

Korach and the death of dialogue

The story of rebellion in this parsha is particularly difficult to read. Not only because of the graphic description of the earth swallowing up Korach and of spontaneous combustion resulting in the death of 250 rebels, but because it is literally a little difficult to follow the story as the text moves between treating two rebellions as the same, and as quite separate.

At the outset we are told of a single act of rebellion by Korach from the tribe of Levi, and Datan and Aviram from the tribe of Reuven. As we read further, we see that Moshe deals with each separately and that the confrontation with each plays out in a different venues. In the case of Korach the argument takes place in the sanctuary where the dispute centres on a demand to share priestly power, and with Datan and Aviram confrontation occurs at the entrance to their tents where they conflict with Moshe over the distribution of political power.

In both instances Moshe's response is to try to engage the rebels in conversation - he wants to talk it out, but he is frustrated by the rebels' unwillingness to engage in dialogue. In the case of Korach, the episode ends with Moshe's directive to Korach and his followers to prepare their fire pans for an offering the following day – and Korach simply doesn't answer. In the case of Datan and Aviram we read that they reject the instruction from Moshe to come to him: "No, we will not go up" they say.

Torah commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg reads in the Korach chapters a tale of the frustration and trauma experienced when speech fails. She brings a midrash which in the best midrashic tradition of 'reading between the lines' sees these episodes as a verbal stand-off.

*With all these words Moshe [tried to] appease Korach, but you do not find that he gave him any answer. Because he was clever in his wickedness, he said to himself, "If I answer him, I know that, since he has great wisdom, he will now overwhelm me with his words and seduce me into being reconciled with him against my will. So it is better if I don't respond to him." **When Moshe saw that there was nothing to be gained with him, he withdrew from him.***

*Then Moshe sent to summon Datan and Aviram: They also persisted in their wickedness and did not care to answer him "and they said, 'We will not come up.'" Their] mouths tripped up [these] wicked men, for a covenant is made with the lips. So they died and went down to the bottomless abyss, after they had gone down alive into the underworld. **"Now Moshe was very angry": He was very anguished. Why? When a man argues with his companion and reasons with him; when he answers him, he has peace of mind; but if he does not answer him, then this involves anguish.***

Bamidbar Rabbah, Chapter 18

The midrash introduces a secondary conflict about the willingness to have dialogue that sits in parallel to the first conflict about power. The midrash reads Korach's silence as manipulative – the response of a man who is "clever in his wickedness". Korach fears being "seduced" into reconciliation so he shuts down conversation.

I suspect we have all been in encounters where our attempt to talk things through is frustrated by the use of silence as a weapon – as a way of avoiding the opportunity to make peace, an approach that is obstructive because there is no way to resolve conflict without dialogue.

And yet we may also have experienced shades of what Korach might have felt, as the less powerful person in the exchange, who doesn't see any point in debating. I have certainly been in situations where I did not believe that the other person came to the conversation in good faith or with any ability to acknowledge their own part in the problem, and in such cases, I have chosen to withdraw, and to withhold speech.

But the text doesn't really support the view of Korach as practising suitable self-care. The text sides clearly with Moshe as events play out in the form of an arbitrated truth which result in the ground swallowing up Korach. In our lives we don't often have the benefit of objectively decided outcomes and the midrashic reading is helpful, because it introduces the element of intention as a good barometer of the utility of dialogue. There are instances where refusing to engage in conversation is the right thing to do and where we should indeed be wary of being 'seduced' by a more powerful, or manipulative person into a reconciliation that has not first been honest and clear in addressing underlying issues .

Korach's conduct does not provide a good model for the case where one refuses to engage for good reason. Korach – as read by midrash - sets out to avoid reconciliation. He shuts off the possibility of being influenced, and consciously won't open himself to the possibility of resolution. As readers we also know that Moshe is not an orator. He has been plagued by a sense of his own inadequacy when it comes to speech and as such Korach's fears seem overblown and disingenuous. Moshe does not have the gift of the gab – so what is Korach so afraid of? And the answer it seems is that he fears the end of conflict.

The case of Datan and Aviram is less subtle – they are sneering and oppositional. They are not concerned about being manipulated – they just don't want to talk, and this - according to the midrashic reading – causes Moshe to experience real anguish because he knows that in the absence of diplomacy, the outcome will involve violence.

The parsha provides really powerful insight about the dangers of refusing to talk - even if our fears of the cost of the debate or argument are real. Self-preservation does sometimes require us to be circumspect about who we argue with and under what conditions, but the narrative reminds us that without dialogue, there can be no peaceful resolution.

It is a really sobering idea when considered in the context of increasing polarised public conversations. Twelve years ago, when I first encountered social media I was excited about the possibility offered to exchange ideas with people I would not otherwise have the opportunity to talk to – including people I disagreed with. I believed then in the power of social media as vehicle for the exchange of ideas. My concern back then was about the lack of civility that imbued many of those conversations. That – I'm sad to say – feels like the good old days.

Now public discourse is characterised by the malaise Moshe experienced – the very death of dialogue. More than ever people seek validation of their own views in public discussions, rather than to be tested or challenged. We all sit in our own opinion bubbles, unwilling and unable to engage across the divides, and often with good reason. Social media conversations are draining and have not got any more civil and feel like they have very little influence, like no one is moved or challenged by debate which is also often harsh.

Traditional media has suffered too from the financial and resourcing pressures faced by journalists and the industry, by the concentration of media ownership which has resulted in less diversity within and across publications, and by the unashamed partisanship of many news outlets – so that we are all inclined now to prejudge the merits of an argument or piece based of the medium in which is broadcast or published. None of this encourages us to talk across the divides of strongly held opinions, and very different experiences.

This Dvar Torah is not a good news story. But it should at least be a Dvar Torah - and our tradition has much to teach us about the ethics of argument, and the case for constructive dialogue. The famous starting point is often the story in the Talmud of the houses of Hillel and Shammai, the two rabbinical schools of thought who tended to hold quite different views.

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

The Gemara asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the halakha established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the halakha they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

It is hard sometimes to read old stories with fresh eyes but never has the case for the House of Hillel been more compelling: humility made it possible for its members to listen and acknowledge the truth of those with whom they disagreed, and they consciously made a point of studying their opponents' views.

We need to find ways to do as Hillel did, in the face of all the dice being loaded against us against us on this. We have truly been blessed and cursed to live in interesting times – political polarisation, threats to democratic principles, profound and distressing social conflict, real and present climate crisis, an unprecedented public health crisis, dangerous and dishonest leaders who undermine the work of scientists and experts, and ahead – dire economic conditions which will almost certainly aggravate all those problems.

Against all the obstacles, now is not the time to avoid the arguments we don't want to have. Now is the time to find ways to listen to and where possible, have sober conversations with people with whom we disagree.

It is exhausting and sometimes feels soul destroying but the risk of not talking – or at the very least listening - to people with whom we disagree perhaps poses even greater danger to our souls. It takes courage and stamina to engage with views that trouble us, and it takes much wisdom to know when and how an argument is simply not worth the effort and will have an unreasonable cost. But the lesson of Korach is that there is also a very real cost when speech fails.

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