

THE MITZVAH OF MACHLOKES IS THE EXCEPTION TO THE RULE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Korach

The Mitzvah of Machlokes Is The Exception To The Rule

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 422 - Bais Din's Power to Subpoena. Good Shabbos!

The Mishna teaches that a machlokes [argument] that is for the sake of Heaven, will yield lasting results (sofah l'hiskayem) while an argument that is not for the sake of Heaven will not yield lasting results (ayn sofah l'hiskayem) [Avos 5:20]. The classic examples of noble disputes are the arguments between Hillel and Shammai. The classic example of a non-noble argument is that of Korach and his followers.

Rav Yeruchem Levovitz asks: how do we even 'honor' the dispute of Korach and his followers by mentioning it in the same breath with the disputes of Hillel and Shammai? Would we contrast the machlokes of Hillel and Shammai with that of a ball player with the umpire or the Hatfields and the McCoys? It is inappropriate to make any kind of comparison between sublime differences of alternate Torah exegesis and petty feuding of egocentric commoners. Why should we even give such credibility to Korach and his followers by mentioning them in one Mishna with Hillel and Shammai?

Rav Yeruchem explains that we learn from the fact that the two are mentioned together in one Mishna, that Heaven forbid should we consider Korach and his followers to be in the league of the Hatfields and the McCoys. The dispute of Korach and his followers is in fact extremely close to the machlokes of Hillel and Shammai. Their dispute had all the trappings of an argument for the sake of Heaven. It involved the most noble of causes.

Korach and his followers were arguing that they were not satisfied with their spiritual position in life. "We want to have more Kedusha [personal holiness]; we want to have a closer relationship with the Almighty; we want to have the closeness of a priest to the Divine Service." Hillel and Shammai had legitimate and passionate disputes regarding the most noble of matters. This too was the nature of the dispute of Korach and his followers -- at least that is the way it started out.

But then their dispute became tinged with the non-altruistic motives of personal honor and aggrandizement -- causing it to be categorized as a machlokes which was not for the sake of Heaven. The two sets of cases in the Mishna began as parallel disputes. However, Korach and his followers "just missed the turnoff" when it became an altruistic machlokes.

Hillel and Shammai were able to keep the dispute on an altruistic level. It never became a matter of "me right" and "you wrong". It was never a matter of "I want to come out on top because I want to win". It was strictly an argument for the sake of Heaven. The Talmud teaches us that Beis Hillel would always quote the opinion of Beis Shammai before their own opinion in reciting the disputed positions. Their intent was to arrive at the truth, not to necessarily be the winner.

Korach and his followers also started with the noblest of intentions. But once a person becomes tinged with motivations that are not for the sake of Heaven, disputes can dissipate and deteriorate into the worst type of activity.

Rav Yeruchem stated that sometimes it is a mitzvah to be engaged in a dispute. There are times when it is necessary to stand up for what is right. However this 'mitzvah' is an exception to the rule. Normally a person should engage in Torah and Mitzvos even in a manner that is not for the sake of Heaven, because ultimately the person will come to do the mitzvah for the sake of Heaven [Sanhedrin 105b]. In other words, it is not ideal behavior for a person to spend a significant amount of money on the best Tephillin or the nicest Esrog, so that people will admire his nice pair of Tephillin or his beautiful Esrog. Nevertheless, we tell him, "Go ahead and buy the best pair of Tephillin and the best Esrog." Ultimately, he will come to appreciate the true value of the mitzvah of Tephillin and Esrog. In the meantime at least he is fulfilling these mitzvos in an appropriate fashion.

There is one mitzvah in the Torah, however, regarding which a person either one does it 100% l'Shma [for the sake of Heaven] or he is better off not doing it at all. That, says Rav Yeruchem, is the Mitzvah of making a machlokes. The lesson of the Congregation of Korach is that a dispute must be 100% for the sake of Heaven. It must be that way at the beginning in the middle and at the end. Otherwise it becomes disgusting!

There are very few of us who are capable of saying "MY machlokes is a dispute which is 100% for the sake of Heaven". Hillel and Shammai could pull that off. Most of us cannot. It is for this reason that

the Mishna in Avos links the machlokes of Hillel and Shammai with that of Korach and his followers in the same breath. They were extremely similar in nature, at least in the initial stages.

The Symbolism of the Almonds

Toward the end of the parsha we learn of the incident whereby Moshe Rabbeinu collected staffs from the leaders of each of the Tribes, in order to demonstrate which leader was chosen by G-d to be the High Priest. "It shall be that the man whom I shall choose - his staff will blossom; and I shall cause to subside from upon Me the complaints of the Children of Israel, which they complain against you" [Bamidbar 17:20].

"It was the next day, Moses came to the Tent of the Testimony and behold! The staff of Aaron of the house of Levi had blossomed. It brought forth a blossom, sprouted a bud and developed almonds" [Bamidbar 17:23]. The Chumash commentators wonder about the symbolism of almonds. Why of all the fruits in the world did Aaron's staff specifically grow almonds?

I saw the following insight given by Rav Shlomo Zalman HaKohen Kook:

The Talmud in Brochos discusses whether the appropriate blessing for bitter almonds is "She'hakol" or "Borei Peri haEtz." The Rishonim there comment that there are two types of almonds. There are certain almonds that are sweet when they are small and have just begun to ripen. However these same almonds become bitter when left on the tree to fully ripen. Another type of almond is just the opposite. They are bitter when they begin to ripen, however they turn sweet when they are fully ripened.

These variant almonds represent the difference between machlokes and shalom [peace]. It is unfortunate to say this, but when a machlokes begins, it generates a certain excitement (geshmak!). However, when it persists and more and more people become involved and more and more people get hurt, the machlokes becomes extremely bitter. This is the end of every machlokes: everyone is hurt. Machlokes can be compared to those almonds that start out sweet but eventually turn bitter.

Shalom, on the other hand, is just the reverse. Making peace between warring factions is very difficult. Both sides have to compromise and bury the hatchet. Initially, this is not easy at all. It is hard to say "I'm sorry". It is hard to forgive perceived wrongs. It is bitter. But, once the peace is established, things turn out to be sweet in the end.

This is the symbolism of almonds on Aaron's staff. There are two types. The type that starts sweet and becomes bitter is characteristic of every dispute. Peace is symbolized by the other type of

almond - the kind that is very bitter at the beginning, but yields very sweet fruit in the end.

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

1. Tape # 017 - Visiting the Sick
 2. Tape # 062 - May the State of Israel Extradite a Jewish criminal?
 3. Tape # 106 - The Temple Mount Today -- Obligations and Restrictions
 4. Tape # 151 - The Mitzvah of Pidyon Haben: Some Fascinating Facts
 5. Tape # 198 - The Ethiopian Jewry Question
 6. Tape # 244 - Tachanun: To Say or Not To Say
 7. Tape # 288 - "Masiach L'fi Tumoh": The Coca Cola Question
 8. Tape # 334 - Leaving a Chasun Before Benching
 9. Tape # 378 - Truth telling to Patients
 10. Tape # 422 - Bais Din's Power to Subpoena
 11. Tape # 466 - Tachanun: To Say Or Not To Say
 12. Tape # 510 - Pidyon Habein and Vending Machines
 13. Tape # 554 - The Kohain and the First Aliyah
-

Tapes or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and **Torah.org**.

Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.