



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

קורח תשע"ט
Korach 5779

Argument for the Sake of Heaven

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PARSHAT KORACH IN A NUTSHELL

The story of the rebellion of Korach was a devastating challenge to Moses' leadership. As Ramban points out, it could only have happened because after the sin of the spies and the resulting punishment that the generation who left Egypt would not live to enter the land, the people were bitterly disappointed. Building on their unrest and shattered hopes, Korach assembled a rabble of troublemakers – some from his own tribe, some from the tribe of Reuben, and others who had leadership positions elsewhere – and

challenged the leadership of Moses and Aaron. The rebellion failed – the ground opened up and swallowed the chief rebels – yet the complaints of the people continued. They ended only when Aaron's rod, alone among the rods for each tribe, blossomed, and brought forth almonds, a message of peaceful conflict resolution. The parsha ends with a legal section detailing the duties of the Priests and Levites and the offerings to be given to them by the rest of the people.



THE CORE IDEA

The Korach rebellion was different from the other complaints and demonstrations Moses faced during the wilderness years. It did not stem from a problem the Israelites faced such as a lack of food or water, or a way through the sea, or having to fight a battle against giants. It was a personal attack on Moses and Aaron. Korach and his fellow rebels accused Moses of favoritism, of failure, and of being a fraud – of making decisions for his own benefit, in the name of God. So terrible was this argument, that it became the classic example for the Sages of the worst kind of disagreement – an argument "not for the sake of Heaven". The opposite of this is an *argument for the sake of Heaven*, and the classic example given by the Sages is arguments between Hillel and Shammai (Mishnah Avot 5:17).

The Meiri (who lived in Spain in the 13th century) explains the difference between them in this way: "Hillel and Shammai argued out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of grumpiness or just for the sake of winning an argument... but Korach and his followers came to attack Moses out of jealousy and desire for victory" In other words,

the first type of argument is an *argument for the sake of truth* and the second an *argument for the sake of victory*.

This becomes obvious when you notice the difference between what the rebels *said* and what they really wanted. What they said was that the people did not need leaders, because they were all holy. They had all heard the word of God. There should therefore be no leaders of higher rank or holiness within Israel. "Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Num. 16:3). But from Moses' reply, it is clear that he knew they actually wanted something altogether different. He answered: "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 work at the Lord's Tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? ... but now you are trying to get the Priesthood too." (Num. 16:8–10)

Moses knew they did not really want a community without leaders. Instead, *they* wanted to be the leaders. Korach's

speech had nothing to do with finding the truth, but rather it was about achieving personal honour, status, and power.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What is the difference between an argument for the sake of Heaven and an argument not for the sake of Heaven?
2. What did Korach really want? What do you think Hillel and Shammai wanted when they argued?
3. Can you think of examples of both types of arguments from your own life?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

A story is told in the Talmud (Eruvin 13b) where for three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel (the students of Shammai and Hillel) argued about a matter of Halacha, neither being able to convince the other to change their opinion. Beit Shammai said 'the halacha follows our opinion' and Beit Hillel said 'the halacha follows our opinion'. Eventually, a voice from heaven was heard announcing 'Both these and those are the words of the living God. But the halacha follows the opinion of Beit Hillel'.

The Talmud then asks 'Since God declares that both these and those are the words of the living God, for what reason does the halacha follow the opinion of Beit Hillel?' The following explanation is given: the followers of Hillel were

friendly and patient, treating everyone with respect, and when they taught the halacha they would teach the teachings of Beit Shammai as well as their own teachings. In fact, when they presented their own position in a debate between the teachings of Hillel and Shammai, they gave priority to the teachings of Shammai, teaching this position before their own.

1. How can the positions of both Hillel and Shammai be the words of the living God if they contradict each other?
2. If both positions are right, why does God need to announce a winner?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Moses' first response to Korach and his followers was to propose 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 Korach and his fellows claimed Moses did whatever he wanted, not was God wanted, let God decide who the true leader should be. 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.

At this point, the confrontation became yet more intense. For the first and only time in his life, Moses staked his leadership on the occurrence of a miracle. He 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." (Bamidbar 16:28–30)

He was immediately answered. No sooner had he finished than "the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them" (Bamidbar 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 (Bamidbar 17:16–24).

What resolved the dispute, in other words, was not a show of power but something altogether different. 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. The almond flowers recalled the gold flowers on the Menorah (Shemot 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" (Shemot 28:36). 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. The Priest does not rule the people; he blesses them. He is the channel through which God's life-giving energies flow. He connects the nation to the Divine Presence. What makes a spiritual leader is not ambition but humility. 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.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The Sages celebrated *machloket le-shem shamayim*, 'argument for the sake of heaven.' They epitomised it in the archetypal debates between Hillel and Shammai, about which it was said that *elu ve-elui divrei Elokim chayim*, 'these and these are the words of the living God.' The central document of rabbinic Judaism, the Babylonian Talmud, is written in the form of sequences of argument. The argument itself and the clarification of the issues involved is often more important than the conclusions reached. Rejected opinions are considered as closely as accepted ones. Indeed, the Talmud states that the rulings of the school of Hillel became authoritative because, among other things, they studied the views of their opponents as well as their own and stated them before their own.

Argument, for the Sages, was a deeply religious mode of discourse: not only argument between man and man, but even argument between man and God. The aggadic or interpretive literature of the Talmudic period turns the biblical conversations between man and God – Moses' plea

for the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf, for example, or Hannah's prayer for a child – into intense and dramatic confrontations which the rabbis termed *chutzpah kelapei shamaya*, audacity toward heaven. In this respect they were continuing a biblical tradition of argument between earth and heaven – we recall Abraham's dialogue over the fate of Sodom, Job's over his tragedy, Moses' and Jeremiah's over the justice of Providence. It is a highly distinctive tone of Jewish spirituality, one that embarrassed Philo and other Jewish philosophers, but one that remained close to the Jewish heart.

Traditional Alternatives, p. 202

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think argument is so central to Jewish culture, the halachic process, and even Jewish spirituality?
2. How can an argument between man and God be considered an 'argument for the sake of heaven'?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is the agenda behind an argument for the sake of heaven as opposed an argument not for the sake of heaven?
2. Can you think of examples of both types of arguments from your own life?
3. How were Hillel and Shammai's debates a paradigm example of an argument for the sake of heaven?
4. Why wasn't the earthquake enough to settle the dispute in the eyes of the people?
5. Why do you think Judaism's key texts are "anthologies of arguments"?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. An *argument for the sake of heaven* involves both sides striving to establish the truth. The losing side in an argument will gracefully accept defeat because the truth has been reached and that was their sole motivation for the argument. However an *argument not for the sake of heaven* is driven by ulterior motives such as honour and status. The loser in such an argument will feel the pain of defeat and find it hard to accept, because their sole aim has not been achieved.
2. Korach wanted the status and power that Moshe and Aaron had. He was jealous of the position and status that they had been given by God. Hillel and Shammai had only one goal in their debates – to decide on the halacha. This was their truth and while Shammai was defeated in all but five occasions, he accepted this because the truth of a halachic ruling had been established.
3. If we are honest with ourselves we can all find examples of arguments that we have had that have been less about finding the truth and more about winning the argument. Hopefully we can also find examples of arguments where we have gracefully accepted defeat because we were only interested in the question being debated.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Both positions are seen as 'right' and 'true' in the eyes of God. Neither is superior to the other (if one position was, then it would have disproven the other and there would have been a clear winner without a need for God to declare which was the halacha). Not all arguments are between truth and falsehood. Sometimes two truths can be in opposition.
2. Because this is a matter of normative halacha, we need to have a final decision so we can know how to act. God needed to announce which of the two legitimate positions is the one that was to become the normative halacha.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. The culture of debate and argument democratises Jewish knowledge and spirituality. It means that anyone can be part of the conversation. The Sages even extend this to standing face to face with God and challenging for justice or understanding. Whether the greatest Jewish leaders such as Moses and Abraham, or simple Jews such as Job or you and I, each has the right to stand before God and challenge and argue, within the parameters of deep faith in God.
2. If an argument for the sake of heaven is the pursuit of truth, then when Moses, Abraham and Job challenge God they are asking for an account of truth. This is a remarkable and unique spiritual paradigm for a personal relationship with God. Man can and should hold God accountable for truth and justice. However, this must also be within the framework of faith and a humility that recognises that not all of truth can be grasped by finite humanity.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
3. Because they were searching for the truth only and not interested in personal honour or status. This is clearly seen in the way they accepted the legitimacy of each other's position, accepting "defeat" with grace, because it was ultimately not seen as defeat, but rather victory in the search for truth. Beit Hillel especially demonstrated this in the way that they respected the opinion of their opponents, making it a priority to teach the opinions of Beit Shammai first.
4. Sometimes having truth on your side to win an argument is not the most important thing. The way you treat your opponent and allow room in society for those who feel excluded as a result of the outcome of an argument is more important. The more effective way to resolve conflict was demonstrated later. When all the leaders planted their rods, only Aaron's blossomed. This was a sign of life and light, rebirth and ultimately reconciliation.
5. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answer 1. "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." This empowers everyone to be part of the conversation in the search for truth.