



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

DISPUTE & DISUNITY

Controversy is part of human existence.

Human beings will always have their own way of thinking, acting and responding. It is impossible for everyone to be the same and agree on everything.

But Judaism does not endorse every kind of controversy.

The classical analysis is in Pirkei Avot: "Every controversy for the sake of heaven will finally be established, but if not for the sake of heaven it will not be established. What is a controversy for the sake of heaven? This is the controversy of Hillel and Shammai. And one not for the sake of heaven? This is the controversy of Korach and his congregation" (Avot 5:20).

What is meant by a controversy being "established"?

One possibility is that in the end it will lead to a worthwhile result; it will advance the cause of truth and assist in perfecting the creation. Or perhaps it means that generations to come will continue to discuss the issue, and the debate will echo down the ages.

To illustrate that kind of controversy, the Hillel-Shammai debate was chosen.

Both protagonists were earnest seekers of the truth. There was nothing unworthy in their motives. They sought only to understand the Torah. Their approaches differed, but they were both genuinely acting for the sake of heaven.

But the second illustration seems illogical. If the first is the paradigm, the second should have read, "Korach and Moshe", not "Korach and his congregation".

It was Moshe whom Korach and his people were challenging, Moshe with whom they were in conflict. So why is Moshe not named as the other side of the machloket?

One answer is that the motives of the two sides were different. Korach was not pursuing God's interests but his own prestige, power and status.

Moshe's motive, on the other hand, was pure and disinterested. He was fighting God's battle, not his own. His leadership position had been given by God. He had not appointed himself, nor had he wanted to be appointed. To see him as acting "not for the sake of heaven" would be an insult.

There is another way of looking at the passage.

Malbim remarks that, like any controversy pursued for selfish ends, "even those who have come together on one side are not really united. Each is governed by his own calculations of

what he stands to gain and is ready to cut the others' throats."

Korach and his group were each out for their own ends. They were not united amongst themselves, and Moshe was not involved in their conflict - it was Korach versus his congregation.

Truly a tragedy. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH