Thank You for Disagreeing With Me

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – July 5, 2019

1. This week's Torah portion is Korach
2. Korach is the leader of a rebellion along with his sons against Moses and Aaron, he openly disagrees with them and challenges their leadership.
    a. He says to them, "Moses! You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Adonai is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Adonai's congregation?" (Numbers 16:3)
    b. This really angers Moses who cries to God, "Pay no regard to their complaints. I have not taken anything that belongs to them, nor have I wronged any one of them." (Numbers 16:15)
    c. God sides with Moses and kills Korach and his followers in an Earthquake and Plague
        i. That's good old divine justice for you.
        ii. Korach's end seems to suggest what Moses' spies alluded to last week when they announced that the land "eats those who dwell on it.…"
            1. And yet, isn't there something in us that wants to be a bit like Korach: challenging authority, asserting ourselves, and leading our own band?
                a. We can disagree, argumentative, we can object and that's not always a bad thing. In fact its only through

disagreement and challenge that we can learn and grow and get better.

iii. To put it another way, if a leader surrounds themselves with only those that agree with them or our news feeds include only those opinions that validate what we already think and believe, what good does that do us or our cares and concerns?

3. There is a story in the Talmud of R'Yochanan and Resh Lakish
4. They were brothers-in-law and study partners who debated their conflicting opinions on almost every branch of Talmudic law. When Resh Lakish died, R'Yochanan was left distraught. R'Elazar ben Pedat, a great scholar of the day, tried to comfort R'Yochanan by substituting for Resh Lakish as his learning partner….
    a. The TALMUD tells
        i. …Every opinion that R'Yochanan would offer, R'Elazar would confirm it with a Tannaitic source. Eventually, R'Yochanan lashed out: "Are you like the son of Lakish? Not in the least! For with him, when I would give my opinion on the Halacha, the son of Lakish would ask 24 questions, and I would answer him back with 24 responses. In such a manner, our legal discussion meant much more; it became larger and enhanced. But you merely provide my opinion with supportive proofs. Don't I know [already] that my opinions have merit?" R'Yochanan walked aimlessly, tearing his garments and weeping on end. He cried

out: “Where are you, son of Lakish? Where are you?”…The other sages prayed for him for mercy, but R’Yochanan soon died. [Baba Metzia, 84a]

b. He was lost without a contrarian voice in his life
    i. AND SO ARE WE
    ii. We need to be challenged, we need a Korahc to test us, even if the suffering is unwelcomed and troubling.
        1. Thank you God for my troubles, thank you God for my detractors, they make me better.

5. AND YET Jewish tradition has not been kind to Korach
    a. Korach is the arch-demagogue, lusting for power to inflate his own prominence, not to serve the people.
        i. His argument was not *L’shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven but rather for his own ego and self aggrandizement
        ii. He becomes sort of a household name (at least in a household that understand the reference) – we say to someone who appears to place their needs ahead of the greater good, ‘You’re being like Korach’ again it only works if you get the reference, but then it is a withering rebuke.
            1. The Mishnah describes all illegitimate controversy for personal gain as “Korach and his followers” - Not “and Moses” for each faction had their own agenda. They were united only in their opposition to Moses and Aaron…They

defined themselves by what they were against, not by a vision of what they stood for.

2. To be Korach is to stand only in opposition, against everything, not to stand for something.

6. Another story from the TALMUD…
    a. R'Abba taught in the name of Shmu'el: For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting: The Halacha is in agreement with our views, and the latter contending, the Halacha is in agreement with our views. Then a Bat Kol came forth announcing: These and those are the words of the living God, but the Halacha is in agreement with Beit Hillel. Since both are words of the living God, what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the Halacha in his favor? Because they [Hillel's Academy of study] were humble and kind, studying their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai…And even more, citing the arguments of Beit Shammai even before their own. [Eruvin, 13b]
7. We need the contrarian, we need the one who picks apart our assumptions, challenges our opinions – and we need to do that to others.
    a. **But** we need to do it *l'shem shamayim* for their betterment not our own. To be constructive not destructive in our words and deeds.
        i. **Sometimes you have to tear down in order to rebuild**

ii. **But if you tear down and destroy only for the sake of making a mess of things, a pile of rubble – you are Korach, the antithesis of being a mensch.**