Healthy and Unhealthy Controversy: Thoughts for Parashat Korah

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Korah

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The Pirkei Avot describes the controversy of Korah and his cohorts to have been "not for the sake of Heaven." Their goal was to overthrow the leadership of Moses and Aaron, in the hope of seizing political power for themselves. They did not offer a positive agenda; rather, they preyed on the fears and frustrations of the public.

When controversies are "not for the sake of Heaven"—but rather for the sake of personal gain and egotistical gratification—they are resolved by a show of power. The side which is stronger defeats the opponent; the controversy is over; history continues. These controversies are a zero sum game. One side wins, one side loses.

The Pirkei Avot contrasts the Korah model of controversy with that of the debates between Hillel and Shammai. Those disputes were "for the sake of Heaven." Neither Hillel nor Shammai was seeking personal power or glory. Each was presenting his interpretation of the Torah and his application of halakha. Each had cogent arguments to support his view. Although they disagreed strongly on various issues, they were not opponents out to destroy each other but were colleagues in search of truth. The Talmud reflects this idea when it states that both of their views "were the words of the living God." In such debates, a ruling must be reached so that people will know what the law requires. Yet, the "losing" side has not really lost. His opinion is still quoted, still taken seriously. While it did not prevail then, it might prevail at another time or in another context.

Hillel and Shammai ultimately were on the same side—on the side of truth, on the side of Heaven. Their controversies reflected honest and well-reasoned

differences of opinion. What they shared in common far outweighed their relatively few differences of opinion.

Just as in antiquity, we have our share of controversies today. Some are clearly in the category of Korah controversies—not for the sake of Heaven. People fight for power, seek to destroy their opponents, give vent to their egotistical ambitions in cruel and ruthless ways. These controversies are resolved through power struggle. The stronger side will win; the weaker side will be wiped out or forced to back down or surrender completely.

We also have controversies that are more akin to those of Hillel and Shammai. As long as the disputants realize they are ultimately on the same side, these controversies can be healthy aspects of our intellectual and cultural lives. We can weigh both sides calmly and reasonably. We can disagree on various points of theology or philosophy, and still remain respectful and friendly to each other.

A problem arises, though, when theological and philosophical debates transform themselves into battles for power that call for the total defeat of opponents. On the surface, these controversies may seem to be “for the sake of Heaven”; yet, they are in fact fueled by egotism and the desire to crush opposition. Disputants in such controversies do not see the opinions of their opponents as being “words of the living God,” but as blasphemies that cannot be tolerated in any way. When theological and philosophical disagreements slip into the category of Korah-controversies, this leads to violence and terrorism. Instead of being reflections of a search for truth, they become vehicles for oppression, fueling the overwhelming urge to crush those who dissent.

In his essay, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” Sir Isaiah Berlin dealt with the question of how we deal with theological and philosophical disagreements. He rejected “relativism” which posits that all arguments have equal weight, that everything is a matter of personal choice and preference. No, the categories of truth and falsehood exist. Not every viewpoint has equal legitimacy. Yet, Berlin favored what he called “pluralism”, an acceptance that different people might come to legitimate differences of opinion without seeing each other as mortal enemies or opponents. In his view, this pluralism is “the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other.” In other words, I may be convinced that I have the real truth, but I may still see that others—who do not share my understanding of truth—are good, sincere and thoughtful people trying to do their best. I can learn from them, respect them, and be friendly with them. We are disputants—not enemies.

In distinguishing between the Korah-type controversies and the Hillel-Shammai-type controversies, the Pirkei Avot was providing insight on the nature of human conflict. By juxtaposing them, it may have been alluding to the thin line between these two types of controversies. Power struggles can dress themselves up as religious debates; theological and philosophical disputes can be mere camouflages for egotistical and unsavory oppression of opponents.

Perhaps if we can learn to see our conflicts with others in the Hillel-Shammai model, we can develop a more harmonious religious and social discourse. This does not call on us to surrender our notion of truth; but only to recognize that other good, honest and fine people have the right to see things differently than we do. And perhaps if the public at large would adopt the Hillel-Shammai model, this might impact on the politicians, warriors, terrorists and oppressors who follow the Korah-model and who strew so much grief and bloodshed on our world.

Healthy controversy reflects an honest search for truth. Unhealthy controversy reflects the desire for power and ego gratification. Let us be sure that all of our own controversies are for the sake of Heaven.

Angel for Shabbat