

Dear Chavraya,

I have had two occasions this week in which I found myself in an argument in which I realized that we were stuck. In each case it was a small group of people and we were unable to make headway, unable to move from the discomfort of an argument in which there seemed to be no easy or graceful exit for anyone.

Neither case was one of fiery anger, of raised voices, but of pained searching, troubled by what was on the table before us, and by our seeming inability to find a way to draw together differences in the search for common ground. They were very different situations, one a deep discussion with a committee of my rabbinic colleagues, through which in the end we were unable to resolve the matter we had come together to address. The other was a case with great consequence for one person, the defendant in a trial for which I found myself on the jury. I needed to feel comfortable with the process of the jury's deliberations, to know that we had given whatever time was needed to wrestling with the facts of the case, not to worry about the late hour or expired parking meters.

I have come to see in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*, much teaching on the nature of argument. Dynamics are modeled, both positive and negative, to help us see our way beyond that place of being stuck, perhaps even the way to common ground. Korach and his company challenge Moses and Aaron. Korach, a Levi, is a leader in his own right. The common rabbinic view is that Korach and his followers are seeking the political and religious power represented by Moses and Aaron. The sense of "taking," of overreaching, is drawn from the first word of the parsha, *va'yikach/and he took*. The challenge set forth by Korach and the others is quite reasonable, their premise well supported by the Torah itself. Gathered together, others undoubtedly coming forth to see what is going on, the challenge is laid out: *You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire community, they are all holy and God is in their midst*. The matter of taking on too much brings an echo of Yitro's challenge to Moses, his concern that his son-in-law will burn out under the burden of leadership. The beloved elder advises the younger one to share responsibility, to spread the burden and thereby make it lighter. The difference between the two similar challenges is in the clear concern in one for the person challenged. It becomes a matter of how we challenge, whether with love or anger, and even if with righteous anger, then how also with love.

I realized something with this year's reading of the parsha that I had never noticed before. I was fascinated to realize that Korach himself never actually speaks for himself, never as an individual, reference to the words cast at Moses and Aaron appearing only in the plural, as spoken by the whole group. In that strange silence a context is created in which to consider the nature of an argument. Never speaking, it is not in truth about Korach, but about us. We come to see, both in the text of the Torah and in rabbinic commentary, what works and what doesn't work in seeking to convince another of the rightness of your view. Korach has raised a valid argument, but it is not heard for its truth, rather, only for its challenge. Moses, too, offers a way of response that in its essence might bridge the divide, reaching out to the other, seeking to talk. Moses at first sends messengers to two of those allied with Korach, Datan and Aviram, asking them to come and talk. In the context of the parsha as it becomes our own, not about Moses any more than about Korach, we realize the need for personal

contact. As Moses later realizes, reaching out is the starting point, but it needs to be with our own presence, to go ourselves to the other and ask to talk. We are equally obligated to respond to the one who extends a hand across the divide, and in that Datan and Aviram failed.

The standard for what defines a holy argument, one in which people are able to get unstuck and still speak with each other afterward, as they stand together on common ground is whether the argument is *for the sake of heaven/l'shem shamayim*. In a classic teaching in *Pirke Avot*, the rabbis offer paradigms, the debates between the schools of Hillel and Shammai as arguments for the sake of heaven, while those of Korach fail to rise to such a height. In a powerful commentary, Rabbi Ovadia Me'bartanura, one of the classic expositors of the Mishna, teaches that it is about means and ends. To rise to the level of holiness, the nature of our argument needs to hold within it the seeds of the end we seek. If the end is holy, imbued with concern for the wellbeing of others, so must be the process of getting there. Of an argument that is for the sake of heaven, Rabbi Ovadia teaches, *the beginning and the end of the argument reflect a seeking of the truth*. Going further, he says, *from within the argument the truth is clarified/mi'toch ha'viku'ach yit'barer ha'emet*. In an argument that is not for the sake of heaven there is in its essence *a quest for power and a love of victory/bakashat has'rara v'ahavat ha'nitzu'ach*.

We are taught from this parsha that we should not hold on to an argument; that we need to know when to let go, *ayn mach'zikin ba'mach'loket/don't hold to an argument*. The Slonimer Rebbe asks why the rabbis emphasize not to hold on to an argument rather than suggest that we shouldn't argue at all. We learn what we already know, of course, that it is human to argue. The key is to know how to argue and when to let go, when to pause and together seek common ground. When we find ourselves in such situations as I found myself in this week, when we seem stuck and unable to move, it is time to pause and ask of each other, how shall we find the way out? In seeking the way together, rather than each seeking to overcome and to vanquish the other, our arguments become for the sake of heaven. Only on Shabbos we are told not to be angry. The *mitzvah* not to kindle fire on Shabbos is understood metaphorically to be the fire of anger. In so refraining from anger and argument on one day, may we learn how to better direct our anger on other days, that all of our arguments may be for the sake of heaven.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor