

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Korach – getting involved in machloket (disputes)

In this week’s Parsha of Korach we read about the dispute between Korach and his followers, and Moshe and Aharon. The charismatic Korach gathered a group of disenfranchised people with a populist claim: “The entire nation is holy, why did Moshe and Aharon elevate themselves above the people?” Korach’s claims threatened to destroy the unity of Bnei Yisrael. Hashem sent a clear message that Moshe and Aharon were acting in accordance with Divine instruction by punishing the protagonists with a miraculous death. Depending on the precise nature of their sin, some were consumed by a heavenly fire and some were swallowed up by the earth.

The Torah then seems to testify that there will never again be such a bitter dispute:

“...And there shall never again be like Korach and his assembly...” (Bamidbar 17:5)

This pasuk is difficult to understand. Surely there have been countless disputes since the time of Korach, some of which have been far more bitter and prolonged. We are all familiar with disputes and machloket in communities, organisations, families and in every aspect of life.

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot¹ lists the dispute of Korach and his assembly as the quintessential dispute that was not l’shem shamayim (for the sake of Heaven). Korach was driven by a selfish desire for honour. This is contrasted with the disputes between Hillel and Shammai which are prime examples of disputes for the sake of Heaven. Hillel and Shammai disagreed on a number of halachot² and they argued their points of view passionately. However their debating was purely for the sake of discovering Hashem’s truth. There was no personal animosity and the two groups interacted socially and intermarried freely.³

Machloket l’shem shamayim is praised. The Mishnah in Pirki Avot states that such disputes will have a constructive outcome. When the Torah testifies that there will never again be such a bitter dispute like the Korach dispute it is clearly referring to machloket that is **not** l’shem shamayim. However this distinction does not help us to answer our question on Bamidbar 17:5. Most of the disputes that we witness are certainly not l’shem shamayim. We still don’t understand how the Torah can state that there will never again be dispute like Korach and his assembly.

The Malbim⁴ was no stranger to disputes. He staunchly defended Orthodox Judaism against the rising Reform movement and he met with much opposition. During one such bitter dispute, his students quoted the above verse in Bamidbar 17:5. They asked their teacher how such a dispute could take place when the Torah promises that there will never again be such a bitter quarrel in

¹ Pirkei Avot 5:20.

² Actually, most of the disputes were between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, the students of Hillel and Shammai after the death of these two great leaders. Hillel and Shammai themselves only disagreed in a few areas.

³ Gemara, Yevamot 13a-b.

⁴ Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser (1809-1879), a master of Hebrew grammar and author of a famous commentary on the Tanach.

history?⁵ The Malbim explained this pasuk as meaning that Korach's dispute was unique in that there was no uncertainty or shades of grey. Moshe and Aharon were totally and absolutely correct. Korach and his assembly were 100% wrong. Hashem himself, through His miraculous interventions⁶, effectively testified as such. Thus the Malbim teaches that this pasuk is reassuring us that never again in history would there be a dispute that was not l'shem shamayim in which the merits of the case were black and white. In any dispute each party inevitably thinks it is 100% correct and the other party is totally wrong. However the Torah is testifying that this cannot be the case. Both parties have to assume some guilt.

Naturally, if we personally are involved in a dispute, we may presume that we are 100% correct. However, each of us needs to accept this message personally. There is a popular story about a Rabbi who gave a powerful sermon on mussar. The main focus of his shiur was that we each need to accept criticism ourselves and not try to pass the buck to someone else. As the Rabbi was leaving the hall after his shiur, he overheard a man in the audience turn to his wife and say "Did you hear that? The Rabbi's message was meant for you!"

Whenever we are involved in disputes, we have to realise that at least part of the blame rests with us. The Torah has testified that neither party will ever be 100% in the right. We may even be 99% right, but that means that we are still responsible for 1% and we should focus on our fault.

If we want to resolve a bitter, prolonged dispute, we can try the following process:

Step 1: Realise in our heart that we are at least partly to blame for the dispute.

Step 2: Try to identify what we did wrong.

Step 3: Avoid focusing on the other party's faults and accept that the other party may not apologise for their wrongdoing.

Step 4: Once we have genuinely achieved steps 1-3 we can make contact with the other party to apologise for our wrongdoing or offer some form of peace offering. Before making contact we should remind ourselves that the other party may or may not reciprocate with an apology.

Step 5: Forgive the other party with a full heart. (See Rabbi Twersky's book "Forgiveness" for tips on how to accomplish this).

If we can take responsibility for our own faults, without requiring the other party to do the same, we may be one step closer to replacing machloket with shalom.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to internalise the lesson that since the time of Korach there is no such thing as a dispute that is 100% black and white. We always share some measure of blame in any dispute.
2. Try to carry out the 5 step process outlined above.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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Note: as the majority of our readers are located outside of Eretz Yisrael we will be following the calendar of Parshiyot for Chutz L'Aretz.

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⁵ Tallelei Orot, Bamidbar p278, seen in "Making Peace" by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen on the aish.com website.

⁶ The Heavenly fire, the earth opening up to swallow the evildoers, the plague and later the miracle of the blossoming staff (see Bamidbar Chapter 17).

About Darchai Noam

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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