



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA  
FROM RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

בס"ד

קורח תשע"ט  
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## COVENANT & CONVERSATION: FAMILY EDITION

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## Argument for the Sake of Heaven

The Korach rebellion was not just the *worst* of the revolts from the wilderness years. It was also different in kind because it was a direct assault on Moses and Aaron. Korach and his fellow rebels in essence accused Moses of nepotism, of failure, and above all of being a fraud – of attributing to God decisions and laws that Moses had devised himself for his own ends. So grave was the attack that it became, for the Sages, a paradigm of the worst kind of disagreement:

Which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? The argument between Hillel and Shammai. Which is an argument not for the sake of Heaven? The argument of Korach and his company. (Mishnah Avot 5:17)

Menahem Meiri (Catalonia, 1249–1306) explains this teaching in the following terms:

*The argument between Hillel and Shammai:* In their debates, one of them would render a decision and the other would argue against it, out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of cantankerousness or a wish to prevail over his fellow. An argument not for the sake of Heaven was that of Korach and his company, for they came to undermine Moses, our master, may he rest in peace, and his position, out of envy and contentiousness and ambition for victory.<sup>1</sup>

The Sages were drawing a fundamental distinction between two kinds of conflict: *argument for the sake of truth and argument for the sake of victory*.

The passage must be read this way, because of the glaring discrepancy between what the rebels said and what they sought. What they said was that the people did not need leaders. They were all holy. They had all heard the word of God. There should be no distinction of rank, no hierarchy of holiness, within Israel. “Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” (Num. 16:3). Yet from Moses’ reply, it is clear that he had heard something altogether different behind their words:

Moses also said to Korach, “Now listen, you Levites! Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near Himself to do the

<sup>1</sup> Meiri, Beit HaBechira ad loc.

work at the Lord's Tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near Himself, but now you are trying to get the Priesthood too." (Num. 16:8–10)

It was not that they wanted a community without leaders. It is, rather, that *they* wanted to be the leaders. The rebels' rhetoric had nothing to do with the pursuit of truth and everything to do with the pursuit of honour, status, and (as they saw it) power. They wanted not to learn but to win. They sought not verity but victory.

**"They wanted not to learn but to win. They sought not verity but victory."**

We can trace the impact of this in terms of the sequence of events that followed. First, Moses proposed a simple test. Let the rebels bring an offering of incense the next day and God would show whether He accepted or rejected their offering. This is a rational response. Since what was at issue was what God wanted, let God decide. It was a controlled experiment, an empirical test. God would let the people know, in an unambiguous way, who was right. It would establish, once and for all, the truth.

But Moses did not stop there, as he would have done if truth were the only issue involved. As we saw in the quote above, Moses tried to argue Korach out of his dissent, not by addressing his argument but by speaking to the resentment that lay behind it. He told him that he had been given a position of honour. He may not have been a Priest but he was a Levite, and the Levites had special sacred status not shared by the other tribes. He was telling him to be satisfied with the honour he had and not let his ambition overreach itself.

He then turned to Datan and Aviram, the Reubenites. Given the chance, he would have said something different to them since the source of their discontent was different from that of Korach. But they refused to meet with him altogether – another sign that they were not interested in the truth. They had rebelled out of a profound sense of slight that the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son, seemed to have been left out altogether from the allocation of honours.

At this point, the confrontation became yet more intense. For the one and only time in his life, Moses staked his leadership on the occurrence of a miracle:

Then Moses said, "By this you shall know that it was the Lord who sent me to do all these things, that they were not of my own devising: If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt." (Num. 16:28–30)

No sooner had he finished speaking than "the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them" (Num. 16:32). The rebels "went down alive into the grave" (16:33). One cannot imagine a more dramatic vindication. God had shown, beyond possibility of doubt, that Moses was right and the rebels wrong. *Yet this did not end the argument.* That is what is extraordinary. Far from being apologetic and repentant, the people returned the next morning still complaining – this time, not about who should lead whom but about the way Moses had chosen to end the dispute: "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 'You have killed the Lord's people,' they said" (17:6).

You may be right, they implied, and Korach may have been wrong. But is this a way to win an argument? To cause your opponents to be swallowed up alive? This time, God suggested an entirely different way of resolving the dispute. He told Moses to have each of the tribes take a staff and write their name on it, and place them in the Tent of Meeting. On the staff of the tribe of Levi, he should write the name of Aaron. One of the staffs would sprout, and that would signal whom God had chosen. The tribes did so, and the next

morning they returned to find that Aaron's staff had budded, blossomed, and produced almonds. That, finally, ended the argument (Num. 17:16–24).

What resolved the dispute, in other words, was not a show of power but something altogether different. We cannot be sure, because the text does not spell this out, but the fact that Aaron's rod produced almond blossoms seems to have had rich symbolism. In the Near East, the almond is the first tree to blossom, its white flowers signalling the end of winter and the emergence of new life. In his first prophetic vision, Jeremiah saw a branch of an almond tree (*shaked*) and was told by God that this was a sign that He, God, was "watching" (*shoked*) to see that His word was fulfilled (Jer. 1:11–12).<sup>2</sup> The almond flowers recalled the gold flowers on the Menorah (Ex. 25:31; 37:17), lit daily by Aaron in the Sanctuary. The Hebrew word *tzitz*, used here to mean "blossom," recalls the *tzitz*, the "frontlet" of pure gold worn as part of Aaron's headdress, on which were inscribed the words "Holy to the Lord" (Ex. 28:36).<sup>3</sup> The sprouting almond branch was therefore more than a sign. It was a multifaceted symbol of life, light, holiness, and the watchful presence of God.

One could almost say that the almond branch symbolised the priestly will to life as against the rebels' will to power.<sup>4</sup> The Priest does not rule the people; he blesses them. He is the conduit through which God's life-giving energies flow.<sup>5</sup> He connects the nation to the Divine Presence. Moses answered Korach in Korach's terms, by a show of force. God answered in a quite different way, showing that leadership is not self-assertion but self-effacement.

**“ Leadership is not self-assertion but self-effacement.”**

What the entire episode shows is the destructive nature of argument not for the sake of Heaven – that is, argument for the sake of victory. In such a conflict, what is at stake is not truth but power, and the result is that both sides suffer. If you win, I lose. *But if I win, I also lose, because in diminishing you, I diminish myself.* Even a Moses is brought low, laying himself open to the charge that "you have killed the Lord's people." Argument for the sake of power is a lose-lose scenario.

The opposite is the case when the argument is for the sake of truth. If I win, I win. *But if I lose I also win – because being defeated by the truth is the only form of defeat that is also a victory.*

In a famous passage, the Talmud explains why Jewish law tend to follow the view of the School of Hillel rather than their opponents, the School of Shammai:

[The law is in accord with the School of Hillel] because they were kindly and modest, because they studied not only their own rulings but also those of the School of Shammai, and because they taught the words of the School of Shammai before their own. (Eirubin 13b)

They sought truth, not victory. That is why they listened to the views of their opponents, and indeed taught them before they taught their own traditions. In the eloquent words of a contemporary scientist, Timothy Ferris:

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<sup>2</sup> See L. Yarden, *The Tree of Light* (London: East and West Library, 1971), 40–42.

<sup>3</sup> There may also be a hint of a connection with the *tzitzit*, the fringes with their thread of blue, that according to the Midrash was the occasion for the Korach revolt.

<sup>4</sup> On the contemporary relevance of this, see Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name* (New York: Schocken, 2015), 252–268.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase that comes to mind is Dylan Thomas' "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" (from the poem by the same name). Just as life flows through the tree to produce flowers and fruit, so a divine life force flows through the Priest to produce blessings among the people.

All who genuinely seek to learn, whether atheist or believer, scientist or mystic, are united in having not a faith, but faith itself. Its token is reverence, its habit to respect the eloquence of silence. For God's hand may be a human hand, if you reach out in loving kindness, and God's voice your voice, if you but speak the truth.<sup>6</sup>

Judaism has sometimes been called a “culture of argument.”<sup>7</sup> It is the only religious literature known to me whose key texts – the Hebrew Bible, Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud, the codes of Jewish law, and the compendia of biblical interpretation – are *anthologies of arguments*. That is the glory of Judaism. The Divine Presence is to be found not in this voice as against that, but in the totality of the conversation.<sup>8</sup>

In an argument for the sake of truth, both sides win, for each is willing to listen to the views of its opponents, and is thereby enlarged. In argument as the collaborative pursuit of truth, the participants use reason, logic, shared texts, and shared reverence for texts. They do not use ad hominem arguments, abuse, contempt, or disingenuous appeals to emotion. Each is willing, if refuted, to say, “I was wrong.” There is no triumphalism in victory, no anger or anguish in defeat.

The story of Korach remains the classic example of how argument can be dishonoured. The Schools of Hillel and Shammai remind us that there is another way. “Argument for the sake of Heaven” is one of Judaism’s noblest ideals – conflict resolution by honouring both sides and employing humility in the pursuit of truth.

Shabbat Shalom

**“This is one of Judaism’s noblest ideals – conflict resolution by honouring both sides and employing humility in the pursuit of truth.”**

Jonathan Sacks



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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 312.

<sup>7</sup> David Dishon, *The Culture of Argument in Judaism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> I have written more extensively on this in *Future Tense* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2009), 181–206.