

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Korach 20 “Skinhead”

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I’d like to acknowledge that last week’s sermon was sponsored by Aliza Jaffe and Ben Sass, in honor of the birth of their son Leo. Mazal tov!

I believe it’s safe to say that we’re living in a time that seems fraught with contention. Of course, if you look back over history, it’s clear that conflict is inherent in the human condition, so in that sense, what we’re going through is not all that unusual. But in certain periods, like the one we’re experiencing now, the conflict feels particularly intense and pervasive. I think this week’s Parsha is highly relevant to this topic because it focuses on Korach, who was notorious for his contentious behavior. In Pirkei Avot, the Mishnah contrasts two prime examples of dispute, *machloket*, in Jewish history: Hillel and Shammai, who in Pirkei Avot 5:17 were said to disagree for the sake of heaven, and Korach and his group, who engaged in infighting for their own selfish purposes, **not** for the sake of heaven.

These characterizations raise several questions. First, what practical lesson can we learn from this Mishna? How do you know if a dispute is for the sake of heaven or not? Doesn't everyone who argues make that claim? Second, why does the Mishnah refer to fighting between Korach and his own group, when the Parsha's narrative seems to be about Korach arguing with Moshe?

It is interesting to note that *Korach* is also a Hebrew word, which can be pronounced *keireiach*, *bald*. The Talmud tells about an individual named Yehoshua ben Korcha, and that Korcha refers to Rabbi Akiba – he was known as the “bald guy”. So, it's ironic that the Gemara in Mesechet Menachot 29b tells us that he is said to have learned secrets of the Torah from the “hairs”, aka the crowns on the letters of the Torah.

Hair has always been an important symbol, both in the Torah and in secular society. We read that in his youth, Joseph used to gaze in the mirror as he curled his long hair, which was one way he expressed his individuality. His brothers resented his behavior because they believed in subordinating one's individuality to the group. The Kohanim and particularly the Kohen Gadol, were required to frequently cut their hair.

Even today, you see examples of people who use hair as an expression of their values; for example, skinheads shave their heads in order to show affiliation with those who share their beliefs. And as evidenced by the name of the rock-musical “Hair”, the controversial political views of late 1960’s youth were symbolized by long, flowing hair.

Korach maintained that the group should take precedence, and that’s how he rationalized his opposition to God’s elevation of Moshe and Aaron to positions of leadership. In today’s contentious climate, we see Korach’s philosophy expressed by both left and right wing extremists, just as we’ve seen it before in both Communist and Fascist movements – what they all have in common is that they allow no dissension. Our Parsha sends an important message when it tells us that Korach got eaten up by the ground. Why? Because there was no other way to vanquish his form of fanaticism, which was rooted in selfish intentions and a disrespect for human nature. Korach refused to accept the way God created human beings, as creatures who seek individual fulfillment along with group identity.

Which is why no matter how much organizers insist on total devotion to a group cause, someone always rises to the top and seizes all the power and money.

This is the consistent theme we have been discussing regarding the book of Bamidbar. Our Parsha is demonstrating once again that group identity should not be strengthened at the expense of respect among members. And that's how you know if an argument is for the sake of heaven or not.

Hillel and Shamai disagreed, but always in the context of regard for one another and a recognition that peace and respect for the other should be maintained. If conflict ensues without making room for disagreement, and therefore suppresses individuality, that is a telltale sign that it's not for the sake of heaven, since God does not value conflict at the expense of individuality.

Which brings us back to the question of why the Parsha does not say that Korach fought with Moshe. We are told that Korach fought with *kol adato*, his entire group, because his kind of *machloket* was the kind that ends up provoking infighting among the very group its leader claims to represent. That is the inevitable result of trying to destroy individuality.

When it comes to the practice of Judaism as well as secular politics, we must always be mindful that while devotion to the group is a laudable ideal, it should never be so extreme that it denigrates the efforts and ideas of the individual group members. *Korach* teaches us that the unfortunate but inevitable outcome of such discord is complete and utter destruction of the group itself. Shabbat shalom.