

TORAH WEEKLY

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Dissension or Clarification?

By: Rabbi Levi Lebovits (Originally Published 2010)

The opening words of this week's Parsha are puzzling. The verse says "Vayikach Korach," "And Korach took," but it does not conclude by telling us what he took.

Rashi explains that what Korach took was himself. He says that Korach "took himself to another side to dispute the authority of Moshe's decisions." What happened here – and what does this mean?

The Torah tells us that Moshe had appointed Elitzafon as the prince over the Levite tribe of Kehas, which Korach felt should have been awarded to him. He subsequently gathered 250 chief justices to protest against Moshe's authority. The end of the story is that all those who challenged Moshe's authority were swallowed up by the ground, or consumed by fire that came down from heaven. The lesson we learn from here is how destructive conflict is and the many negative consequences it can lead to.

But isn't the Talmud full of arguments and disputes? Yet we don't hear of anyone being subject to such punishment?

The mishna in Pirkei Avos, Ethics of the Fathers, explains that the difference between the dispute of Korach and the disputes found in the Talmud is that Korach's dispute was not for the sake of Heaven, whereas the others are for the sake of Heaven (5:20).

The point the mishna is teaching us is that when two parties have a dispute but are involved for the sake of Heaven, there is a common ground between them, and they are working toward a common goal, then it is not a dispute, but rather a clarification process. However, when it is not for Heaven's sake, there is no common ground, and it is truly an argument.

This is what Rashi means when he writes that Korach took himself "to another side" to protest the authority of Moshe: he removed himself from working toward the shared goal of fulfilling Hashem's will. Instead, he created a new personal purpose for his position.

It is in cases such as these that dispute is so destructive and creates dissension between people. We must understand that Hashem has created us all differently and we therefore have different perspectives on issues. But as long as we are working toward a common goal, we can remain unified.

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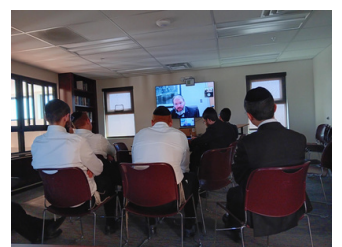
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