

KORACH (NUMBERS 16:1-18:32)

There's More to Being Right Than Just Not Being Wrong

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Every rabbi has a few. There's always someone looking to challenge the leadership with complaints of imagined misdeeds. Moses certainly had his share of detractors. Most noteworthy in the group are Dathan and Abiram, adversaries since Egyptian days, and Korach, the star rabble-rouser of this week's Torah Portion.

Korach has the dubious distinction of having a commandment named after him: Rav tells us in the Talmud (Sanhedrin, 110A) "Whoever reinforces a dispute violates a commandment, as it is written, '*...and he should not act like Korach and his assembly...*'(Numbers, 17:5)"

In a manner that is reminiscent of election year advertising, Korach et al did everything possible to discredit Moses. At issue was the Divine authority of Moses. Korach, a cousin of Moses, resented the fact that another cousin had been chosen for a position of authority. Rather than accepting this decision as G-d's will, Korach attacked His messenger: "*All of the people are holy. Why are you (Moses and Aaron) setting yourselves above G-d's congregation?*" (Ibid, 16:3)

Korach couldn't admit that he was motivated by personal ambition. Instead, he became a crusader for "the people":

"Moses appointed himself king and then made his brother the High Priest. He has fabricated illogical commandments and has falsely spoken in G-d's name."

The smear campaign went so far as to accuse Moses of adultery. Korach gathered 250 challengers to demonstrate against Aaron's Priesthood.

Moses' response? He proposed a litmus test for qualifications as the High Priest.

Only a Kohain, or Priest, could offer incense in the Temple. An offering by a non-Kohain would incur Divine punishment. Moses suggested that all who aspire to take over Aaron's job should show up the next day and try to offer incense. A "disclaimer" accompanied the suggestion. Moses warned them that if, in fact, Aaron's Priesthood was ordained by G-d, and was not a dynasty building effort by Moses, the incense burners would be punished by G-d. In the end, Korach and his cohorts were swallowed alive by the earth.

So much for Korach. He was a jealous man, offended by having been passed over for a job he wanted. Therefore, he incited others to rally against the "Moses/Aaron Regime." Who were Dathan and Abiram, and what was THEIR complaint?

Dathan and Abiram were brothers, members of the Tribe of Reuben. They were not Levites, and had no personal aspirations to ascend to the Priesthood. They were neighbors of Korach, and they were critics of Moses who always appreciated a good fight!

Remember back in Exodus, Chapter 4, when Moses tried to break up a fight between two Hebrews? They turned on him, and reported him to the Pharaoh for killing an Egyptian. Those two men were Dathan and Abiram. When Pharaoh refused to release the slaves, increasing their work quota instead, Dathan and Abiram criticized Moses. When Moses told the people not to leave manna overnight, guess who disobeyed? That's right, D&A! When Moses told the people that manna wouldn't fall on Shabbos, Dathan and Abiram sneaked out in the middle of the night, spreading manna to make Moses look like a liar!

To say the least, there was no love lost between Moses and these two fellows. It seems almost as if Dathan and Abiram had dedicated their lives to making Moses miserable. Every step of the way, they insulted and undermined him. After reading of the antics of these two despicable creatures, one is almost tempted to applaud the Torah's report of their descent into the Eternal Abyss.

Moses, however, viewed things differently. He sent a message to Dathan and Abiram, requesting a meeting. He wanted to convince them not to rebel against the Word of G-d. Their response was that they would sooner have their eyes plucked out than meet with Moses!

Okay, Moses, are you angry yet? Ready to let these two characters get their just desserts? Not quite. The next day, as Korach's followers burnt their incense, Moses went personally to speak to Dathan and Abiram, making one final attempt at talking some sense into them. He wanted to save them from Korach's fate. He was met with verbal abuse from them, as well as from their wives and children. Insulting Moses was the last thing they ever did...

Why did Moses keep going back to Dathan and Abiram? They were obviously malcontents who had made a lifetime project of opposing Moses. Why didn't he just ignore them and let them get what was coming to them? Reish Lakish, in the passage from the Talmud quoted above, answers the question. Had Moses not made the personal trip to visit Dathan and Abiram, he would have violated the rule against reinforcing a dispute. He would, ironically, be in violation of the commandment, " *...and he should not act like Korach and his assembly!*"

This is not at all clear. How can one compare the righteous Moses to Korach, a vile and disgraceful man who caused nothing but trouble for the Nation of Israel? Is it fair to expect Moses to try to make peace with two such vicious enemies as Dathan and Abiram and to say he's like Korach if he doesn't? If anything, he should have let them sink into the ground, and good riddance! THEY were the ones who had reinforced the dispute by refusing to meet with Moses!!

We can see from this how far we are required to go to avoid "*Machlokes*"--disputes. Disharmony is so damaging that we are required to go to great extremes to avoid it.

Many years ago, when I was a student in Yeshiva, I physically stopped another student from doing something that was very dangerous. He was extremely insulted by the fact that I had pushed him around. My Rebbe asked me to apologize. Apologize? I was incredulous! He endangered himself and others, and I should apologize to him??!!! My Rebbe explained to me that there are sometimes many factors behind what causes people to do what they do. Since this young man's personality was such that he was easily offended, perhaps it would be appropriate for ME to make the first move. In other words, I WAS REQUIRED TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP toward making peace, BECAUSE I WAS ABLE TO.

How many disputes go on for years because no one is willing to make the first step toward settling things? We've all heard of the Hatfields and the McCoys. How about the Goldbergs, Schwartzes, and Shapiros (names coincidental) who don't even remember why they are not speaking to each other?

Moses never did a thing to hurt Dathan and Abiram in any way. THEY were the creators of their conflict. Yet, he felt a need to pursue peace. He felt that if he wouldn't make one last-ditch effort to settle his argument with them, he would be taken to task for continuing the fight.

Are we that free of guilt in any of our disputes that we can afford to wait around for the other person to make peace?

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz