

Dear Chavraya,

We have all felt the unpleasant aftertaste of an argument. Most of us, I assume, prefer to avoid argument, whether with family, friends, or colleagues. I have a cousin who perversely delights in egging people on, in raising interpersonal streams of discourse to the boiling point. I try to remember that when speaking with him, and try not to take the bait. Indeed, this is what baiting is. Without purpose, without structure and underlying respect, argument is destructive, the kind of interaction we reasonably try to avoid. Argument, however, is an inevitable consequence of difference, and is only negative in the way and purpose of our engaging in it.

There is much to learn about the nature of argument in the tragic unfolding of conflict in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*. The culminating event in the *parasha* is well known, and represents the ultimate irresolution of conflict, destruction of the other. The earth opens up and swallows Korach and his followers. In the dynamics of Torah there is teaching and challenge in failure, whether of people or God. In Moses' falling to the ground before Korach humble expression is given to the tragedy of failing to transform the other. Korach has fomented rebellion against Moses and Aaron, who in our terms represent respectively political and religious leadership. There are times when challenging leadership is called for and is the noble and right course. Moses himself begins his career as rebel, challenging in God's name the iron fist of Pharaoh. Moses' goal is the liberation of his people.

The very first word of the Torah portion that bears his name reveals the less than noble goals of Korach's rebellion. *Vayikach Korach/And Korach took* suggests an effort to seize power, to take for one's own purpose. Three names follow that of Korach in the first sentence, yet the verb is in the singular, and further, the verb does not have an object. Each of those who joined with Korach came for their own purpose, the *taking* of power its own object, its own objective.

In *Pirke Avot/Chapters of the Ancestors*, the rabbis offer a standard by which to recognize the worthiness of an argument or challenge: *Every argument that is for the sake of Heaven will in the end lead to a lasting result, but an argument that is not for the sake of Heaven will not in the end be permanent*. An argument that ensues from the pursuit of truth and deeper understanding is of lasting meaning, and so too even our own interpersonal arguments when guided by the quietly understood hope of a stronger bond. The rabbis cite the passionate differences between Hillel and Shammai, the arguments of each preserved in the Talmud, as being for the sake of Heaven, while those of Korach are absent of such higher purpose.

In the space that opens up between two parties to an argument there is creative possibility if each has the desire to fill that space with meaning. In our words of exchange across the hollow space that only initially divides, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov posits a creative potential that is nothing less than God's creation of a world.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor