A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

While the quarrel between Korach and his followers against Moshe and Aaron may be the most famous machlokes (argument) in the Torah, it is far from the only one. Indeed, sefer Bamidbar, of which parshas Korach is the fifth parsha, seems to have the dubious honour of containing the lion's share of discord among the Five Books of the Torah. Here, we find the quarrel over entering Israel (chapters 13-14); the unhappiness of Israel with the Manna and their desire to eat meat (chapter 11); and their dissatisfaction over the lack of water (chapter 20).

When we discuss the topic of machlokes (controversy and debate), it is important to note that in the Jewish perspective, all machlokes is not necessarily bad. One could only imagine how dry the Talmud would be in the absence of controversy - argument and debate are its very lifeblood. Argumentativeness is a quality with which it seems we have collectively as a nation been blessed (cursed?); as the old cliche goes, "Two Jews - three opinions!"

What, then, makes the difference between a "good" machlokes and a bad one? It seems from Chazal (our Sages - see further) that it all depends where one's heart is. If one's intention is "Le-shem Shamayim/For Heaven's sake," then the machlokes is acceptable and good. Any machlokes without some sense of altruism, then, is not good, and should as a rule be avoided.

Bearing this in mind, if we were grade the afformentioned disagreements according to their level of "Le-shem Shamayim," it would appear that the argument of Korach and his followers was certainly the closest to being "For Heaven's sake." After all, it was not money or riches they were after. All they asked for was, "equal opportunity" in serving Hashem. "For the entire nation - all of them are holy - so why do you (Moshe and Aaron) elevate yourselves (in positions of power and leadership) over Hashem's congregation? (16:4)"

Compare this to a nation dissatisfied with the Heavenly manna, or a rebellion against entering Israel ("Let us appoint a new leader, and return to Egypt!" [14:4]) and it seems obvious that, at least in comparison, Korach and his followers were a notch above the petty complainers, moaners and groaners that preferred, "the free fish in Egypt" to the "insubstantial Manna." (11:5)

Yet when Chazal (Avos 5:17) seek to epitomize and quantify the term "Machlokes She-lo le-shem Shamayim/An argument not for Heaven's sake," they choose as an example the machlokes of Korach and his followers:

What can be termed a "machlokes le-shem Shamayim?" The machlokes of Hillel and Shamai (two great Talmudic scholars who debated issues of Torah law). And what is considered a machlokes she-lo le-shem Shamayim? The machlokes of Korach and his followers.

Why is the machlokes of Korach and his followers; one that ostensibly takes on the appearance of an altruistic, well-meant, dispute, singled out among all others as the quintessence of machlokes for the wrong reasons?

I heard the following story from a well known communal leader here in Toronto: Jews arriving in Toronto in the early 1900's did not necessarily find the "land of golden sidewalks" they were expecting. For these foreigners, mostly unskilled, working in the "sweatshops" sewing pants and shirts was often the only chance they had to eke out a semblance of a living. The hours were long, the conditions were appalling, and the workforce was such that if you weren't "pulling your weight" by working your guts out, there were plenty other immigrants more than willing to take your place.

When this distinguished Rabbi first arrived in Toronto, there were no communal positions available - at least not ones that afforded him the luxury of putting bread on the table - so he, too, succumbed to the lifestyle of the sweatshop slave. Luckily, in a manner of speaking, his wealthy uncle was the owner of one of the sweatshops. So, while he earned the same meagre salary as the rest, he at least had the relative peace-of-mind that he wouldn't find himself on the street tomorrow - the job was his for as long as he wanted.

At some point, his uncle decided that the workers sewing the pockets on the pants were slacking off. He sent instructions that the minimum quota of pants-pockets-per-hour should be increased to 12 - almost double what it had been! The "sweaters" were dumbstruck. Sewing pockets on twelve pairs of pants per hour seemed like an impossibility. Yet to dispute the issue could easily mean losing your job, a risk none of them could afford to take.

They had a brainstorm: An uncle couldn't fire his own nephew! Let his nephew go and plead their case with his uncle. Terrified, he knocked on the door to his uncle's office. "Yes?" "Do you mind if I ask you something? You sent instructions that we are to sew twelve pairs of pants per hour. With all due respect, this is an impossibility! We are all working our hardest, but 12 pairs of pants per hour simply can't be done!"

"Is that so?" asked his uncle sarcastically. "One can't sew pockets on 12 pairs of pants per hour? I think one can! Come - we'll go together - and I'll prove it to you."

All the workers stood up when "the boss" entered their domain. From the look on his nephew's face, they knew they were in for it. He had them clear an area for him and set up a machine. Then, to everyone's amazement, the owner of the sweatshop took off his expensive suit, sat himself down at a sewing machine, took one look at the time, and began sewing like a madman. Employees stood around him like worker-bees, quickly handing him pieces of material and pockets at his command. He sweated profusely, and his agitation was intense. While he hadn't sewn for many years himself,

he hadn't forgotten how. In the end, he somehow managed to finish 12 pairs of pants in just less than an hour.

Shaking, he stood up from the machine; his voice quivered from exhaustion. He gazed as his astonished workers: "There - now who wants to tell me you can't sew twelve pairs of pants in an hour!?"

"Yes, but uncle, you worked like a madman for just one hour. Workers stood around you handing you everything as soon as you asked. We work 13 hours a day - for us to produce twelve pairs of pants an hour is an impossibility!"

"My nephew, in truth you are correct. Yet I was correct in principle! And I've just proved it."

How many times, after a bitter argument over a narishkeit (senseless issue), have you heard similar justifications? "It's not the _____ (money/honour/affront etc.) that bothers me - it's the principle!" You were short-changed in a store; overcharged by a taxi; your seat was taken in shul; this kosher symbol is better than that one... Self- righteous indignation begins to bubble within...

I've got news for you: It's not the principle. If it was "the principle," you would feel just the same feelings if it happened to someone else as if it happened to you. If it was the principle, your emotions would be lead by a sense of sanctity, calmness, and a desire for truth. Yet that's rarely the case. It is the money, the prestige, or whatever else might be motivating us. It's just that internally, we realize it's so petty we're ashamed. So we withdraw from our bag of argumentative- ammunition that trusty old warrior called "principle," a point over which wars have been waged, families have fallen apart, and people's lives have been ruined. Now, if it were at least indeed "the principle" that was at stake, perhaps the discord would fall under the category of machlokes le-shem Shamayim. Yet the flag-of-principle rarely displays its true colours. More often than not, it's really just an alien flag in camouflage. How careful must one be, when raising one's flag- of-principle, to be sure that the winds blowing are winds of truth and justice, and not winds of contention, self-gratification, and triumphancy.

On the outside, the arguments of Korach and his band had a veneer of truth-seeking and shem Shamayim. They presented themselves as spokesmen of the nation - they asked only for equality and fairness. Yet inside, each one of the 250 men wanted to be the Kohein Gadol/The High Priest. They were warned by Moshe that at best, one of them would succeed; the other 249 were doomed to fail. Yet knowing this, they went ahead and offered the Incense. There were no "principles" at stake here; only a power-struggle over who among them would emerge as the "next" leader of the up-and-coming Jewish nation.

This, says the Oznayim La-Torah, is why the Mishnah singles out Korach and his group as the epitome of machlokes she-lo le-shem Shamayim, because it is the most dangerous form of machlokes of all. When arguments are petty, the thinking man will avoid them; he realizes that to get involved in a skirmish over narishkeiten just isn't worth the cost to his reputation and to his peace-of-

mind. Yet when power-struggles and petty-wrangling become "a fight for principle," even the most sound-minded individual must labour to keep at a distance.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponosored by Mr. Gerald Papoff, in honour of his wife, a "Woman of Valor," Marcia Papoff, on the occasion of their wedding anniversary, 8 Tamuz.

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