



5 Ways

to argue 'for the sake of heaven'

How do you approach tensions and differences of opinion in family, in parish, in community life? Most of us have a 'Korah' within, which needs to be identified and softened with the humility of Moses. Disputes 'for the sake of Heaven' are those that place love of God and others before 'my sake.' Consider these five tips.

1. Contact the other. Pick up the phone. Meet for coffee. Talk face to face. Married couples, hold hands when you argue. Distance can lead us to 'demonize' the other; contact helps us to 'humanize' the other.

2. Listen. Don't presume, pre-judge, or say, 'He's always like that.' Listen with compassion. Affirm common ground. Be alert to the unique vantage point of the other.

3. Surrender. 'Let go' of ego, of the need to be seen as 'right,' of the need to be recognized, of the temptation to bad-mouth the other, of

past hurts that color our view of the present.

4. Pray. Call upon the Lord to empower you with all the graces you need; love, patience, humility, courage... Pray especially for openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, for the gift of discernment.

5. Choose your battles wisely. Choose your words carefully. Combat the argument, not the person. Place yourself in the other's shoes. Seek solutions that include rather than reject the other's participation. And keep a healthy sense of humor!



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 16:1—18:32

Korach

Why reflect on Torah?

We begin with a statement from the *Mishnah* (a collection of Jewish laws and sayings):

"Any dispute which is for the sake of Heaven, its end will endure. But if it's not for the sake of heaven, its end will not endure. Which is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? That's the dispute of Hillel and Shammai. And which isn't for the sake of Heaven? That's the dispute of Korah and all his gang" (Avot 5:19)

This quote refers to a famous dispute in Jewish history between two Sages, Hillel and Shammai. Both were learned in Torah, but they differed in approach. Shammai favored a restrictive interpretation of Torah, whereas Hillel favored a flexible one. While the disciples of each school debated fiercely, rabbinic opinion eventually ruled in favor of Hillel. Even so, the tradition maintained respect for Shammai, saying, 'the words of this one and the words of that one are both the word of the living God' (TB Eruvin 13b).

This inclusive approach recognizes that both are motivated by an honest search for truth, and that the principles each hold must be held in healthy tension, a tension that must continually be brought to light and 'will endure,' according to the *Mishnah*, because it is 'for the sake of heaven.' And what of the reference to 'Korah and all his gang' in the above quote? Read on...



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Numbers 16:1—18:32

In today's Torah portion we see Korah rallying 250 of Israel's best against Aaron and Moses, challenging their right to hold priestly office and leadership. After reading this colorful story in Numbers 16, and after visiting the front page of this leaflet, join us in asking, "Is the dispute between Korah and Moses/Aaron 'for the sake of heaven'?"

Tasting Torah

"They assembled against Moshe and Aharon and said to them: *Too much is yours! Indeed, the entire community, the entirety of them, are holy, and in their midst is YHWH! Why then do you exalt yourselves over the assembly of YHWH?*" (Numbers 16:3; Fox).

What does Korah claim? That the entire community is holy. And what does he question? Why Aaron should be elevated. What do you think of Korah's statements?

Touching Torah

In themselves these are reasonable questions! The holiness of Israel is declared by God in the Book of Exodus. And the 'elevation' of an individual to the role of High Priest should never be taken lightly and only in keeping with God's will and the wellbeing of the community. Surely the community has the right and responsibility to be concerned about who undertakes such a role. Why, then, is Moses so aggrieved? Why does God treat Korah and his supporters so harshly?

Eybeschütz (18th c. Talmudic scholar) finds an answer by carefully examining the statement in the *Mishnah* (see page 1). If Hillel and Shammai opposed each other in dispute, why doesn't the wording of the text place Korah and Moses in opposition? Instead it places Korah against 'all his gang.' Says Eybeschütz, "The *mishnah* is telling us that there was internal dissension and everyone involved in the rebellion was in it for his own glorification. Thus we see that their intention was not for the sake of Heaven."¹

Depthing Torah

Maimonides draws a similar conclusion: the problem with the dispute was the ego-driven mindset of Korah. He and his gang were motivated by their own self-interest and blind ambition rather than by the desire for truth and the wellbeing of the community.

We all know of situations where a group, community or political party disintegrates because of internal factions and in-fighting. According to the sages, Korah's cause was doomed for the same reason. While his arguments had a certain coherence, his intentions were divisive. This is why the *mishnah* places him against 'his gang' rather than against Moses.

What then of Korah's dispute with Moses? By implication, this dispute is 'for the sake of heaven.' Spirited debate about the relationship between the elevation of the individual and the unity of the community 'will endure' for it is part of maintaining balance and health within a community.

Doing Torah

In a pluralistic society the diversity of experiences and perspectives can be enriching and stimulating. They can also give rise to controversy and tension, in homes and parishes as much in parliaments and bishops' conferences. How do we respond to such tensions? Discuss the lessons and practical insights that arise from today's Torah discussion. Mention at least one that you will apply to your everyday life.



Faith and Life

How might Korah have presented his concerns differently, 'for the sake of heaven'? Describe the scene as you imagine it.

Think too of a situation of conflict in your own life which might have benefited from the wisdom of scripture and the sages. Perhaps it is not too late to try a different approach?

1. See Cherry, 154.

Bibliography: Cherry, *Torah Through Time* (Philadelphia, 2007); Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda); Wylene, *Seventy Faces of Torah* (NY, 2005).