



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

## **Parshat Korach: On Receiving Criticism**

**Rabba Sara Hurwitz**

*President and Co-Founder, Maharat*

There is a fascinating midrash in which Chazal tries to understand Korach's critique of Moshe's style of leadership and the arguments Korach uses to incite others to join his rebellion.

Korach, the compassionate storyteller, describes a widow who must support her two daughters. She owned a field and when she was about to plow, Moses said to her, "Thou shalt not plow an ox and an ass together" (Deuteronomy 22:10). When she was about to sow, Moses quoted the pasuk, "Thou shalt not sow thy field with two kinds of seed" (Leviticus 19:19). When she was about to bring her harvest to the granary, Moses was there saying, "Give the first tithe and the second tithe offering." She submitted to the law, thereby forcing her to sell her property in exchange for two sheep. However, at every step Aaron was there to take the first males (Deuteronomy 15:19) or the first portion of shearing (Deuteronomy 18:4), until she had to give up her sheep, as well, to the Beit Hamikdash, leaving her weeping, destitute with nothing. Korach ends his argument with the cry, "All such evil things Moses and Aaron do on their own; but they hang the blame on the Holy One!" (Midrash Tehillim/Shoher Tov 1:15)

Put this way, it is difficult to see the Torah as a compassionate code of laws, intended to protect those in need. According to Korach, the Torah and those who embrace Torah precepts, are nothing more than narcissistic individuals, with little regard for the welfare of others. Halakha is not designed to enhance our lives, but rather to bring about our demise.

Korach blames Moshe and Aharon for the struggles and hardships that *B'nei Yisrael* faced in the desert. However, Korach conveniently neglected to cite the many *pasukim* that seek to protect the widow, the orphan and the stranger. His populist arguments were intended to incite unrest and dissent for the sake of controversy.

Korach's rebellion can be compared to another episode in the Torah of potential rebellion, with one key difference. Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, also criticizes Moshe's style of leadership. However, while Korach's argument is not based on solicitous information, Yitro's advice comes from a place of support, with the intention of helping Moses become a better leader.

And when Moses' father-in-law **saw** all that ... כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה לְעַם וַיֹּאמֶר...  
he did to the people he said... (Exodus 18:14) (שמות 18:14)

Yitro looked and saw. He did his research and tried to understand the complexity of Moshe's predicament, and then with tremendous love, he guided Moshe on how to serve his people better.

Criticism can be a useful tool to help a person grow, but one should always know from whom the critique is coming. Does it come from someone who cares about you and wants to see you



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

and your teachings flourish? Or does the criticism come from a place of hatred and distrust? Does it come from someone who is willing or unwilling to consider and analyze every angle of a problem?

Not everyone can be expected to agree on every issue. However, trying to undermine and unseat an entire movement by putting forth a populist argument without appreciating the sophistication and richness of a complex religious tradition, as Korach attempted to do, is not a useful form of dialogue.

The Gemara in Eiruvin 13b describes the *machloket*, (disagreement) between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai. A *bat kol* (heavenly voice) issued forth announcing that “both are the words of God but the halakha is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.” But if both are the words of God, the Gemara asks, why is Beit Hillel entitled to have the halakha be in agreement with their rulings? “Because... they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai and were even so humble as to mention the actions of Beit Shammai before theirs.”

Beit Hillel did their homework. They considered every angle of any given controversy. They didn’t attempt a coup and incite others to disregard other ideas. Instead they “saw,” and considered alternative views, and only then did they make an educated argument.

May each one of us have the wisdom and patience of Yitro and Beit Hillel to help offer critique that are truly “for the sake of Heaven.”



*Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.*