

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Korach

When I was a teenager, I loved to attend the *shi'urim* (lessons) by my teacher Rav Auerbach, of blessed memory, in Jerusalem. I vividly remember Rav Auerbach stopping in the middle of a class to ask, "Does everybody understand me?" Then he always added, "Can you please ask me more questions?" We students used to look at one another. A moment of silence. Then Rav Auerbach looked at each of us and said, "Please ask me questions. Please. It makes me so happy." His warm personality and inquisitiveness gave me, and so many others, a deep love of Judaism.

Jews are taught to question everything, to examine every side of an issue. Children do this naturally, and we should encourage them in finding answers to their questions. But can asking questions go too far? When does questioning cross the line and become rebellion?

This week's Torah portion is about Moses's cousin, Korach, head of the tribe of Levi. Despite his wealth and status, Korach was envious of the power and position of Moses and his brother, Aaron. Korach questioned their authority and fomented an uprising against them. Korach's story demonstrates the difference between asking questions for the sake of understanding, and asking for the sake of tearing down authority and breaking down community.

The Mishnah (*Avot* 5:20) teaches that controversy "for the sake of Heaven" has a constructive outcome; one that is not for the sake of Heaven is destructive. The Talmudic debates of Hillel and Shammai, about the fine points of Jewish law and practice, are considered disputes for the sake of Heaven. Never personal (the Talmud teaches that their disciples married into each other's families), their sole purpose was to elucidate Jewish law – to comprehend, explain, and clarify, but not to denounce.

Korach's disagreement with Moses, however, was about jealousy, ego, one-upmanship – mutiny. "Why," Korach asked Moses, "do you [and Aaron] raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" He and his followers accused Moses of nepotism for appointing Aaron to be the high priest, and they were punished for their questioning. But was it such a crime to criticize, to question? Perhaps Korach's sin was not that he condemned Moses's authority, but that his criticism

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wasn't constructive; he offered no alternatives, but simply rejected the authority of Moses and Aaron and led his followers in a mass defection from their leadership.

How did Moses respond? The Torah tells us that "he fell on his face," a sign of his trademark humility. Realizing the futility of arguing with Korach, Moses calmly advised him to come back the next morning and lay his fire pans of incense before God. It would be left to God to choose which offerings to accept.

The next morning, when the moment of truth arrived, Moses and Aaron begged God not to annihilate the entire Jewish people because of the sins of one man. Shortly thereafter, the ground opened and swallowed up Korach, his followers, and their families. This was God's response to the rebellious questioning of Korach, whose blinding self-interest prevented him from questioning "for the sake of Heaven" and threatened to drag down the spirit and unity of the Jewish people.

Moses was like a father to the Jewish people; he loved the children of Israel as a father loves his children. He understood that it is the nature of a person – and especially of a Jew – to ask questions. Still, he felt betrayed by the actions of Korach, not because Korach questioned, but because of the way he questioned.

Our ability to ask questions is a gift from God. Like all gifts, it must be used wisely. The children in our lives ask questions as part of their nature, and as part of their purpose. Their questions are an expression of their innate desire to know and understand, and by helping them find answers, our own understanding grows along with theirs.

Questions from a child – even when they have a tone of defiance – come out of their innocence and reflect a sincere desire for knowledge. Our task is to satisfy their thirst for understanding, to encourage their questions in a spirit of joy, and to foster their love of Judaism and Torah through honest conversation and loving relationships. In this way, we can hope to merit that we and our children will question openly, and without rebelliousness.

Shabbat Shalom!

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