

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.



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.



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.



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.



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.



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!

The *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

This week our focus is the rebellious figure of Korah in the Book of Numbers. We begin with a statement from the *mishnah* (an ancient 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; quoted in Cherry, 153).

This quote refers to a famous dispute in Jewish history between two Sages, Hillel and Shammai. Both were learned in Torah, but 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. Cf. Job 33:14).

This inclusive approach, even while settling the dispute in favor of one party, 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 Num. 16, and after visiting the front page article of this leaflet, join us in asking, "Is the dispute between Korah and Moses/Aaron 'for the sake of heaven'?"

(1) Eybeschutz: 18th C. Polish Rabbi and Talmudic scholar. Quoted in Cherry, 154.

Sources: Cherry, *Torah Through Time* (Philadelphia, 2007); Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1994); Wylen, *Seventy Faces of Torah* (NY, 2005).

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?" (Num. 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?

Eybeschutz finds an answer by carefully examining the statement in the *mishnah* (see p.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 Eybeschutz, "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.

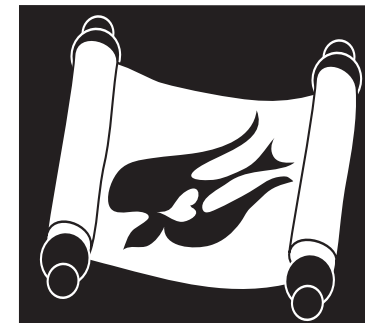
We all know of situations where a group, community or political party disintegrates because of internal factions and in-fighting. According to the Sages, Korah's cause was doomed for the same reason. While his arguments had a certain coherence, his intentions were divisive. This is why the *mishnah*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

We live in tumultuous times where the plurality of ideas and lifestyles are often the source of debate and division, in homes and parishes as much in parliaments and bishops' conferences. 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.

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



Faith & Life

I was socializing after a church function, and as I stood chatting with a small group of people, one of them started to verbally attack the bishops with vehemence. Whatever the merit of his concern, it was tainted by a complete lack of compassion and respect. We shuffled uncomfortably, realizing that this man (we had only just met him) was perhaps displaying more of his own problems than that of the bishops. But one of our number reacted promptly. 'Excuse me for interrupting,' he said, politely but firmly. 'But I honestly feel that I cannot stand here and listen to you destroying the characters of these men.' And with that he walked away. The circle broke up pretty quickly after that.