

NO PARALLEL

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..." [16:1-2]

The Mishnah in the Chapters 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."

The language of this Mishnah clashes with our expectations. We expect an analogy -- Hillel vs. Shammai, Korach vs. Moshe. Instead, the Mishnah reads "Korach and his entire congregation," and never mentions Moshe at all.

The Medrash Shmuel explains that this actually makes perfect sense. "Which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? This is the argument of Hillel and Shammai," both of whom were motivated entirely for the same reasons: the sake of Heaven. So a comparison between the two is correct and appropriate.

When we look at the argument between Korach and Moshe, however, there is no analogy. The motivations of the two parties were not at all the same, and it would be false to claim that Moshe acted "not for the sake of Heaven." Moshe had only the purest of motivations. The Mishnah simply couldn't say that "the argument of Korach and Moshe" was "not for the sake of Heaven," because that would wrongly place Moshe into the same basket.

There is a simple, yet crucial lesson in this Mishnah: one cannot, upon seeing an argument, assume that both sides are equally wrong. It does not "take two to tango." It takes one person doing the right thing, and another person stirring up trouble, to create an argument.

It could be that one of the parties is no more responsible for the argument than Moshe was "responsible" for Korach's rebellion. So the principle of judging others favorably requires that we assume that each individual side is entirely right, until we know better.

If an observer had come along who did not know better, he or she could have imagined that our

parsha describes a simple power struggle between Moshe and Korach. This would be ridiculous, and a disgusting accusation against someone whom the Torah describes as "more modest than any man!" Moshe was acting entirely for the sake of Heaven, and he had no interest in making an argument. He was forced into this situation by Korach, and Heaven forbid that anyone should attribute the least blame to Moshe for what transpired.

It would also be an error to imagine that this is only true when one of the parties is as holy as Moshe. A person doing the right thing can be falsely attacked, and in this there is no difference between Moshe Rabbeinu (our teacher) and Moshe Schwartz who lives down the block.

What requires Moshe Rabbeinu, or Hillel and Shammai, is that they remained entirely for the sake of Heaven. The average person is not able to keep his or her own honor and ego out of an argument. But this does not mean that he or she was in any way to blame.

Sometimes it may even be you whom people think is "involved" in an argument, and this may lead you to doubt whether you are truly doing the right thing. You may consider yourself at least partially responsible for an argument or ill-feelings, and in so doing will treat yourself unfairly.

In this situation, it is important that you seek out a wise and impartial counselor. Your Rabbi might be the right person (parents, by the way, are probably too inherently biased in your favor). It may be absolutely true that you are "over the line" -- but perhaps people are blaming you for something which is none of your doing.

A story of this nature once happened to me while I was studying in Israel. Without being too specific about the details, the Rosh Yeshiva, the Dean of my Yeshiva, told me that in his judgment it wasn't worthwhile for me to become involved with a particular program. It was a "kosher" activity, nothing that would ordinarily be considered wasting time from study -- but the Dean felt that it wasn't appropriate for me. [He was right, as I learned several years later.]

Of course, I didn't go to the people involved and tell them that I refused to participate -- I simply said that I wasn't available, which was true. Another student let the reason why slip out. Of course, they really couldn't have an argument with the Rosh Yeshiva, but the news quickly traveled back to me that they had heard about this and were essentially blaming me for following the Rosh Yeshiva's advice.

Of course, I have been in a host of arguments in my life where I was wrong -- this was one of the fortunate exceptions. Nonetheless, I was somewhat upset about the situation, and discussed it with the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Eliezer Schwartzman, of "Lakewood East," the branch of Lakewood in Israel (Bais Medrash Gavoha D'America B'Eretz Yisrael).

At the time, we were studying Tractate Bava Metziah, which covers various financial laws. The Mishnah on page 75b says, "One who hires workers, and the workers fool each other, they only have claims (Tarumos) against each other." The Talmud explains the situation: a business owner asks someone to hire workers at a particular rate, and the middleman then tells the workers that the owner will pay them, naming a higher fee than what the owner actually said. At the end of the day, the workers go to collect their wages, and the owner gives them only the smaller amount.

The Mishnah is telling us that a court not only cannot force the additional outlay upon the innocent owner, but also cannot force the middleman to pay the difference. Since he told them that the owner alone was responsible for paying them, and because both rates were reasonable for workers of that type, he ends up walking away free. The workers can claim that they would have made the effort to try to find higher-paying work, but the middleman can respond that without him, they would not have found work at all -- and thus he escapes liability by claiming that his deception was actually to their benefit.

A court cannot force the middleman to pay, but the workers do have "Tarumos," claims. The middleman will be judged in Heaven for his actions, for deceiving the workers.

So Rabbi Schwartzman told me: from here we learn that "Tarumos" are also a "zechus," a privilege. Not everyone gets to have "claims." These workers have claims against the middleman, because he deceived them, he caused an argument, he created trouble. But when people are doing the right thing, it is not their responsibility if others decide to be angry with them for doing the right thing. Those others are the ones creating the argument, not the innocent they accuse.

Once again, this needs to be discussed carefully with an impartial counselor or Rabbi. But we must not be afraid to do the right thing, merely because someone might use this as an excuse to be angry. It is true that Hillel sought peace, and pursued peace, and we should be like Hillel -- but Moshe is no less a role model. Sometimes, we need to be ready to do the right thing -- and that doesn't make us "part" of an argument!

Good Shabbos,
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