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## Would You Rather Be Right or Happy?

Would you rather be right or happy?

At the core of many high-conflict situations is the strong desire for one or both parties to be right. Getting to the truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth, may be a value in court, but if used too often in relationships, it will lead to continual strife. When counseling clients through conflict, an essential task is to clarify the end goal. If the ultimate goal is justice, fairness, and truth, then we will have to suffer the consequences that generally come when others disagree. If the ultimate goal is peace, harmony, and sustained relationships, then we may have to swallow our desire to be right.

Commenting on the conflict that Korach

instigates against Moshe, *Maharal* argues that people get into disputes because they follow “*din*” – the strict letter of the law. They get sucked into a mindset of rigidity of purpose in their pursuit of justice and judgement. In the wake of the hunt, destruction and calamity tend to befall these justice seekers and those around them. Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes that this type of person “suffers from a kind of manic rationality.” In contrast, those who are willing to go “*lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*” - beyond the letter of the law – avoid unnecessary disputes. They either realize that there are two sides to the story or they are willing to let things go, even if they “know” they are correct. They rather have peace than be right.

In order to prove to all that Aharon was chosen as the *Kohen Gadol*, God told Moshe to take a staff from the head of each tribe and place them all in the Tent of Meeting. By the next day, Aharon’s staff had blossomed and sprout forth almonds. Rabbi Menachem Sacks, in his commentary *Menachem Zion*, finds a deep symbolism in the fact that the staff produced almonds, and not another fruit. Within the context of the laws of tithing, the *Mishna* informs us that there are two types of almonds; those that are bitter when they are small and sweet when they develop, and those that are sweet when they are small and bitter when they grow bigger.

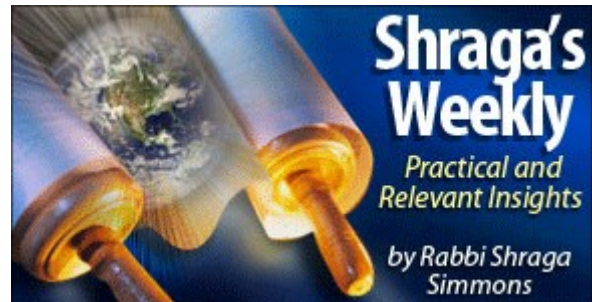
Fights and disagreements often feel sweet and right in the moment but lead to bitterness and regrets in the long run. Peace, on the other hand, is often difficult to maintain in the moment. It is difficult to

bite our tongues and not respond when we think we are justified. But in the long run this will lead to ultimate sweetness.

Yet, this does not mean that we should give up on communicating our deeply held beliefs just because someone might disagree. The *Mishna* in *Avot* (5:17) identifies the conflict of Korach and his followers as a “dispute not for the sake of Heaven” and pits them against the disputes between Hillel and Shammai, which were “for the sake of Heaven.” Obviously, there is a place for disputes, as long as they are “for the sake of Heaven.” The difficulty is how to define what is considered “for the sake of Heaven,” especially when one can easily justify and rationalize that one is pursuing truth and justice “for the sake of Heaven.”

While a more comprehensive and individualized answer to this query is warranted, let it suffice for now to suggest that most of the arguments that we have on a regular basis with our spouses, children, family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, community members, and social media acquaintances, are probably NOT what the *Mishna* would consider “for the sake of Heaven.”

The question then becomes, what is our goal? Do we want to be right or be happy? If we want happiness, let us consider focusing less on truth, and more on peace.



## Pursuit of Peace

A Jewish man is shipwrecked on a desert island. After 10 years he's finally rescued by a passing ship. When the rescuers disembark on the island, they are surprised to find the man has built himself an entire civilization: golf course, restaurant, and two synagogues.

"But since you're here all alone on the island," they asked, "why do you have **TWO synagogues?**"

"Because," replied the man, pointing to the buildings, "that's the one I go to, and that's the one I don't!"

## Korach – What's So Bad?

In this week's Parsha, a terrible dispute erupts amongst the Jewish people. A man named Korach accuses Moses of corruption. Korach then recruits 250 men and stages a full-fledged rebellion. In the end, the earth opens up and swallows Korach and his cohorts alive.

Why such a terrible punishment? Judaism regards quarrelling as one of the gravest sins. Why? Because divisiveness contradicts the essential unity of God. A

flower has perfect form and symmetry, the ecosystem functions harmoniously, the colors of a sunset blend perfectly. Quarreling – with its tension, allegations and incriminations – undermines the harmony of creation. (Midrash Bamidbar Rabba 11:7)

In Hebrew, the word for peace, *shalom*, is derived from the root *shalem*, which means whole or complete. Peace is not merely the absence of war. Peace is a cooperative, symbiotic relationship, where both parties care for each other, assist each other, and ultimately complete each other.

### How to Avoid a Quarrel

We've all been faced with confrontation. It may be a business dispute, or simply jockeying for position at a red light.

So what should we do? The surest way to immediately defuse any conflict is to refuse to participate. Remember: It takes two to argue.

In our Parsha, Moses asks to meet with the provocateurs Datan and Aviram. Moses eagerly pursues peace even though it means the risk of personal humiliation (see Numbers 16:8,12).

The Talmud (Avot 1:12) describes Aaron as the master of pursuing peace. If Aaron saw two people arguing, he would tell each of them that the other admitted his mistake and wants to make up. That way, each party saves face, allowing the dispute to end. How much family dysfunction could be spared with this advice!

### Well-Intentioned Argument

The topic of "peace" is a popular one these days. We hear everyone talk about peace in the home, peace with the Arabs, peace in the inner city.

Peace is perhaps the most central theme in Judaism. The words of King David (Psalms 133:1), *"How good and pleasant is it for brothers to sit peacefully together,"* are perhaps the most popular Hebrew song. The Amidah prayer, said three times daily, ends with the word "Shalom." The Grace After Meals ends with the word "Shalom." The Birkat Kohanim (Priestly Blessing) ends with the word "Shalom." The entire Talmud ends with the word "Shalom." As well, the Talmud declares, "Shalom" is one of the Names of God!

But if peace is such an essential Jewish value, then why are Jews always arguing?!

Quarreling should not be confused with well-intentioned controversy. Any student of the Talmud knows that the schools of Hillel and Shammai were always arguing. Yet their respect for one another grew because they knew the disputes were for the purpose of reaching a common understanding. In fact, the Talmud (Yevamot 14b) reports that the children of Hillel and Shammai intentionally married each other to show they were at peace.

The Talmud states: "Just as no two faces are exactly alike, likewise no two opinions are exactly alike." Rabbi Shlomo Eiger explains this in terms of peaceful human relations: The fact that other people have different facial features does not bother me in the slightest. In fact, I am actually glad

this is so, because it preserves my uniqueness! So too, I should appreciate the unique perspective that others bring to my life.

The Talmud (Avot 5:20) describes a well-intentioned controversy as that between Hillel and Shammai. A poor-intentioned controversy is that of Korach and his followers, who tried to manipulate others for their own selfish power struggle.

### Hammering Out the Truth

Judaism does not object to argument, if it is for the sake of truth. In fact, sincere disputants will ultimately feel love for one another. What's most striking about a yeshiva is that the study partners are always yelling at each other. The forcefulness of their positions engenders not animosity, but rather increased respect!

The Talmud relates a story about the great scholar Rebbe Yochanan and his study partner Reish Lakish. The two learned together for many years, until one day Reish Lakish got sick and died. Rebbe Yochanan was totally distraught over the loss. His students tried to comfort him, saying, "Don't worry, Rebbe. We'll find you a new study partner – the most brilliant man in town."

A few weeks later, Rebbe Yochanan was seen walking down the street, totally depressed. "Rebbe," his students asked. "What's the problem? We sent you a brilliant study partner. Why are you so sad?"

Rebbe Yochanan told them: "This man is indeed a scholar. In fact, he's so brilliant

that he can come up with 24 ways to prove that what I'm saying is correct. But when I studied with Reish Lakish, he brought me 24 proofs that what I was saying was wrong. And that's what I miss! The goal of study is not to just have someone agree with me. I want him to criticize, question, and prove to me that I'm wrong. That's what Torah study's about."

### Israel Today

This week's Parsha states clearly: "*Don't be like Korach*" (Numbers 17:5) – which the Talmud (Sanhedrin 110a) explains is the prohibition against quarreling.

Hatred, jealousy and infighting are unfortunately not new terms to our people. The Talmud (Yoma 9b) says that it was baseless hatred amongst Jews which brought about the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple has lain in ruins for 2,000 years.

Only through unconditional love will it be rebuilt.

Much is said about internal disputes between Jews in Israel. Perhaps we cannot completely eliminate these disputes. But we must never forget an essential rule: "Every person is worthy of profound respect, regardless of their beliefs and level of observance."

I may have differences and disagree with other Jews on various issues. I may disagree with my wife on various issues as well. But just as I would never consider distancing from my wife based on our disagreements, so too I would never consider distancing myself from other Jews.

In Israel - where the issue of Jewish unity is most critical - much is being done to address the problem. Organizations like Geshar and Common Denominator run programs to bring together divergent groups - kibbutzniks with settlers, or secular with religious - to help discover that what unites us is ultimately greater than that which divides us.

How appropriate that the city of Jerusalem is actually a contraction of two words - Yeru-Shalem - "peace will be seen." May the Almighty bless us with the patience and sensitivity to avoid destructive arguments, and to accord proper respect to all.



## The Roots of All Evil

Korah, a cousin of Moses from the distinguished tribe of the Levites, falls prey to two of the three sins which our Sages teach are the source of all destructive character traits: *jealousy* and the *thirst for honor*. (The third character trait is lust.) In his obsession, Korah foments rebellion and tries to unseat Moses and Aaron.

“*Vayikach Korach* – And Korah took”<sup>1</sup> are the opening words of the *parashah*, and our Sages explain that he “took,” i.e., seduced, people with persuasive words. He duped

them and managed to incite 250 leaders of the nation to join him.

Those who participated in Korah’s rebellion all had their own hidden agendas. First and foremost among them were Dathan and Abiram, who had a long history of attacking Moses and who harbored a desire to return to Egypt. Then there was the neighboring tribe of Reuben. Korah convinced them that Moses was guilty of nepotism. Stating that it was not by the command of God that Moses had appointed Aaron as High Priest, but rather, by his own ambition to keep all the high honors for his own family. Korah’s arguments fell on willing ears since, following the sin of the Golden Calf, Reuben lost his privileged position as the firstborn. Reuben’s vulnerability also lay in his close proximity to Korah, reinforcing the warning of our Sages, “Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor.” We must be careful when choosing a place of residence, for our neighbors can influence us without our even realizing it.

## Accusations, Libels, and a Formula for Peace

There are times in life when accusations are leveled that are so outrageous, so egregious, that one is left stunned and unable to respond. Moses – lovingly referred to as “*Ro’eh Ne’eman*, the loyal shepherd” – who sacrificed his entire life for his people, who wrestled with God and put himself on the line by declaring, “If You forgive them, good, and if not, erase my name from Your Book,”<sup>2</sup> is now put on trial by this pretender and accused of nepotism and greed.

One can only imagine the pain that Moses must have felt at this senseless accusation. We gain a glimpse of his suffering when the Torah tells us that he “fell on his face” in prayer,<sup>3</sup> for what could he have possibly said when confronted by such ingratitude and betrayal?

How would you have reacted in Moses’ place? What can we learn from Moses to help us when we are unjustly accused by those for whom we sacrificed and gave our love?

By all rights, Moses would have been justified in reacting furiously and demanding the obliteration of the insurgents, but instead, he tried to reason with them: “In the morning (*boker*) Hashem will make known ...,” he said.<sup>4</sup> The word “*boker*” does not only mean “morning,” but is related to the word “*bikores*,” meaning “to clarify, to investigate.” By telling them to “sleep on it, to wait until the morning,” Moses hoped that they would examine their own motivations and re-think their malevolent plans. Sadly, however, they remained adamant and refused to concede their evil intent. So lesson number one that we learn is not to act hastily or precipitously. Before speaking, before acting, before condemning, try to make peace. Tell your opponent to “sleep on it, to wait until morning” in the hope that he/she will investigate and find clarity. Unfortunately, in the case of Korah, it did not work. Korah and his followers remained blind and obdurate. Nevertheless, Moses’ example is here to guide us.

Despite it all, however, Moses did not give up. He sent for Dathan and Abiram and

tried to make peace with them but once again, they arrogantly refused, so Moses, the prophet of God, the leader of Israel, the beloved rabbi of all the Jewish people, did not hesitate to humble himself, but personally went to Dathan and Abiram in a final effort to make peace.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, we are given a profound lesson. If strife and contention plague our families or community, let us not stand on ceremony, but let us be the first to extend the hand of peace. If Moses didn’t feel that he compromised his honor by humbling himself, how can we? Even if our overtures are rebuffed, we should not give up, but try and try again.

Our Sages admonish us not to keep a quarrel going and gave us a threefold formula to achieve peace: “Be like a teakettle, be like a bird, and be like a river.”

A teakettle makes peace between fire and water, even though it becomes scorched in the process.

- Try to catch a bird: It will fly away. Someone took your seat, your parking place? Instead of being angry, learn from the bird: Fly away.
- The banks of the river keep the waters from overflowing. Learn control and do not permit the floodwaters of your temper to take over.
- Let us take to heart Moses’ example: Pursue peace and make every attempt at reconciliation.

## The Disastrous Consequences of Jealousy

Korah possessed everything to which a man could aspire: He was brilliant, came from a noble family, was majestic in appearance, and was the wealthiest man of his time. But all his attainments were for naught because he had no peace; his heart was consumed by jealousy. His obsession came to a tragic climax in the controversy he fomented, resulting in his death and that of his family as well as of many others.

Jealousy is the ugliest trait a person can harbor, so how can we protect ourselves from its deadly sting? Whenever we feel it invading our hearts, let us bear in mind that jealousy is pointless and also self-destructive. It is pointless because the venomous feelings that envy generates will not alter our situation; if anything, it will make it worse. What we covet will not become ours, but it will prevent us from enjoying what we *do* have, and worse, it will transform us into bitter, cruel individuals. Thus, Korah – who at first had everything – in the end had nothing. All his accomplishments, all his wealth, had no meaning because, in his mind’s eye, all he saw was *the crown of the priesthood on his cousin’s head*.

The story of Korah speaks to us in every generation. Alas, jealousy has been the undoing of man since the beginning of time when Cain rose up to kill his brother Abel. *Baruch Hashem*, in our own generation, we enjoy so many blessings, and yet we are discontented and ungrateful. Somehow, we always feel that our neighbor, our relative, our friend, is better off than we, that the

grass is greener on the other side, Thus, we rob ourselves of our peace of mind, make ourselves miserable, and are unable to enjoy those blessings that we *do* have. So, instead of looking enviously at others, we would do well to focus on our own lives and develop our own potential.

The great Chassidic leader, the Rebbe Reb Zisha, was once asked if he would have preferred to have been born the Patriarch Abraham. To which he responded, “What would the Almighty God gain from that? There would still be only *one*] Abraham and *one* Reb Zisha.” This teaching of Reb Zisha’s is one that we would do well to contemplate. We must realize that each and every one of us has a special task and that, throughout our lives, we must strive to fulfill the purpose for which God created us. Instead of trying to imitate others, we should probe our own souls and become our own unique selves. Genuine joy can only be found in the knowledge that we are standing at the post to which we were assigned by God, and are fulfilling His Will. On the other hand, self-aggrandizement and an envious eye can only lead to frustration and destruction. The sooner we realize this, the sooner we will know peace of mind.

In living a purposeful life, it is important to remember the very first passage of this *parashah* in which it is related that Korah took it, which means that the life of Korah centered on *taking* rather than *giving*. Takers are never content, since genuine happiness can only be found in giving. Had Korah realized that, he would have understood that the very essence of life is

to help others and create a relationship with Hashem; that realization would have enabled him to rejoice in the achievements of his fellow man.

1. Ibid. 16:1.
2. Cf. *Exodus* 32:32.
3. *Numbers* 16:4.
4. Ibid. 16:5.
5. Ibid. 16:25.

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