

A Tale of two Controversies

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Korach*, three men named Korach, Dathan and Aviram, together with 250 followers, confront Moses and Aaron, saying:

You have gone too far! The entire congregation is holy and the Lord is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s assembly? [Numbers 16:3]

Korach, a Levite, wants to be High Priest, a position that went to Moses’ older brother Aaron. Moses responds: You are already a Levite, an exalted position. Why do you want more?

Is it not enough that the God of Israel has distinguished you [Levites] from the congregation of Israel to draw you near to Him, to perform the service in the Tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them? He drew you near, and all your brothers, the sons of Levi with you, and now you seek the priesthood as well? [Num. 16:9-10]

Then Moses proposes a test. Let the three rebels and their 250 acolytes, plus Aaron, offer incense, which only priests can offer, and we’ll see how God reacts. God’s reaction is swift:

[After the offering,] the earth beneath [the three rebels] opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, all of Korach’s people and all their property. They, and all they possessed, descended alive into Sheol. The earth covered them up and they vanished from the midst of the congregation. All Israelites around them fled at their shrieks, for they said, “The earth might swallow us [too]!” And a fire came forth from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who had offered the incense. [Num. 16:32-35]

Nothing happened to Aaron. This presumably proved he was a legitimate priest and the others were not.

Analysis

The Mishnah refers to this dispute as follows:

כָּל מַחֲלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוּפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוֹ הִיא מַחֲלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקֶת הַלֵּל וְשַׁמַּי. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחֲלָקֶת קֹרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Every controversy that is *leshem shamayim* -- for the sake of Heaven -- will endure. But one that is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. Which is a controversy that is for the sake of Heaven? The controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And which is a controversy that is not for the sake of Heaven? The controversy of Korach and all his followers. [Pirkei Avot 5:17]

A “controversy that endures” is one that results in long-term change for the better.

Hillel and Shammai were two Talmudic Sages who frequently held different opinions on matters of Jewish law and debated them forcefully. Why were their controversies for the sake of Heaven and the controversy between Korach and Moses was not?

1-Truth versus power

Hillel and Shammai wanted the truth, namely: What does God want us to do? Korach wanted power, namely: the High Priesthood.

2-Personal versus non-personal

The disputes of Hillel and Shammai were not personal. Korach’s was. He accuses Moses of nepotism, of corruption, of power-grabbing. His partners accuse Moses of plotting to kill the people:

Moses sent for Dathan and Aviram... but they said, “We will not come up! Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you also want to lord it over us?” [Num. 16:12-13]

Note the cheek of calling *Egypt* “a land flowing with milk and honey”! Note the unintended irony when the rebels said: “We will not come up!” [*Lo naaleh!*]: They spoke prophetically. They soon went *down*, underground!

On the other hand, the Talmud states:

Bet Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Bet Hillel, nor did Bet Hillel refrain from marrying women from Bet Shammai. This serves to teach you that they practiced affection and camaraderie between them, and fulfilled [the prophet Zechariah's teaching]:

Love truth and peace. [Zechariah 8:19]

[Yevamot 14b]

Wise people can disagree and still live together in harmony.

Rabbenu Bahya, from 14th-century Spain, writes that
[Korach] was “dressed” in jealousy... a disease for which there is no known therapy... a very vicious disease.

As an aside, wanting truth and not getting personal are not enough. The Talmud tells us why Bet Hillel eventually prevailed:

Rabbi Abba said, quoting Shmuel: For three years, Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai argued. One said “The halakha follows us” and the other [also] said “The halakha follows us”.

A heavenly voice was heard saying: “These and these are the words of the living God, but the halakha follows Bet Hillel.” ... Why? ... Because Bet Hillel were kind and gracious; they taught their own views as well as those of Bet Shammai; and even went so far as to teach Bet Shammai’s opinions first. [Eruvin 13b:10-11]

3-Relevant versus irrelevant dispute arguments

First, Korach lied about his motives. He claimed he was talking about equality, democracy, empowering all the people, etc., but he just wanted a high position for himself. Then he brought irrelevant arguments in the discussion, intended only to ridicule Moses in front of the people and cloud the issues at hand. For example, the Midrash says: [Numbers Rabbah 18:3]

-The Torah says:

Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them to make tzitzit for themselves [on the corners of their tallitot, and attach a blue string to each one]. [Num. 15:38]

Korach quickly said to Moses, “If the tallit is already all blue, is it exempt from [having] tzitzit?”

Moses said to him, “[Such a tallit] is required to have tzitzit.”

Korach said to him, “Since the tallit is all blue, why are four [blue] threads [in the tzitzit] required?”

-[Korach said:] If a house is full of [holy] books, is it exempt it from [having] a mezuzah [since the mezuzah contains only two passages from the Torah]?”

[Moses] said to him, “[Such a house] must have a mezuzah.”

[Korach] said to him, “Since the whole Torah has 275 parashiot and they do not exempt the house [from having a mezuzah], how can the one parasha in the mezuzah [fulfill the obligation]?”

-[Korach] also said to him, “These are things about which you have not been commanded. Rather you are inventing them [by taking them] out of your own heart.”

The Jerusalem Talmud adds:

At that moment, Korach said that the Torah is not from Heaven, nor is Moses a [true] prophet, nor Aaron a High Priest. [Sanhedrin Y 10:1]

Let us close the loop and answer Korach. First, blue dye was very expensive and only the rich could afford a fully blue tallit. So the single blue thread in the tzitzit (תְּכֵלֶת - *tekhelet* in Hebrew) acts as an equalizer, and everyone should have it. (However, most tzitzit today don't have it because the way to produce it is lost, although some claim to know it.) Second, the mezuzah is required to tell the outside world you are Jewish.

One could argue that Korach's questions were related to his initial argument that all are equal: Why should the whole tallit be lower than the blue string on the tzitzit, and why should the Torah scrolls in the house be lower than the mezuzah on the door? Moses' reply implies that there must be a leader even if all are equal.

By contrast, Shammai and Hillel stuck strictly to the topic of discussion in their debates.

4- Unity in goals versus no unity

The rebels were a mix of people with different goals, united only by their opposition to Moses and Aaron. The tribes were unhappy that leadership seemed to be passing only to the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Reuben in particular had good reason to be upset, since Reuben was Jacob's firstborn.

Indeed, the Mishnah says "the controversy between Hillel and Shammai", but does not say "the controversy between Korach and Moses"; instead it says "the controversy between Korach and all his followers". This alludes to disagreement between Korach and his partners. If there is no unity within a side, the controversy cannot be "for the sake of heaven". For example, the Talmud says that the second Temple fell because of infighting among the Jews while they opposed the Romans in battle -- *sin'at chinam* or "senseless hatred", as it calls it.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks likens the Korach movement to the ever-increasing anti-Israel activities in the world:

That is what is now happening in the campaign against Israel on campuses throughout the world, and in the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement in particular. Like the Korach rebellion, it brings together people who have nothing else in common. Some belong to the far left, a few to the far right; some are anti-globalists, while some are genuinely concerned with the plight of the Palestinians. Driving it all, however, are people who on theological and political grounds are opposed to the existence of Israel within any boundaries whatsoever, and are equally opposed to democracy, free speech, freedom of information, religious liberty, human rights, and the sanctity of life. What they have in common is a refusal to give the supporters of Israel a fair hearing... The flagrant falsehoods it sometimes utters – that Israel was not the birthplace of the Jewish people, that there never was a Temple in Jerusalem, that Israel is a “colonial” power, a foreign transplant alien to the Middle East – rival the claims of Dathan and Aviram that Egypt was a land flowing with milk and honey and that Moses brought the people out solely in order to kill them in the desert. Why bother with truth when all that matters is power? Thus the spirit of Korach lives on... Nothing is achieved by sacrificing truth to the pursuit of power – the way of Korach through the ages. [https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/korach/when-truth-is-sacrificed-to-power/]

Conclusion

But Korach still had a point, which was ultimately upheld. The priests, the Levites, the Sadducees, the Jewish aristocracy all lost power after the Second Temple was destroyed. Spiritual power became vested in the rabbis, who rise to their position thanks only to their own merit. The kohanim and leviim have only ceremonial roles. So, in that sense, Korach’s controversy did “endure”. Also, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe said that Korach’s desire for high spiritual office was, in and of itself, a positive thing; that we should desire and yearn for the highest ideals; that his objective was good even if his means were not. That also “endured”. To wit, he was rewarded with honorable descendants. They included his three sons, who composed eleven of the psalms [Ps. 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88] and the great prophet Samuel!

But Korach’s timing, motives and methods were wrong, and we must recognize that above all.

Shabbat shalom.