

# DIVIDED FRONT

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"And Korach the son of Yitzhar, the son of K'has, the son of Levi, and Dasan and Aviram the sons of Eliav, and On the son of Peles, the sons of Reuven, took [themselves to the side]; and they rose up against Moshe, along with men of the Children of Israel, 250 princes of the congregation, honored by the assembly, men of a good name." [16:1-2]*

Korach, Dasan, Aviram, and 250 leaders of the Jewish nation, united against the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. They claimed that their intent was good, but the Torah tells us that their argument was for their own benefit, or simply for the sake of arguing. In fact, they are designated by our Sages as the classic paradigm of an argument not made for the sake of Heaven.

The Yalkut Shimoni observes that Moshe tried repeatedly to reason with Korach, and yet we find no response at all. The Yalkut explains that Korach realized that if he were to respond, he would fail. "I know that Moshe is extremely wise. He will enlighten me with his words, and I will be forced to agree with him. Better I should ignore him entirely." When Moshe realized that speaking with Korach was useless, he turned instead to Dasan and Aviram - but they also did not bother to respond.

It is interesting that the Yalkut says that Dasan and Aviram did not respond, because we find that they said, "we will not come up. Is it a small thing that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey, to put us to death in the desert, that you must also lift yourself up over us?" [16:12-13] They did respond, didn't they?

Well, no. There's no answer there. Dasan and Aviram merely repeated themselves, and refused to discuss the matter. And there is a further point -- having refused to discuss, having no one to correct their most egregious error, they then launched into a world of fantasy, characterizing Egypt during their slavery as "a land flowing with milk and honey" -- terms used by G-d to describe the Land of Israel! Failing to reason is no response at all. Korach, Dasan, and Aviram all preferred making speeches over addressing what Moshe was saying -- no matter how ridiculous their own words.

In Sichos Mussar, Rabbi Chaim Shmuelewitz zt"l analyzes the difference between Korach's rebellion, and the arguments of the students of Hillel and Shammai, which are the classic example of an argument which is *\_for\_* the sake of Heaven. What was the difference? Hillel and Shammai were more than willing to understand and address the other opinions. They did not disagree for personal gain or simply to create an argument, but because they honestly differed about which opinion was correct and true. The Halacha follows the students of Hillel, and our Sages say that this is because

these students were so concerned for truth that not only did they teach the opinions of Shammai, but they taught those contrary opinions even before teaching their own. This was total dedication to truth.

The Chasam Sofer, in his Toras Moshe commentary, points out that Korach, the 250 leaders, and Dasan and Aviram were not making the same argument. Korach, for his part, acknowledged the special holiness of the tribe of Levi, but argued against Moshe's leadership. He claimed that the leader should be the oldest son of Amram, namely Aharon, and the High Priest should be the oldest son of Yitzhar - namely, Korach himself! The Torah says concerning Korach and his closest allies that "they arose against Moshe" [16:2], because Korach had no argument against Aharon.

The 250 leaders, on the other hand, rejected the special nature of the Levites overall. They were the first-born of their families, and the special service had been their responsibility until G-d selected the tribe of Levi "in exchange." For this reason, when the 250 are mentioned, the Torah says "they assembled together against Moshe and against Aharon" [16:3].

In the final confrontation, Dasan and Aviram did not take pans of incense like the 250 first-born. The Chasam Sofer concludes that they were not interested in claiming the honors desired by the first-born, or by Korach himself. They simply wanted to rebel, and claim that Moshe was a charlatan. They themselves had no interest in the Temple service whatsoever.

These great differences between Korach, the first-born, and Dasan and Aviram, are also an indicator of an argument "not for the sake of Heaven." What would have happened if Moshe had "lost the argument"? Korach would have assumed control, and then there would have been a fight between Korach and the 250 first-born! They had no agreement with each other - they were "united" only because they each disagreed with Moshe.

The text in the Sayings of the Fathers [5:17] reads, "which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? This is the argument of Hillel and Shammai. And not for the sake of Heaven? This is the argument of Korach and his entire congregation." Note that there is no parallel between the two cases - the latter should read "Korach and Moshe." The Medrash Shmuel explains that while the motivations of both parties were the same in the first case, this was not true in the latter. For this reason, Moshe and Aharon -- whose motivations were pure -- could not be classified together with Korach.

Using the Chasam Sofer, we understand why this Mishnah says "Korach and his entire congregation." They also argued with each other, but they, unlike Moshe, shared the same motivation -- selfish gain! So there is, after all, a parallel between the two cases in the Mishnah -- the latter is specifically the argument between Korach and the 250 first-born, who argued with each other, not for the sake of Heaven!

In any case, it is clear that Korach and the 250 first-born were not concerned for truth, for if they were, they never could have presented a "united front" against Moshe, given their own fundamental differences of opinion. The only thing they shared was their opposition to Moshe -- but the reasons

for this opposition were themselves diametrically opposed.

It was a "marriage of convenience." The Torah validates a disagreement only when the parties argue out of a sincere concern for truth, and when they are willing to consider other serious opinions. Anything else is a self-serving argument, which brings nothing but destruction in its wake.