



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בס"ד

קרח תש"ג
Korach 5780

How Not to Argue

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

There is a lot to be learnt by listening to the other side of the argument



PARSHAT KORACH IN A NUTSHELL

This week we read the story of Korach and his followers who rebelled against Moses and challenged his leadership. The entire generation of people who left Egypt with Moses was now aware that they would not live to enter the land of Israel. Korach took advantage of their shattered hopes and feelings of frustration. He gathered a rabble of trouble-makers – some from his own tribe, some from the tribe of Reuben, and others who had leadership positions in other tribes – and together they stood against the leadership of Moses and Aaron and questioned their authority and their motives.

The rebellion failed and the leaders of the rebellion ended up being swallowed by the ground. But the people continued to be restless and to complain. Finally, rods were set out, one for each tribe, and Aaron's rod blossomed miraculously, sprouting almonds, which was a message of peace and harmony. Then the people truly accepted the authority of Moses and Aaron.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Do you think Korach would have made a better leader than Moses?



THE CORE IDEA

The Sages said (in Pirkei Avot 5:17) that Korach's story is a great example of an argument *not* for the sake of heaven. What is an example of the right kind of argument? The Sages directed us to the schools of Hillel and Shammai, who argued about laws and ideas in the Torah, but who did so "for the sake of heaven". The Bartenura noted that the key difference between these two types of argument is that argument for the sake of heaven is *argument for the sake of truth*. Argument not for the sake of heaven is *argument for the sake of victory and power*, and these are two very different things.

Korach and his followers came from three different groups. Korach was from the tribe of Levi. Datan and Aviram came from the tribe of Reuben. And there were 250 leaders from different tribes who joined them. Each had their own complaint. The 250 leaders were angry that leadership roles had been taken from them after the sin of the Golden Calf and given instead to the tribe of Levi. Datan and Aviram felt it was unfair that their tribe – descendants of Jacob's

firstborn son Reuben – had been given no special status. Korach wanted to be a Kohen, and probably wanted to be Kohen Gadol, High Priest, in place of Aaron.

The rebels said to Moses and Aaron, "Why then do you *set yourselves above* the Lord's assembly?" Later, Datan and Aviram said to Moses, "And now you also want to *lord it over us!*" What the rebels revealed here is their true resentment: they wanted to be in charge. The three groups had nothing in common except that they each wanted to be leaders. Each of them wanted a more important or respected position than they currently held. In a word, they wanted power. This was an argument not for the sake of heaven.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How was the Korach rebellion's argument "not for the sake of heaven"? What did they really want?
2. What should be the motivation of a true leader? What would a leadership challenge "for the sake of truth" look like?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

There were five of us, sitting facing one another on the plane, and we were to be together for the next eight hours. Across the aisle was the British Prime Minister John Major and Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind. Opposite me was the leader of the opposition Tony Blair, and next to me, Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third party. I had been invited, as Chief Rabbi, to represent the Jewish community. It was Sunday, 5th November 1995, and we were on a plane of the Queen's Flight to attend the funeral of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who had led the Oslo peace process with the Palestinians, and who had been assassinated the previous night by a Jewish religious-nationalist zealot at a peace rally in Tel Aviv.

A normal commercial flight from London to Ben Gurion airport takes about 4 ½ hours, but this plane of the Queen's Flight, like an antiquated but very dignified limousine, travelled slowly, though in immense style, and needed to land halfway to refuel. The atmosphere was sombre. We all knew that a great man who had been pursuing peace had lost his life. War often turns ordinary people into heroes, while the pursuit of peace can make genuine heroes look like traitors to their own more nationalistic countrymen.

Half an hour into the flight, Paddy Ashdown turned to John Major and said, "John, here we are, leaders of three opposed parties, but we probably have more in common with one another here than we do with the extremists in our own parties. We've never sat together before like this. Let's talk honestly and openly about what we really believe about the biggest issues today." John Major, with a smile, willingly agreed, and for hour after hour they talked together as candid friends. It was possibly the only time such an extended conversation took place between the party leaders. For eight hours, I sat and listened to the closest British politics came to a team of rivals, sharing their deepest convictions with total openness and friendship. I cherish the memory of those hours because it showed me politics at its best.

From **Morality** by Rabbi Sacks (pp. 219-220)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is this story closer to a debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai than to Korach's story?
2. What do you think makes story exceptional?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

Listen carefully to what people accuse others of, and you will then know what they themselves want. Often their words reveal their own underlying resentments. For example, various empires over many centuries have accused Jews of wanting to dominate the world. Yet Jews have never wanted to dominate the world. Unlike almost any other long-standing civilisation, they never created or sought to create an empire. But the people who levelled this accusation against Jews belonged to empires which were beginning to crumble. They themselves wanted to dominate the world but knew they could not, so they attributed their desire to Jews (in the psychological process known as splitting-and-projection, the single most important phenomenon in understanding antisemitism). That is when they created antisemitic myths, the classic case being the protocols of the Elders of Zion, invented by writers or propagandists in Czarist Russia during the last stages of its decline.

What Korach and his fellow rebels wanted was what they attributed to Moses and Aaron, a form of leadership unknown in the Torah and radically incompatible with the value Moses embodied, namely humility. They wanted to "set themselves above" the Lord's assembly and "lord it over" the people. They wanted power.

What do you do when you seek not truth but power? You attack not the message but the messenger. You attempt to

destroy the standing and credibility of those you oppose. You attempt to de-voice your opponents. That is what Korach and his fellow rebels tried to do. So they accused Moses of setting himself above the congregation, of turning leadership into lordship.

They made other claims too, as we can infer from Moses' response. He replied, "I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them," implying that they had accused him of abusing his position for personal gain, misappropriating people's property. He said, "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea," implying that they had accused him of making up certain instructions or commands, attributing them to God when they were in fact his own idea.

The most extreme example is the accusation levelled by Datan and Aviram: "Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?" This is a forerunner of those concepts of our time: fake news, alternative facts, and post-truth. These were obvious lies, but they knew that if they said them often enough and at the right times, someone would believe them.

There was not the slightest attempt to set out the real issues: a leadership structure that left simmering discontent among the Levites, Reubenites and other tribal chiefs; a generation that

had lost all hope of reaching the promised land; and whatever else was troubling the people. There were real problems, but the rebels were not interested in truth. They wanted power.

Their aim, as far as we can judge from the text, was to damage Moses' credibility as a leader, to raise doubts among the people as to whether he really was receiving his instructions from God, and to so besmirch his character that he would be unable to lead in the future, or at least force him to capitulate to the rebels' demands. When you are arguing for the sake of power, truth doesn't come into it at all.

Korach was swallowed up by the ground, but his spirit is still alive and well, and in the unlikeliest of places – places like the British and American universities of today.

Arguments not for the sake of heaven have resurfaced in our time in the form of the “cancel” or “call-out” culture that uses social media to turn people into non-persons when they are deemed to have committed some wrong – sometimes genuinely so (sexual harassment for example), sometimes merely for going against the moral fashion of the moment. Particularly disturbing has been the growing practice of denying or withdrawing a platform at university to someone whose views are deemed to be offensive to another group.

This is a contemporary instance of arguments not for the sake of heaven. This is about abandoning the search for truth in favour of the pursuit of victory and power. It works by discrediting and devoicing – “cancelling” – an individual. A university is, or should be, the home of argument for the sake of heaven. It is where we go to participate in the collaborative pursuit of truth. We listen to views opposed to our own. We learn to defend our beliefs. Our understanding deepens, and intellectually, we grow. We learn what it means to care for truth.

The pursuit of power has its place, but not where knowledge has its home.

That is why the Sages contrasted Korach and his fellow rebels with the schools of Hillel and Shammai:

For three years there was a dispute between the schools of Shammai and Hillel. The former claimed, 'The law is in agreement with our views,' and the latter insisted, 'The law is in agreement with our views.' Then a Voice from Heaven (a bat kol) announced, 'These and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in accordance with the school of Hillel.'

Since the voice announced that both schools 'are the words of the living God', why was the school of Hillel chosen to have the law determined in accordance with their rulings? Because they were kind and modest, they studied both their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai, and they were even so humble as to mention the teachings of the school of Shammai before their own.

I believe that what is happening at universities, turning the pursuit of truth into the pursuit of power, silencing, demonising and no-platforming those with whom people disagree, is the Korach phenomenon of our time, and it is very dangerous indeed. An old Latin motto says that to secure justice, *audi alteram partem*, “Listen to the other side.” It is through listening to the other side that we walk the path to truth.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think people today are often unable to listen to the other side?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Here are the three principles of civility: [1] For there to be justice, all sides must be heard. [2] Truth on earth cannot aspire to be truth as it is in heaven. All truth on earth represents a perspective, and there are multiple perspectives. [3] The alternative to argument is violence.

That is why the argument must never cease.

Those are the conclusions I have reached since that long plane journey when I listened to three party leaders debating together as they flew to attend the funeral of a brave politician, assassinated by a zealot who did not believe in the democratic argument, and believed instead that politics can be dictated by the barrel of a gun.

Morality, p. 230



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Are the leaders in your country more similar to Hillel, Shammai, and Moses, or Korach?
2. Where can you see in society today arguments that are not "for the sake of heaven"?
3. Why is it so important to listen to the other side if you are sure you are right?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger.** Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Korach would not have made a good leader because, as he demonstrated clearly in this story, his main concern was his own prestige and power, and he did not have the best interests of the people at heart. Moses on the other hand was a selfless leader, known for his humility, and he dedicated his life to serving the people. He only had the best interests of the people at heart.

THE CORE IDEA

2. Korach and his followers were not arguing with Moses with pure intentions. They wanted power for themselves and they wanted to replace Moses and Aaron as the leaders of the nation. They were jealous that Moses and Aaron had influence and positions of leadership above them. They did not have the best interests of the people in mind, but rather they were trying to benefit themselves. They were uninterested in truth (such as who would be the better leader and who God wanted to lead the people), and they were only concerned with their own position, arguing for the power they lacked but yearned for.
3. A worthy leader dedicates their life to serving the people. Leadership challenges are not always a bad thing. If the challenger honestly believes they can serve the people better than the current leader, then a challenge may be appropriate (if it is also the will of the people, and in our case, God). The focus of good leadership must always be the good of the people.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. This conversation on the plane among these British politicians was between three politically opposed leaders who deeply disagreed with each other over important issues. However, they argued in this instance with respect and with an openness to hear the other positions. This was an argument that searched for truth rather than power or ego. It was a discussion with the intent to find the truth and not to achieve a political victory.
2. Sadly, it seems that today too many of the world's political leaders are simply in positions of leadership for their own interests, and their main objective is to stay in power at all costs. Often it does not seem like they are serving the interests of the people or acting in the pursuit of what is right and just. In our story, however, these leaders were arguing with each other in the pursuit of truth, and with an openness to listening to each other's ideas and beliefs.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. There could be a few different answers offered here. Perhaps people have become overly sensitive, feeling too deeply offended by positions they disagree with. Or perhaps they have become arrogant and over-confident with the conviction of their beliefs, and they refuse to even give any space to opinions they disagree with. Or perhaps they are scared that if they are exposed to other ideas they will be forced to re-evaluate their own cherished beliefs.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Make sure that the discussion of this question is "for the sake of heaven" and stays within the spirit of Hillel and Shammai and not Korach and his followers!
2. Universities used to be places where the discourse was a paradigm example of arguments for the sake of heaven and the pursuit of truth. Rabbi Sacks referred to how this is becoming less and less the case today, where there is no space for dissenting positions, and those with alternative voices are shot down and "cancelled". Similarly, the political discourse in many countries today can often be described as being not for the sake of heaven. The arena of the press and journalism is also under threat as the political discourse there becomes partisan and venomous. If we can take on board the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* this week, perhaps we can learn to listen more openly to each other.
3. Listening to opinions that are opposed to your own challenges you to grow and to think, calling on you to evaluate your opinion more fully, and helping you to articulate what you do believe in. It encourages humility and guards against arrogance and over-confidence. Openness to hearing other voices is also a moral ideal, showing respect to other people and their ideas.