

THE POWER OF PEACE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Power of Peace¹

It strikes us as a bit much, the drama that brought Korach down. To start with, Moshe insists upon pushing the envelope in judicial sternness. The Torah has no problem dealing with appropriate harshness against the worst perpetrators of evil. Worshipers of idols, murderers, and sexual profligates are all executed at times by the court, but without any new contrivance. They are all permitted to exit their existence by perfectly natural and predictable means. Regarding Korach, however, Moshe asks for - and receives - "a new creation"² to dispatch him and his company to their deaths.

Does this make sense? At worst, Korach violated an ordinary *lo sa'aseh*, an ordinary transgression. On the hierarchy of transgressions, *machlokes* hardly resides at the weightier end, where the punishment escalates. (To make matters worse, the transgression is not even mentioned until our *parshah*, well after Korach began his offensive.) Why is it dealt with so severely? Why do young children lose their lives in this incident, in contradistinction to the Torah's firm rule that children are not to be punished for the sins of their parents?

The difficulty does not end with the verses in our *parshah*. The contrast and comparison go on. Chazal tell us that the first Temple was destroyed because of violations of the three cardinal sins, three transgressions so serious that one must give up his life rather than violate. The seriousness of the crime appears to match the punishment. The second Temple, they tell us however, was lost because of *sinas chinam*, groundless enmity. Now hating another Jew is wrong, but it is an ordinary *lo sa'aseh*, on par with engaging in disputatious behavior. How does it become the peer of a deadly combination of the worst transgressions of the Torah?

Do not think that perhaps the intentions of Korach's cohorts were particularly diabolic and ugly. The opposite is true. *The Shalah HaKadosh* tells us that all of Korach's two hundred and fifty coconspirators (including the *nesi'im*!) pursued the interests of Heaven. Earthly glory was not on their minds; they saw spiritual gold, and each wanted to be the one to mine it. They were convinced somehow that the job of Kohen Gadol was up for grabs, a spiritual plum available to whomever exerted himself more. They complained that Moshe had squeezed them out of contention through effective *tefillah* on behalf of his brother's candidacy. They were disappointed that Moshe used his "in" with HKBH to keep the position within his family, moving the coveted prize out of reach.

Rabbi Akiva called "love your friend as yourself"³ the great principle of the Torah.⁴ What gives this love so much power is what it accomplishes. The mutual love of Jews for each other binds us together. It is only when we are bound together that Hashem relates to us as a Father. Only when we practice this love are we called His children. Only within unity do we merit the blessings of a bounty of His compassion and lovingkindness. The results of losing the distinction of being His children are disastrous.

Machlokes tears asunder the bond that makes us special. We do not become Jewish sinners through it. We become something less than Jews, at least in the sense of no longer being members of a single vibrant entity.

The Zohar typifies Korach's dispute as something divisive - divisive above, and divisive below. In other words, *machlokes* disrupts the elaborate connection between the Worlds that link Heaven and earth, as well as disrupting the connection between Hashem and us. Sowing chaos universally, *machlokes* is dealt with as the most serious shortcoming.

Klal Yisrael can attach itself to the One only when they are one. (Think of *matan Torah*. In our finest hour we accepted a Torah spurned by the rest of the world. We accomplished this only in a moment of oneness - "like one person, with one heart."⁵) *Devekus* - the most important object of our pursuit - is possible only when we are one.

Shattering the essential unity of *Klal Yisrael* is as insidious as the cardinal sins. Each of those severs the relationship between a Jew and his Creator. Idolatry strips Jewishness from his mind. Illicit relationships distance him through the passions of the heart. Murder turns his limbs, his organs of performance, into un-Jewish organs. The combination of all three turned us into beings so un-Jewish, that the connection with Heaven was interrupted. The Temple ceased to function.

Machlokes did the same. Without strong bonds between a Jew and his friend, without an essential bond between them, they could not maintain oneness with Hashem. The second *Beis Hamikdosh* became irrelevant.

We have arrived at precisely the point that the Torah wishes to make in our *parshah*. The consequences of the sin of *machlokes* are anomalous. They do not reflect the severity of the transgression as a rebellion against Hashem's expressed Will. Those consequences flow from realities about ourselves as a people, and how we collectively relate to Him. Just as loving others is the "great principle" of the Torah in a positive sense, *machlokes* is the same in the negative. We lost the *Beis Hamikdosh* through hatred and dissension; we will regain it only through love.

The Torah makes this point best by embedding it in a story about people who were not driven by ego or petty desires. As the *Shalah* pointed out, their intentions were for the good. We could easily think that a noble pursuit would mitigate the effects of divisiveness. Alas, that is not the case. Whatever breeds division, for whatever the cause, will still choke off the connection between

ourselves and Heaven.

We are still somewhat at a loss to understand. Why should this be? A *machlokes leshem shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, is not such a bad thing.⁶ Inescapably, we learn that people pursuing spiritual goals does not turn their competition into a *machlokes leshem shomayim*! The two hundred fifty chased after their prize only because they convinced themselves that Moshe had somewhat improperly used his advantage to take a lead in the competition. Herein lies a subtle flaw, one that compromised their entire pursuit.

Chazal tell us that one who second-guesses his Torah teacher is the equivalent of one who doubts G-d Himself.⁷ There was no race to run without entertaining suspicions that Moshe desired something that was not completely congruent with the wishes of his Master. A subtle fault line ran through their pursuit of what they thought was spiritual treasure.

Another fault line was not so subtle. Negation of self is an important principle in spiritual striving. *Yeshus* - the pronounced presence of self and ego - is the root of many deficiencies. Contrary to what we might believe, *yeshus* is problematic not only in regard to material acquisitions and undeserved honor. It is a blight on the pursuit of *ruchniyus* as well. They told themselves that there is nothing improper in wanting the merit of spiritual elevation. In the race for spirituality, why not compete? If only one person could have it, it was fair game for all.

But what advantage would Hashem's interests have in the selection of any one of them over another? Where was the net gain? If one could not be discovered, then the beneficiary was not the honor of Heaven, but one person's thinking of himself.

The bottom line is that *machlokes* is fatal. Even when pursued for what seems to be a noble cause, and even when the participants are great people who should be able to detect any admixture of impropriety, the odds are against it amounting to anything positive. In the case of Korach's associates, the odds were two hundred and fifty to one - and they all lost.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 101-103

² Bamidbar 16:30

³ Vayikra 19:18

⁴ Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:4

⁵ Rashi, Shemos 19:2

⁶ Avos 5:17

⁷ Bamidbar Rabbah 18:20

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