

Korach: Mahloket Leshem Shomayim

- Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky shelit" a of Yeshiva of South Shore explains why the mahloket of Korach is described as Korach veadaso, and not Korach UMoshe. A mahloket leshem shomayim has a marvelous test. We know it by the fact that it remains part of our tradition and culture through the ages.

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Mesholim and Anecdotes that Help Explain Pirkei Avos

BY RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

"Any quarrel," says the Mishnah in the fifth perek of Pirkei Avos, "that is made for the sake of heaven shall, in conclusion, last. However, if the argument is not for the sake of heaven, rather is fueled by selfish motivation, it shall not last." The Mishnah offers Hillel and Shamai as an example of heavenly opponents and of a machlokes l'shaim Shamayim. Their arguments will last forever.

On the other hand, Korach and his entire Edah are the examples given for those whose debates stemmed from egotistical motivations. "Those types of disputes," says the Mishnah, "are doomed to fail."

The Mishnah is, of course, referring to the episode in Parshas Korach, named for Moshe's cousin who contested the kehuna. He gathered 250 followers, and openly rebelled against Moshe and Ahron, claiming that Moshe and his brother underhandedly seized both the temporal and spiritual leadership of Klal Yisrael. Moshe, in his great humility, offered a solution in which divine interference would point to the true leader. Amazingly, Korach and his followers were swallowed alive through a miraculous event, Korach and his followers, were swallowed by the earth, whole and alive.

Yet two questions occur in regards to the Mishnah. By using the expression that, "an argument for the sake of heaven will last," it seems to show that an ongoing argument proves its sanctity. Shouldn't it be the opposite? Shouldn't a heavenly argument ultimately end?

The Rav MiBartenura explains that the principles of the quarrel will retain their places in Torah History, with equal regard to each party. And they will forever remain prominent as Gedolei Yisrael, despite any halachic outcome.

The other anomaly is, that in referring to the kosher argument, the Mishnah refers to the combatants, Hillel and Shammai. Each was on one side of the debate. Yet, in reference to the argument that is labeled as egotistical, it defines the combatants as Korach and his entire Edah. Weren't the combatants Korach and Moshe? Why is the latter part of the Mishnah inconsistent with the former?

The Malbim explains that any argument for self-serving purposes, ultimately ends up, not as an argument between two noble sides, but rather as internal quarrelling and bickering. The argument was not between Moshe and Korach, but rather it ended up with infighting among the original solicitors.

Perhaps a homiletic thought can be used to interpret the Mishne, as is illustrated with this humorous incident.

On the week following Pesach about fifteen years ago, I began a small rabbanus in an small, century-old shul in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The scent of herring juice permeated the building, and the benches did not creak as they swayed, they kvetched. As old as the furnishings were, the membership seemed older. But the small kehilla's spirit of tradition was feistier than its physical appearance.

My first week as the Rabbi, I was asked to be the chazan for Musaf which included Birchas Chodesh Iyar. After bentsching the Chodesh, I was about to say Av HaRachamim, which memorializes Jewish martyrs during the era of the crusades. Then the trouble began. On holidays or other festive occasions such as Shabbos Mevarchim, in deference to the spirit of celebration, the sad tefillah of Av Harachamim is omitted. However, the month of Iyar occurs during sefirah, when 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva perished. In conjunction with that tragedy, many kehilos recite Av HaRachamim on Shabbos Mevarchim for the month of Iyar. I assumed my new congregation did the same and began reciting, " Av HaRachamim." Immediately I heard a shout, and an uproar began.

"M'zugt nit Av Harachamim heint! (We don't say Av HaRachamim today!) We just blessed the new month," announced the President.

" M'zugt ya Av Harachamim der choidesh! (We say it this month!) It's sefirah, a period of mourning," yelled back the vice-president.

" You know nothin'. We never ever say it when we bentsch Rosh Chodesh," yelled the treasurer. "We always did!" asserted the Gabbai.

The argument was brewing for five minutes then they all began to smile and instructed me to say the prayer as I had planned. Before I continued the service I sauntered over to the old shammash who was sitting quietly through the tumult and asked, "I don't understand? What is the minhag of this shul?"

He beamed. "This shul is 100 years old. And then pointing to the formerly combatant congregants he proudly beamed, "This is our minhag."

The Mishnah gives us a litmus test. How does one know when there is validity to an argument? Only when it is an argument that envelops eternity. The arguments of Shamai and Hillel last until today, in the halls and classrooms of Yeshivos and batei medrash across the world. Each one's view was not given for his own personal gain, rather it was argued l'shaim Shamayim and the element of eternity infused, preserves the argument 'eternally! However, Korach's battle with Moshe was one of personal gain. Moshe had no issue with them. Really, it was a battle of

Korach and his cohorts. Each motivated by reasons revolving around personal interest. It did not last. The argument was as mortal and as fleeting as man himself!

Only a battle with divine intent remains eternal. In a true Torah environment the divrei Elokim Chaim, remain eternally alive. They are both powered by the divinity of Torah, whether it be the minhag regarding a nusach or how to make kiddush.

Rav Shmuel Dishon shlit"l once told me that he was, together with his seven-year-old son, by my zaide, HaGaon Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky zt"l for havdalah.

Because he normally stood for havdalah, while my zaide's minhag was to sit, he was afraid that his son would say something negative when seeing Reb Yaakov differ from his own custom.

Rabbi Dishon, therefore, sent the child out of the room. Reb Yaakov understood what was happening and called for the child.

"Let the yingle see that there are different minhagim in Klall Yisrael! That is also a lesson for him."

Chazal tell us that we can be secure in our differences. But only if they are l'shaim Shamayim. For if the machlokes is infused with eternity, then it will remain eternal.

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(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)