

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Korach  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Korach – Getting involved in machloket

In this week's Parsha of Korach we read about the dispute between Korach and his followers with 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. We are all familiar with disputes and machloket in communities, organisations, families and in every aspect of life.

The Mishnah in Pirkai Avot<sup>1</sup> lists the dispute of Korach and his assembly as the quintessential dispute that was *not* l'shem shamayim (i.e. it was *not* 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 that were lishmah i.e. for the sake of Heaven. Hillel and Shammai disagreed on a number of halachot<sup>2</sup> and they were passionate in arguing their perspectives. 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 even intermarried.<sup>3</sup>

Machloket l'shem shamayim is praised. The Mishnah in Pirkai 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 answer our question on the pasuk quoted above. Most of the disputes that we witness are certainly not l'shem shamayim. We still don't understand how the Torah can testify that there would never again be a dispute like Korach and his assembly.

The Malbim<sup>4</sup> was no stranger to disputes. He staunchly defended Orthodox Judaism against the rising Reform movement, and in doing so he met with much opposition. During one such bitter dispute, his students quoted the above verse from Bamidbar. They asked their teacher, the Malbim, how such a dispute could take place when the Torah promised that there would never again be such a bitter quarrel in history?<sup>5</sup> The Malbim explained that they had misunderstood the pasuk. The pasuk actually

<sup>1</sup> Pirkai Avot 5:20.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Gemara, Yevamot 13a-b.

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

<sup>5</sup> Tallelei Orot, Bamidbar p278, seen in “Making Peace” by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen on the aish.com website.

means 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 interventions<sup>6</sup>, 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 completely 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 are at least partially wrong and have to bear some responsibility.

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 from the Torah 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 on 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!" We can't be that man in the story! The message of our pasuk is meant for each one of us personally!

Whenever we are involved in disputes, we have to realise that at least part of the blame rests with us. Even the fact that we find ourselves in a dispute in the first place means on some level that we are partly responsible, albeit perhaps indirectly. 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 the 1%. Thus, we should focus on our part in it all.

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 have done wrong.

Step 3: Avoid focusing on the other party's faults and accept that the other party may not be willing to 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 compensation for it or some other 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. If we are involved in a dispute we must realise that we share and must bear some of the blame.
2. If involved in a dispute, try to carry out the 5 step process outlined above. (Note that this is not limited to legal disputes, but also applies to personal disputes such as family, spousal, parental etc.)

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> 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).