

Parshat Korach

Dispute for the Sake of Heaven

Shlomo Eisenberg

Los Angeles, CA



"But if G-d shall create a [new] creation and the earth shall open its mouth and swallow them and all they have, and they descend to Sheol alive." (Bamidbar 16:30)

"What is a dispute that is for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Hillel and Shammai. That is not for the sake of heaven? The dispute of Korach and his followers." (Pirkei Avot 5:17)

The Netivot Shalom questions the need for such an elaborate punishment. Surely, people who violate the prohibition of 'machloket' (Sanhedrin 110a) should not be punished more severely than those who violate a "*Ye'hareig Ve'al Ya'avur*," the strictest type of prohibition there is? Furthermore, we know that the first Temple was destroyed on account of the three cardinal sins, yet that the second was destroyed because of groundless hatred. (Yoma 9b) How can the two be equivalent?

The Netivot Shalom answers with R. Akiva's maxim: "Love your neighbor as yourself; this is the great principle of the Torah." This general principle combines all the details in the Torah. We can see this from the Shemona Esrei, where we pray, "*Barcheinu avinu kulanu k'echad b'or panecha*." When we are together, unified in brotherly love, then we are in Your light. The Zohar notes that an argument causes a rift in Bnei Yisroel, which causes a rift in all of the upper worlds, which causes a rift between the Jews and G-d. We also know the importance of 'Shalom,' peace, which we emphasize constantly, including ending off our prayers with the words "He who makes peace ... He shall make peace for us." Furthermore, the Midrash on Parshat Pinchas tells us that the gift of 'Shalom' that was given to Pinchas is great, for the world only functions in peace. The Zohar tells us that one who argues on peace, argues on G-d, because his essence is peace.

Thus, the Netivot Shalom concludes, one can see the severity of dispute, why it incurs such a harsh penalty, and how it can be equal to the three cardinal sins.

The Shelah Hakadosh tells us that the 250 men who joined Korach in his rebellion did so for the sake of heaven. They wanted the greatness only because with the greatness would come closeness to G-d, and it was this that they sought. But if the Shelah is right, then why were they punished so harshly?

Furthermore, the explanation of the Shelah is difficult, since in Pirkei Avot (5:17) the dispute of Korah and his congregation is held up as the paramount example of an argument **not** for the sake of heaven. In addition, The Malbim points out that the Mishna calls the dispute of Hillel and Shammai the dispute of Hillel and Shammai (i.e., the two opponents),

whereas the dispute of Korach and Moshe is described as that of Korach and His Congregation. He explains that Korach's followers were a band of malcontents each seeking their own advancement, and that each one was more than willing to stab the other in the back to get ahead.

In light of all this, we must re-interpret the Shelah. The 250 men wanted to be close to G-d. From this aspect, their argument was for the sake of heaven, but in reality it was a selfish argument because they were only concerned with what they wanted, not with the greater good - or with what G-d wanted. Nehama Leibowitz points out that this selfish desire expresses itself in the wording of their grievance: "The congregation, all of **them are** holy" (Bamidbar 17:3), as opposed to "all of **it is** holy." This is a gross distortion of G-d's vision of the unified 'Holy Nation,' making it the 'nation of holy people' instead.

One can now posit another question: Why don't we consider Hillel and Shammai as having violated the commandment against being like Korach? Obviously one would answer that their dispute, unlike Korach's, was for the sake of heaven. But the Zohar has taught us that the severity of the prohibition stems from its dire consequences, the creation of a rift within Israel, which then causes one between Israel and G-d. Surely, even a dispute for the sake of heaven can create an internal rift! The answer lies in how one carries out such a dispute. We are told that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, even though they argued over many of the rules of marriage, nevertheless married one another (Yevamot 1:4). A true dispute for the sake of heaven will not spill over and create that rift. Rather, the parties, who will argue heatedly inside the Beit Midrash, embrace and respect one another outside the Beit Midrash.

Our Rabbis tell us that in the days of Shaul they suffered in battle, even though none of them had a sin, because they were not united. On the other hand, in the days of Achav they were successful in battle, even though they worshiped idols, because there was peace and amity among them (Bamidbar Rabbah 19).

If the 250 men that were with Korach, all of whom were men of standing, could dupe themselves into cloaking their selfish interests with the fig leaf of 'for the sake of heaven,' how much more so do we, members of a lesser generation, fool ourselves into thinking that our interests are also G-d's. Let us all strive to identify which arguments are truly 'for the sake of heaven,' to eliminate those that are not, and to handle dispute properly. If we cannot learn that ... then at least how to keep silent.

If the second Temple was destroyed on account of baseless hatred, than perhaps through unity and brotherhood we can rebuild it and fulfill our role as a Holy Nation.