



פרשת קורח/5781 Parashat Korach by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein on Divrei Torah on Jerusalem 5781

## The Debates of Yerushalayim

The events of this week's parsha are held up forever more as a classic example of a divisive and self-serving form of argument. When the Mishna looks for an example of an "argument not for the sake of heaven" it points to the argument of "Korach and his followers." By contrast, the debate between Hillel and Shammai are highlighted as the paradigmatic "argument for the sake of heaven."<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, the debates seem similar. Similar to Hillel and Shammai, Korach seemed to have centered his argument with Moshe as questions about halachot. What is the difference between the debates of Hillel and Shammai about a myriad of halachik minutia and the questions Korach asked Moshe regarding why a garment that is entirely blue requires a string of techelet or a room filled with Torah scrolls requires a mezuzah?

The Mishna is teaching us that the key difference is what motivates the parties of the debate. Even though ostensibly Korach was having a "Torah debate" with Moshe, nonetheless, it led to horrible results due to his selfish pursuit of power. Hillel and Shammai, though, despite the vociferousness of their debates, were motivated with a desire to find the truth of God's Torah.

This however, leads to another problem. How is one to know what his deep and subconscious motivations are? Everyone rationalizes to themselves that they are fighting for God's sake? Rav Ovadya Yosef<sup>2</sup> answers that a key factor is how one feels regarding the opposing party. When everyone realizes that the other party is pursuing God's truth which stands above all the parties, they will love each other even more after the debate. This is vividly depicted in the following Talmudic passage:

<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 5:17.

<sup>2</sup> Heard in a parsha shiur from Rabbi Shalom Rosner.



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Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba says: Even a father and his son, or a rabbi and his student, who are engaged in Torah together in one gate become enemies with each other due to the intensity of their studies. But they do not leave there until they love each other.<sup>3</sup>

The realization that they passionately share a single mission will bring them together.

A person who is motivated by selfish concerns, though, will see his love and respect for the other party decrease with time. His ultimate goal is self-glorification and therefore even if the content of the debate is about Torah, he will see the other party as the opposition that stands in his way and must be squashed. Their stature will decrease in his eye and he will become annoyed by their very presence. Such was the position of Korach vis-à-vis Moshe.

With this background we can better understand why the Torah requires the Sanhedrin to be seated in Yerushalayim. Torah scholars are known for their penchant for debate and argumentation as this is the best way to discover the truth of Torah. Certainly, seventy of the generations most elite scholars will not see eye to eye on all issues and arguments will ensue. How can the Torah ensure that these debates always remain within the realm of “arguments for the sake of heaven” and not, heaven forbid, even a little for the self-aggrandizement of the particular sage?

One method, perhaps, is to situate the Sanhedrin in Yerushalayim. Sitting in God’s city where His presence palpably felt, will keep God at the forefront of the judges’ minds. When they engage in judicial research and debate they will feel God’s helping hand guide them in the correct direction. In this setting, there is little chance that an argument will be influenced, even every so slightly, by egotistical elements. In Yerushalayim, their debates will be “arguments for the sake of heaven.”

<sup>3</sup> Kiddushin 30b. Translation from sefaria.org.



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