

Seizing upon a Dispute

Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Korah

Moses arose and approached Dathan and Aviram. (Numbers 16:25)

In the Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah*), the Talmudic sage Resh Lakish says that from this we learn that one should not seize upon a dispute.

Another of the sages, Rav, elaborates by saying that whoever seizes upon a genuine disagreement for the sake of personal gain transgresses the Torah's negative commandment (Numbers 17:5), **Do not act like Korah and his group.**

Rabbi Assi goes further and says that one who does so is worthy of being struck by *tzara'at* (traditionally, but inaccurately, called "leprosy"), for it is written here, **Do not act like Korah and his group, as the Eternal spoke through the agency** [literally *the hand*] **of Moses**, which he connects to the incident in Exodus 4:6, where Moses' hand is turned white as snow, just as *tzara'at* turns the skin white. (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 18,20).

This Midrash sees that the main transgression of Korah and his cohort is that they seized upon or grabbed hold of a genuine dispute. The thrust of the Midrash is to explain the verse which forbids us to act like Korah to mean that we are forbidden to "seize upon a dispute" and use it for personal reasons.

It is permitted – even thought to be a blessing – to disagree. Disputes over Torah are not considered bad in the Jewish tradition. But there is a concept of "seizing upon" the dispute, and it is this action which is forbidden in the verse under

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consideration. The Midrash amplifies this point by the comment of Rabbi Assi. Rabbi Assi interprets the difficulty in the end of the verse. Why is Moses' hand mentioned at all? What does this add to the meaning of the prohibition? What is the meaning of "Moses' hand" in this verse?

Rabbi Assi refers to the incident when G*d tells Moses to return to Egypt. As part of his message G*d reveals the Divine Power through Moses' hand. That is, Moses' hand turns white with *tzara'at*. This is the message to us of the verse about Korah which mentions G*d's message to Moses through his hand, namely that the one who acts like Korah is worthy of becoming *m'tzorah* (afflicted with *tzara'at*).

There is a hint here that the result of seizing upon a dispute is bad for a person, not only spiritually, but even on the level of the body. There is also an echo in this comment of the Rabbinic idea that *tzara'at* is a punishment for *lashon ha-ra*, evil talk about another.

There is nothing inherently wrong about a Torah dispute, especially if it is for the sake of Heaven, a dispute over principles of serving G*d. When such a dispute causes "evil talk" about another, however, when the dispute itself causes the parties involved to diminish each other's worth or to cause hatred between them, that is called "seizing upon a dispute," and it is compared to *tzara'at* which "seizes" a person's body suddenly. Thus, to avoid being like Korah and his party, we must be very careful to prevent a legitimate dispute from causing *lashon ha-ra*.

To an understanding of the distinction between a dispute for the sake of Heaven and a dispute for personal gain, may we soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.

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