



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Korach 5771

By Jimmy Taber

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"...and we argued passionately but always rested assured that our arguments were indeed 'for the sake of heaven.'"

These words, used to close the graduation ceremony for my cohort from Brandeis University's Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program, struck me as especially thought provoking. The quote references a passage in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Ancestors, which reads: "Any dispute for the sake of heaven will have enduring value, but any dispute not for the sake of heaven will not have enduring value."¹

As an ethical guide to our debates, arguments and discourse, this passage is quite enigmatic. What does it mean to argue for, or not for, 'the sake of heaven'? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interprets this distinction as a dichotomy between "an argument for the sake of truth" and "an argument for the sake of victory."² In other words, an argument for the sake of heaven is motivated by the pursuit of the greater good, while its inverse stems from a desire for personal gain.

Pirkei Avot itself references this week's *parshah* in its illumination of the phrase, explaining that an example of an argument not for the sake of heaven can be found in "the dispute of Korach and all his company."³ *Parshat Korach* opens with the Levite Korach challenging the authority of Moses and Aaron to lead the Israelite community. He says, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?"⁴ Infuriated by the confrontation, God opens the earth and swallows Korach and his followers.⁵

What about Korach's challenge to Moses and Aaron made it "not for the sake of heaven"? Checking the power of leaders to preserve equality within a community is generally positive. According to the consensus among traditional commentators, however, Korach was not seeking true equality. Rather, he actually sought to remove Moses and Aaron from leadership in favor of himself.⁶ His motivations were selfish and his actions ultimately were not designed to benefit the community as a whole.

As activists, this message is particularly relevant: our work is fundamentally based in disagreement, as we work to change or modify the status quo to create social change. Our strategies to accomplish this often take the form of argument, either explicitly or implicitly, with those who favor things the way they are or have a different vision for change. We write editorials, post to blogs and seek to organize others to promote our perspective; all the while, actively pushing for our vision of our community and the world.

¹ Pirkei Avot 5:17.

² Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks. *The Koren Siddur*. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem, 2009. p. 673.

³ Pirkei Avot 5:17.

⁴ Numbers 16:3.

⁵ Numbers 16:32.

⁶ Rabbi Charles Savenor. *JTS Torah Commentary*. 1 July 2006. <http://www.jtsa.edu/PreBuilt/ParashahArchives/5766/korah.shtml>

In this age, when our words and actions are visible to everyone we know through social media, it is important to ensure that we remain motivated by truth and not victory. Indicators that our efforts have gained traction—like “likes” on our Facebook posts or comments on our blog posts—are a good thing, but tallying likes, tweets, views and comments as an end in itself inappropriately places us, as individuals, at the center of our work. Instead, we must be driven by a desire to create change for the sake of the community, rather than for the sake of our own reputations as changemakers. To be motivated by self aggrandizement leads to arguments without merit that ultimately damage the social justice community.

Pirkei Avot provides us with a model for the ideal debate, singling out the disagreements between Hillel and Shammai as illustrative of “arguments for the sake of heaven.” Though these dueling schools maintained conflicting opinions about everything from how to light Chanukah candles to what constitutes grounds for divorce, Pirkei Avot maintains that their vigorous rivalry was always motivated by the pursuit of truth, not glory. If those on both sides of our contemporary social justice struggles would be similarly driven, victory would become irrelevant and we could all unite in our desire to move our entire community forward.



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