Conversations, not Diatribes: Thoughts for Parashat Korah, June 23, 2012

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Here are two views on fairness; with which one do you agree more?

A. It is only fair that those who are wealthier should share with those who have less. The essential health of a society is based on compassion and caring, a spirit of responsibility for all members of society.

B. It is only fair that people should be allowed to keep what they earn through their own hard work. The essential health of a society is based on respect for individual rights and individual choices.

Those who opt for A are most likely to be political liberals. Those who choose B are most likely to be conservatives.

Depending on one's view of fairness, one will favor particular policies relating to such things as welfare, benefits for illegal immigrants, role of government, taxation, foreign aid etc.
Some will view contemporary government as fostering neglect of basic social, educational and health needs of the weakest members of society; others will view it as fostering creeping socialism. Some will claim that the government doesn't intervene enough to help all members of society; others will argue that the government is too invasive and is infringing on our personal autonomy. Some will blame our society's ills on the "greed" of Wall Street; others will blame the "lazy anarchists" who don't work productively and who want to live off of the labor and enterprise of others.

Which view is correct?

Actually, there is truth in both positions. A problem arises, though, when demagogues and ideologues of either side assume that they are entirely wise and virtuous and that the others are entirely misguided and wicked. Radical liberals and radical conservatives are so convinced that Fairness and Truth are on their side, they do not really give heed to the opinions of the other side. As political

views becomes more polarized, increasing numbers of people talk and listen only to those with whom they agree. Instead of reasoned public discourse, we often hear strident shouting matches where each side vilifies the other.

Dr. Jonathan Haidt, in his book “The Righteous Mind,” offers considerable insight into why good people are divided by politics and religion. He advises us to become aware of why we hold our moral views, and why others might hold views that differ from ours. He writes: “We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning. This makes it difficult—but not impossible—to connect with those who live in other matrices….So the next time you find yourself seated beside someone from another matrix…don’t just jump right in. Don’t bring up morality until you’ve found a few points of commonality or in some other way established a bit of trust…We’re all stuck here for a while, so let’s try to work it out (p. 318).”

In this week’s Torah portion, we read of a full blown rebellion among the ancient Israelites. Korah and his cohorts arose against the leadership of Moses. The rebels were masters of demagoguery. They protested to Moses: “All the congregation is holy and God is in their midst? Why do you lord over the congregation of God?” Factions arose among the Israelites. Tensions reached the breaking point.

Ultimately, Korah and his followers were miraculously swallowed up by the earth. Yet, even after this divine vindication of Moses’ leadership, the people murmured against him and Aaron: “you have killed God’s people.” Peoples’ “gut feelings” were in control of their “strategic reasoning.” Once they had been fired up by the oratory and demagoguery of Korah and company, they were not receptive to other points of view.

It is natural and normal for people to have different outlooks and to approach life from different moral matrices. But when we assume that all truth and righteousness is on our side, and that there is no truth or righteousness on the other side—then we enter into hostile relationships that are destructive to the overall fabric of society.

It is healthy for society to have liberals and conservatives, and for both sides to air their views passionately and sincerely. Yet it is essential that both sides actually listen to each other, and see what they can learn from each other. Instead of shouting matches, we need to engage in calm conversation where we can build on those values we all share. And when we inevitably have unbridgeable differences of opinion, let us not allow these differences to undermine our basic civility and decency.

“We’re all stuck here for a while, so let’s try to work it out.”

Angel for Shabbat