Criticism or Contempt: Thoughts for Parashat Korah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Korah

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This week's Torah portion begins with the words "Vayikah Korah," and Korah took. But the verse never tells us what Korah took!

Our classic commentators offered their explanations. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra opines that Korah "took men" with him in fomenting rebellion against Moses and Aaron. Rashi explains that Korah "took himself to one side" in order to dissent from the current Israelite leadership. Ramban explains that Korah "took counsel with his heart" to rise in rebellion.

Perhaps, though, the Torah is teaching us something else. By not stating what Korah took, the Torah is in effect saying: Korah took....nothing! Korah gave the appearance of taking bold action, but in fact he offered nothing but bluster. He had nothing positive to suggest. Korah is good at complaining, he is an effective demagogue: but he had no actual agenda. The Torah lists his grievances but does not list any of his plans for improving the lot of the Israelites. Korah and the other rebels never disclose how their leadership would be better than that of Moses and Aaron.

The Pirkei Avot (5:21) distinguishes between the types of disputes conducted by Hillel and Shammai and the dispute generated by Korah and his cohorts against Moses and Aaron. The debates of Hillel and Shammai were "in the name of Heaven." The dispute of Korah was "not in the name of Heaven." The usual understanding of this passage is that Hillel and Shammai were not arguing for their own personal glory but in order to clarify the halakha. Even when they disagreed on particular rulings, they both accepted the halakhic system and worked within it. On the other hand, Korah and the other rebels were not

motivated by an honest search for truth, but by the desire to gain personal power. Their rebellion was not for the sake of Heaven but for their own selfish goals.

We might refine this explanation by considering two words: criticism and contempt. Hillel and Shammai were critical of each other's views on certain matters. They marshaled arguments to bolster their own views and to refute the views of the other. Criticism aims at undermining the arguments of the opponent, not at discrediting the opponent's character. People who are critical of each other's viewpoints can still sit together and offer their cases and refutations. Even if neither side is convinced to change his/her mind, the debate can be civil and respectful.

Contempt is something different. A contemptuous opponent is not interested in engaging in serious discussion or debate, but rather in assassinating his opponent's character. He does not offer arguments to bolster his views or to refute his opponent's arguments. Rather, he attacks his opponent's character. He wants to demonstrate that he is superior and his opponent is inferior. He speaks and acts with contempt. This was the approach of Korah's cohorts Datan and Aviram toward Moses. They sought to discredit Moses in the eyes of the people, to malign his character and his leadership. They were not interested in a disinterested dialogue with Moses on the best way to lead the Israelites; Datan and Aviram even refused to appear before Moses when he summoned them. They were contemptuous.

When people—individually, communally, nationally—have disagreements, they can engage in serious discussion and dialogue even if the parties are critical of each other's positions. Each can offer arguments and refutations. Both sides—even if holding very different positions—can still find a common ground and can see themselves as working toward one goal. But when people—individually, communally, nationally—are contemptuous of the other side, then the basis for discussion, debate and reconciliation is undermined. The contemptuous party or parties are not at all interested in dialogue or debate; they are interested in destroying the other party. They see themselves as being superior; they are above discussion or criticism; their opponents are discredited and dehumanized.

And this may be the inner meaning of "Vayikah Korah," and Korah took…nothing. Korah and his cohorts did not come to criticize Moses and Aaron but to contemptuously displace them. When people offer contempt instead of criticism, they essentially offer nothing of value. They bring nothing to the table except hatred and self-righteousness. Contemptuous people are dangerous and

destructive...but ultimately end up by being swallowed up by the forces of truth.

Angel for Shabbat