

Torah Table Talk

L'shem Shamayim: When is Controversy Valid?

קורח

Parshat Korach Numbers 16:1 – 18:32

Korach's rebellion represents the greatest political challenge to Moses' leadership that the Israel's leader faced throughout the wilderness years. Korach, Datan, Abiram, and two hundred fifty malcontents challenge Moses and Aaron. They argue that since all the people are 'holy' and God dwells among them, Moses and Aaron have no right to 'raise themselves above the people.' When Moses challenges Korach to a priestly duel, Korach learns the hard way that God has chosen Moses and his brother. The earth opens up and swallows Korach and his followers.

Korach challenges the right to leadership? We are left to wonder, what makes a controversy valid and proper? Does the community ever have a right to challenge a standing leader? What was it about Korach's rebellion that is so disturbing?

Pirke Avot 5:19

Any controversy which is for the sake of heaven is destined to result in something permanent; any controversy which is not for the sake of heaven will not result in something permanent. Which is a controversy for the sake of heaven? The controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is not for the sake of heaven? The controversy of Korach and his company.

1. What does it mean to say that a controversy is 'for the sake of heaven' or 'not for the sake of heaven?' How would you differentiate one from the other? How are the disagreements between Hillel and Shammai different from Korach's rebellion against Moses and Aaron?
2. It is natural for people on synagogue boards and other organizations to have disagreements and arguments? Come up with three qualities that would separate proper controversies from improper controversies?
3. Read the story of Korach's rebellion in the Torah. Do you think Korach had ulterior motives for challenging Moses' authority? How did his relationship to Moses effect his decision (*Hint – Korach was Moses first cousin*)? Do you think Korach was sincere?

Malbim's Commentary, Sefer Bemidbar

Our sages wished to point out that in a holy or heavenly cause, both sides are in fact united by one purpose, to further unselfish, divine ends. However, in a controversy pursued for unholy ends, for personal advancement and the like, then even those who have come together on one side are not really united. Each are governed by their own calculations of what they stand to gain and are ready to cut the other's throat.

1. Think of an example from history (Jewish or otherwise) of a controversy that was for the sake of heaven and one that was not holy or for the sake of heaven.
2. How might this teaching influence the way candidates campaign for public office today?

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

R. Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three years there was a dispute between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel, the one asserting, "The law is according to our views," and the other asserting, "The law is according to our views." Then a divine voice came forth and said, "The utterances of the one and of the other are both the words of the living God, but the law is according to the school of Hillel."

But since both are the words of the living God, by what merit did the school of Hillel have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and humble, and taught both their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai. Indeed, they taught the rulings of the school of Shammai before their own.

Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 14b

Although the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel were in disagreement--what the one forbade, the other permitted--nevertheless the school of Shammai did not refrain from marrying women of the families of the school of Hillel, nor did the school of Hillel refrain from marrying those of the school of Shammai. This should teach you that they showed love and friendship toward one another, thus putting into practice the injunction "Love ye truth, but also peace" (Zech. 8:19)

1. If the opinions of both Hillel and Shammai are "the words of the living God," why was it necessary to have the law follow a particular point of view rather than validating both points of view? How do we balance pluralism with rule of law?
2. According to the Talmud, what was so special about the controversy of Hillel and Shammai? Why are three qualities that are singled out that made the school of Hillel more acceptable?
3. Discuss: "The difference between Hillel and Shammai are no different than the controversies between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews."

Glossary

Malbim – 1809-1879 Rabbi, preacher and Torah commentator in Eastern Europe. This translation taken from "Studies in Bemidbar" by Nehama Leibowitz.

Eruvin – Tractate in the Talmud dealing with Shabbat fences and barriers.

Yevamot- Tractate in the Talmud dealing with Levirate Marriages. Both Talmudic texts are taken from "The Book of Legends" by Bialik and Ravnitzky.

*"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*