Any Dispute For the Sake of Heaven

by

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Two couples, both new parents, enjoyed a rare evening out. They naturally spoke about parenthood, with its many joys and challenges. When one of the mothers asked the other how their baby was sleeping, the other replied, “through the night without a peep.” The husband of the first mother looked at her incredulously and said, “You’re not parents, you’re babysitters!”

His meaning was amusing but clear. To be a “real” parent was to endure the difficulties of parenthood which, in his estimation, included impossible nights.

So too any role of leadership and responsibility. If leading was easy, anyone could do it. Leadership always entails confronting challenges and conflicts. Moshe certainly knew this only too well. Indeed, a good and wise leader understands that conflict – difficult as it might be on its face – can often be beneficial. As our rabbis teach, “Any dispute for the sake of heaven will be for everlasting value…”

When Korach and his fellow rebels challenged Moses and Aaron, they seemed, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, both true and principled. “What was wrong with Korach and his fellow rebels? On the face of it, what they said was both true and principled. ‘You have gone too far,’ they said to Moses and Aaron. ‘The whole community is holy, every one of them, and God is with them. Why then are you setting yourselves above God’s congregation?’”

Who could argue their point? God had summoned the people to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Moses himself had said, “Would that all God’s people were prophets, that He would place His spirit upon them” (Num. 11: 29). These are radically egalitarian sentiments. Considering them, Korach and the others were right to question why there was a hierarchy, with Moses as leader and Aaron as High Priest?

Such would have been the dispute had it been for the sake of heaven. But this dispute was not for heaven’s sake at all.

Korach. Dathan and Aviram. Two hundred and fifty Israelites of rank within the community. All had grievances.

For his part, Korach was mounting a leadership challenge. He aspired to be Kohen Gadol. And why not? As Moshe and Aaron’s cousin, son of Yitzhar, he had every right to wonder why all the leadership positions should go to just one family from the Levites. He demanded equality. Dathan and Aviram. Reubenites. How could it be that they, children of Yaakov’s first-born son, had no prominent position? And the two hundred and fifty? Men of rank, still rankled that after the sin of the Golden Calf, leadership went from the first-born of each tribe to just one…

Each with a specific grievance. Each allied with the other two to “strengthen” their challenge to Moshe’s authority and Aaron’s leadership. Perhaps if their cause had been just, for the sake of heaven, their alliance would truly have strengthened them. But they were given voice to personal and petty grievances, grievances that spoke to their jealousies and their desire for power.

Had Korach “won out” the others would certainly have continued to rebel. So too had Dathan and Aviram prevailed, Korach would have joined with the two hundred and fifty to continue the effort to overthrow the leadership. These rebellious souls were not allies; they were aligned by convenience.

Moshe, a great leader, was not dismayed by the challenge posed by these men. He did not underestimate the fear, stress and interpersonal dynamics that roiled the Children of Israel. He did not minimize what they had been through, both the glorious and the frightening. He was not surprised by the people’s urge to rebel. Whether rebellion in the pursuit of honor, prestige or recognition, he understood human nature and could deal with the situation. However, Dathan and Aviram went too far.

When Moshe realized that he was unable to make any progress in his dealing with Korach, he summoned Dathan and Aviram, thinking and hoping that he might be able to reason with them. As Rashi notes, Moshe knew how *machlokes* undermined the community. Therefore, he sought to avoid discord at all costs. If meeting with the rebels would maintain the calm, he was more than ready to meet with them. They, however, refused to come to speak with Moshe.  He did not yet know that they how been sowing discord already, castigating him as a failed leader. They went so far as to libel Moshe with outright lies. “Isn’t it enough that you brought us out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert! and now you want to lord it over us! What is more, you have not brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you think that you can pull something over our eyes? We will definitely not come!”

The astonishing arrogance of their lies is nearly impossible to stomach! They castigated him for taken them out of the *richness, and the luxury* of Egypt!? They dared to describe the land of their enslavement with the same words God uses to describe the Land of Israel! They lied and then they enlarged the lie by swearing, “Even if you would gouge out the eyes of those men, we shall not go up.”  As Sforno explains, they were saying to him, “Do you think you can blind us to your failures?”

Their audacity is truly breathtaking!

Their goals were evil. Their words were false. And yet, they were already practiced in rhetorical spin. As Sivan Rahav-Meir observes, “Anything goes. If you tell a lie, but package it nicely, it will sell.” White is black. Good is bad. In the Talmud, this confusing reality is called “an upside-down world.”  Their words epitomize “false advertising” and fake news.

This “Dathan-Aviram phenomenon” was not unique to their time. We see it all around us today. Look at how the BDS movement incorrectly and unfairly maligns Israel. As Rabbi Sacks notes, we are in dangerous waters when, “…truth is sacrificed to power…”

Like Moses, who recognized that conflict – however unpleasant – can be beneficial, Judaism celebrates argument and differences of opinion. It is not for nothing that people say that when two Jews gather, there are three points of view! We value opposing viewpoints. The Oral law is based on opinions and views exemplified by Hillel and Shamai searching and seeking truth. Our tradition celebrates argument, even taking the argument to God Himself! Is that not what Job does in demanding a witness to his suffering?

We argue. We challenge. We needle, and we poke. All in the *service of truth and justice*. But when truth and justice cease to be the goal, when we no longer argue “for the sake of heaven” then we expose only our greed and unseemliness. Korach and Company had no use for the truth. Their aim was power, ego, self-aggrandizement.

How can we tell the difference between the one who would grab power for his own ego versus he would lead for the good of the people? How can we differentiate when “the land flowing with milk and honey” refers to Israel and not Egypt?

Ultimately, the one who seeks power for power’s sake betrays that. Moshe is indeed a king, but we never refer to him as such. He is “Rabeinu”, our greatest of teachers. Aaron is indeed the high priest, but he is also a great teacher, as are all the true *kohanim*. “For a priest’s lips shall guard knowledge, and teaching should be sought from his mouth.” (Malachi 2:7)

The people learn to fear the autocrat, but students cling to their teachers and love their rebbe. Their devotion is not in any way related to his authority, power, or prestige, but because such teachers share of themselves, of their knowledge and, yes, just as much, their warmth, care and concern. Moshe had not, in any way, raised himself above the people. He did not place himself on a pedestal as Korach accused him of doing. It is the community that raised him up, seeing in him a leader who loved them. He didn’t run for office. He did not “buy” any votes. He demeaned no man and mocked no rival.

He was elevated by God and the people.

But Korach… he would have been easily recognized in our ugly, angry political scene. He might even have prevailed!

Such is the reward of an age that fails to reward teaching and true leadership, that does not value “the sake of Heaven”.

Thinking about all this, I am reminded of the “20th century Moshe Rabeinu”, the Posek of our generation, Rav Moshe Feinstein Zt’l. He was *the* absolute halachic authority of our time, the acknowledged halachic arbiter of the entire Jewish community.

How did he rise to such an incredible position of esteem and leadership? Was there a ballot drawn? A committee formed? How was it that everyone agreed that *he* was the last word on halachic issues?

Did he simply wake up one morning with such leadership imposed upon him? Of course not! His leadership was based on an intelligence and a command of halakha, that other scholars found awe-inspiring. As much as his mighty intelligence, rabbis and scholars were in awe of his remarkable humility. His phone number was listed in the phone directory, and he was available for calls from average followers of Orthodoxy, as well as its authorities.

He was thoughtful, kind and modest. In a 1975 interview, he explained in his own way how he had come to his standing, “You don’t wake up in the morning and decide you’re an expert on answers,” he said. “If people see that one answer is good and another answer is good, gradually you will be accepted.”

Step by step, you *earn* your respect and standing. Then, one day, you come to see that you have become accepted as rabeinu.

Rav Moshe Feinstein followed the “Moshe Rabeinu path” not the “Korach path”. He never demanded respect and acknowledgement. He earned it.

He argued for the sake of heaven and in return he knew heaven’s reward.