cause but the *kavod*, the respect and the dignity, with which the sages treated one another.

In an age of religious diversity, this remains a hot issue. Too often, denominationalism leads rabbis to avoid one another and criticize the leaders of other movements rather than trying to understand or appreciate what the other is trying to accomplish. More than a few sermons have been given over the years in which rabbis have accused their colleagues of being a modern day Korach. There is something to be said for seeking truth without tearing others down. The sages valued the importance of *machloket*, controversy, as a way of fine tuning ones critical faculties and ones ability to think more deeply about matters of faith. In the end what matters is whether we are seeking the truth with an open heart.

The Hebrew word *emet*, truth, is spelled **aleph-mem-tauf**. It is often pointed out that these three letters in the Hebrew alphabet are the first, the middle and the final letters of the aleph bet. There is no monopoly on the truth – it can be found to the right, to the left and in the middle. This is a lesson we desperately need to learn today!

Questions to Ponder

1. What is it about the depiction of Moses in the Torah that led the sages to criticize him so severely? Do you think the picture of Korach in Midrash Rabbah goes beyond the biblical depiction of the rebel?
 2. Who do you think the sages had in mind when they depicted Korach as questioning Moses explanation of the laws of the Torah? On what grounds do they criticize him?
 3. Why does the statement in *Pirke Avot* speak of Korach and his company rather than Korach and Moses?
 4. Why did Rabban Gamliel treat his colleague Rabbi Joshua so poorly? Should someone in a position of leadership ever use his power to assert his own authority? If so when? How might Rabban Gamliel have dealt with this situation differently?
 5. Consider Korach’s complaints in the Torah (and in the later tradition). Do you think he is justified in raising these issues regarding Moses and Aaron? Imagine a Rabbi appointing his brother the cantor of the synagogue and his sister the educational director. What issues might this raise in the minds of the community members?
 6. What would be a congregational example of a controversy ‘for the sake of heaven’ and a congregational controversy that is not ‘for the sake of heaven?’
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a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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