

UNHEALTHY CONFLICT



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT KORACH
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Conflict is ubiquitous in so many areas of life and there are numerous fields of research that study this fiery topic as it manifests in these different contexts. Industrial and organizational psychologists investigate conflict in the workplace, marriage and family therapists look at conflict between relatives, political psychologists work to understand conflict on a more global scale, and social psychologists study conflict on a more general level. While naturally there is some conflict amongst the research findings about conflict, there are generally agreed upon trends as to what causes conflicts and the best ways to try and resolve them.

Jewish tradition is also heavily concerned with conflict resolution and the pursuit of peace. Rabbi Dr. Howard Kaminsky recently published a book called *Fundamentals of Jewish Conflict Resolution: Traditional Jewish Perspective on Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts*, where he systematically gathers and summarizes ideas found in Biblical and Rabbinic literature, comparing those sources with modern approaches to conflict resolution. What follows is a brief summary his main points as they relate to Parshat Korach.

The Sages (Sanhedrin 110a) articulate an actual prohibition of perpetuating a quarrel, based on the pasuk that states “Do not be like Korach and his congregation” (Bemidbar 17:5). Rabbi Yehonatan mi-Lunil argues that even though Moshe was in the right and was unjustly attacked, if he didn’t try to stop the dispute, he would have violated the prohibition. Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel suggests further that we can learn from Moshe’s continual attempts to resolve the conflict, that the prohibition even applies after the other party rejects earlier attempts at reconciliation.

The Mishna in Avot (5:17) distinguishes between the disputes of Hillel and Shammai, which are considered for the sake of Heaven, and the dispute between Korach and his followers, which are not. We are just given paradigms, without delineation of any particular criteria for identifying a dispute for the sake of Heaven. It is up to the commentators to fill in the gaps, and many use the nuances of the narrative reported in Parshat Korach to elucidate the parameters.

Summarizing and organizing the commentaries, Rabbi Dr. Kaminsky presents three criteria that indicate that a dispute is not for the sake of Heaven. One is that the party demonstrates a lack of intellectual integrity. They are uninterested in engaging in any clarifying and compromising dialogue. They are right and nothing anyone can say will change their minds. A second criterion is the content and tone of the argument. If it is clear that they are condemning and insulting the other party, with a backdrop of animosity, then the dispute is not for the sake of Heaven. The final criterion relates to the motivation of the dispute. If the provocation is rooted in anything but the pursuit of truth and peace, that is a strong clue that it is not for the sake of Heaven. As various midrashim indicate with Korach, his true motivation was rooted in arrogance, jealousy and hurt, not a more noble internal impulse.

The difficulty, as Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz poignantly adds, is that most people aren't always aware of these ulterior motives and subconscious motivations within themselves. Most people can rationalize away their participation in any dispute as being for the sake of Heaven, even if it is not. If we truly want to follow Moshe's paradigm and avoid Korach's example, we would be wise to reflect before any dispute and engage in an honest introspection. Are we listening to the other party and really concerned with intellectual integrity? Are we being overcome with hostility and other unhealthy negative emotions towards the other party? Can we honestly say—knowing that it is so easy to delude ourselves—that we are not being driven by ulterior motives? If we aren't confident that we pass these criteria, we would generally do well to avoid conflict as much as possible.

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