

We read in this evening's Torah portion about another incident in which Moses and all he sought to do were betrayed not by the lowly and the illiterate, but by the high-born and the educated. Last week's Torah portion visited the full measure of their wrath upon Korach, and the problems he created, the road of treason he followed, and his evil behavior. They portrayed him as a man fraught with ambition, jealous of the authority of Moses, hungry for power, not above spreading malicious and false rumors in the encampment of the Israelites. He promoted opposition and antagonism, he stirred up controversy. It is no wonder that the rabbis reserved their bitterness and criticism for this man and held him up as an example of the pattern of evil.

The rabbi, however, did not oppose all controversy. What was wrong in the case of Korach was not that he differed with Moses, but that he was not motivated by sincerity and honest dissent. He utilized unworthy and unscrupulous methods, he spread lies.

How did the rabbis characterize this controversy?

"The controversy of Korach and his congregation is an example of a controversy that is not for the sake of heaven."

There are controversies that enrich human life. In a sense, human life cannot advance or make any progress without controversy, without decisions that are arrived at by people without controversy, without decisions that are arrived at by people of various backgrounds and differing approaches. It is out of controversy that a community arrives at a far clearer and more authentic perception of the truth and a closer approximation of wisdom than does a community in which everybody agrees.

The absence of controversy, say the rabbis by inference, is by no means the sign of social or communal health. There is an absence of controversy that is pernicious, malignant, and may even prove fatal. Such is the absence of controversy based on a vast indifference that cloaks an entire community and does not create any need for taking issue or expressing opinions. When you see a community united, ask whether it is united through common indifference and ignorance, or whether it is united because --- out of the clash of antagonistic opinions, it has arrived at a great and high level of insight.

Most of our tradition has seen this controversy. Turn to any page of the Talmud and what do you find? Reports of a controversy; reports of differing

opinion. Of course, when it came to action, one opinion had to have preference over another. The great wonder of our faith is that centuries ago it recognized what we are now only beginning to recognize – that minority opinions have value.

The Talmud has perpetuated the minority opinion of centuries of controversy because it recognized that it is through controversy that opinion is clarified, and the wisdom of different parties may be pulled in and in a synthesis that is superior to the view of one party. This is what one American has called “the free trade in ideas.” It is only in the oldest of all markets, that of public opinion, where the society can really proceed to strength to strength.

But it has to be . . . It has to be a controversy that is sincere, that is not simply a clash for power, not simply a struggle and a contest for prestige or authority. It has to be the honest difference of sincere people. Only out of that kind of conflict, out of the contrast of ideas, will progress come.

It is unfortunate that in American-Jewish life and in our Jewish community here in Omaha we have largely fallen victim to something that has developed in this country, which might be called the “count of affability.” If a man is in office, you do not take issue with him; you do not upset any apple carts. If you are a member of a board, you simply accept the recommendation of the executive committee or the officers. While you might have some hesitancy in concurring, you do not bring this controversy into the open. If you have an election, you do not have two slates of officers. If you do, obviously one group will have to be defeated, and why should anybody be hurt? I must confess to you that I grow tired of this sickening anonymity that I think is impoverishing our communal life. The feeling that you must be amicable, even at the expense of truth, and that losing a race in democracy constitutes a humiliation is unfortunate. It is about time that we introduced into Jewish life what is common in American life – two or three political parties with differing views. When a man loses the contest, he should not be humiliated; he should be honored because he indicated his readiness to serve.

When President John F. Kennedy sought a man to be ambassador to the United Nations who would express in a clear and impressive voice the American point of view, he chose Adlai E. Stevenson, a man who had been twice defeated as a candidate. Stevenson traveled through Latin America, he traveled in a complicated area, and I am sure that he accomplished a great deal in interpreting the American attitude and American hope. He is no less great an American in our hearts today because he was defeated in an election.

It is through controversy, a clash of ideas, not of persons, a clash of differing approaches and evaluation, not the struggle for power, that a better future is forged. Out of this principle of differing views the final instruments for fashioning tomorrow are to be welded, for one thing is true in a controversy, that is as the rabbis put it – people have respect one for another.

I hope that we are already mature enough to recognize that we can differ with another person and yet remain friends. A difference of opinion does not mean any personal enmity or hostility. In our controversies we should be able to listen to one another.

A couple with a marital situation came to see me, and I said to the, "Go home and argue." They said, "Rabbi, that is what we have been doing ever since we married – argue." I said, "You have not been arguing yet – you have been quarreling. You have been talking in monologues without either one listening to the other – just running monologues. Now, I would like you to have a dialogue. I would like you to have an argument in which you not only express your opinions, but also listen to the view of your partner. Maybe you will learn something."

When you have a controversy in the sense in which the rabbis understood it, we listen to our opponents; we establish our viewpoint in the light of their objections and criticism; we scrutinize our approach more closely in the light that has been leveled on it by the criticism of another. We must not only pay attention to – but also respect the opinion of our opponent; we must be ready to acknowledge that it may have something to contribute to our own. None of us is infallible.

There must be awareness that we and our opponents are equally sincere in searching for the truth. In American Jewish life we ought to have a fine discussion about religious views and attitudes. We have three or four different branches of our faith. Orthodox, Conservative and Reform – and each has its own approach. Perhaps we could learn something from these contrasting views, but we do not listen to one another. We dismiss our opponents either as heretics and betrayers, or as the benign inheritors of an evil tradition. "After all, you belong to a branch that is not modern," the more liberal might say to me, while the Orthodox says, "You have broken with some traditions, you are a heretic, an apostate. You are taking us down the road of assimilation."

Nobody listens to me, I'm sorry to say and, therefore, I retaliate; I do not listen to them. We have, therefore, a vacuum, a conflict. This is a great pity, because we have lost the resources of the larger community. The gropings

within Jewish life do not nourish themselves from the fruits of the entire community and, therefore, we become ingrown and parochial. We may think we are liberals; we may think we are advanced; but we have become a sect, and we do not benefit from new and creative and stimulating associations with the larger perspective, the larger tradition and the larger community.

If we were to speak to one another, we would realize that each of us is only a segment, a part with a larger tradition. When there was a conflict between the school of Hillel and the school of Shamite, a heavenly voice said,

“ _____ ” “Both speak in the voice of a true and living God.” Each of them has incorporated in its view something of the truth and truth has become larger because we have been able to preserve views.

So our rabbis, with a wisdom that passes the limits of any one century, say to us in this evening’s Torah portion: Preserve controversy, but be sure that it is a controversy that is in heaven’s name. Let it be controversy in which opponents have respect one for the other, in which both sides are dedicated for the search for truth and in which both sides express the larger loyalty than anyone could have compressed within his own group. Out of that controversy will come not discord and disunity, but the largest and noblest kind of human unity – the kind that preserves difference in respect and in affection. These are the controversies we need. Amen.