

Korach separated himself. (16:1)

Vayikach Korach, “Korach separated himself”: two words that define what was to become one of the greatest tragedies of Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s leadership, the consequences of which we continue to live with to this very day. Dispute, controversy and *machlokes* have been present since Korach publicized the concept of dissent, taking it to an unprecedented nadir, which incurred previously unheard of punishment – unparalleled for its severity and finality. All of this happened because “Korach separated himself.” Obviously, there is more than one meaning to Korach’s separating himself. We will address the opinion of *Rashi*, because its simplicity is unusually profound, teaching a significant moral lesson.

Lokach es atzmo l’tzad echad liheyos nechelok mitoch ha’eidah l’orer al haKehunah. Korach “Took himself off to one side, to be separated from the assembly of *Yisrael* by raising objections to the *Kehunah*.” *Rashi* adds that this is what *Targum Onkeles* means when he interprets *Vayikach Korach* as *V’ispaleig*, “And he separated himself.” *Rashi* then adds how he separated himself – *l’hachazik b’machlokes*, “by sustaining a dispute.” *Rashi* seems to imply that the critique against Korach was that he sustained the dispute. Apparently, its origins were not that blameworthy. It was continuing when he was proven wrong, when Moshe explained to him that he was making an egregious error.

Horav Yeruchem Levovitz, zl, quotes the well-known *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* (5:17), which distinguishes between a *machlokes l’shem Shomayim*, a dispute for the sake of Heaven, and one which is not for the sake of Heaven. The paradigm of controversy for the glory of Heaven is the dispute of Hillel and Shammai, two distinguished *Tannaim*, who disputed *halachah* a number of times; yet, each one permitted members of his individual household to marry one another. It was “friendly fire”, with each disputant seeking one thing: to establish *halachah*, thereby glorifying Hashem’s Name. The paradigmatic example of a *machlokes* which is not *l’shem Shomayim* is that of Korach and his followers.

Perusing this *Mishnah* makes one wonder. Is *l’shem Shomayim* the only area of divergence between Korach’s dispute and the *halachic* debates of Hillel and Shammai? Is there no other area in which these two *machlokos*, disputes, differ? How can we even mention Korach’s blatant mutiny, his rebellion against Hashem’s designated leaders, and, by extension, against Hashem Himself, in the same breath as the holy names of Hillel and Shammai. Apparently, as *Rav Yeruchem* notes, there is a much deeper understanding of Korach’s dispute with which we must reconcile ourselves. Korach was not out simply to usurp Moshe’s leadership. It was not only about seeking honor, fame and glory. Korach initially wanted a higher position that meant greater closeness to Hashem. This is what he sought – initially.

Thus, at the very onset, Korach was truly no different than Hillel and Shammai. They had a religious agenda; so did Korach. The problem arose when Korach was proven wrong, when Moshe explained everything to him, when he revealed to him some of the rationale behind Hashem’s

“decisions.” This is when Korach should have said, “Ok, I am wrong. I will no longer dispute the decision. Hashem has spoken.” Sadly, he did not do that. He was *machzik b’machlokes*, continued to sustain the dispute, to transform a serious rational debate into an ugly battle. Korach’s question was acceptable. His eschewing the answer, his inability to accept and acquiesce to a Higher Power, is what brought him down.

Korach’s followers experienced a similar error. Perhaps they all had good intentions, but, when one is proven wrong; when one blatantly sees the folly of his ways, he must be a total imbecile to continue. This is what Moshe told them when they agreed to offer the incense: *Rav lachem, Bnei Levi*, “This is to you, sons of Levi!” (ibid 16:7). *Rashi* explains, “I have told you a serious matter. Were they not fools? For Moshe warned them in this manner. Yet, they still undertook to offer the incense.” What prompted them to act so foolishly – basically rejecting their lives?

Rav Yeruchem quotes an analogy from **Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl**. A thirsty man who had been looking for water to soothe his parched throat finally chanced upon a keg of water. A large group of people assembled there confirmed that the water was fresh and perfectly drinkable. Nonetheless, if one person who appears deranged comes along and warns him not to drink from the water because there is poison in it, he will not drink. This is despite everyone’s agreement that the water is fine. If one person – and one who is, at best, totally deranged – claims that the water is poisonous, no rational person will drink from it. That is the way it is.

Likewise, with *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven. A person convinces himself that there is no one in charge. He can go about his daily endeavors as he sees fit. What should he worry about? But just in case they are wrong, and Hashem will punish you for your sin, will you still continue to drink the water? You will – if you are a fool. This is what Moshe was saying to them: “Gentlemen, you were at the funerals of Nadav and Avihu, where you observed the immediate devastating response to offering incense without being commanded to do so. Are you willing to risk your lives? Are you normal?”