

Pluralistic Leadership: On Korach, Collaboration and Disagreement for the Sake of Heaven

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Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Shabbat shalom everyone! I am so excited and honored to be here to begin my tenure as Senior Rabbi of Temple Beth-El!

I arrived in Great Neck a couple days ago and the welcome I've received has been so incredible and so kind.

Actually, it's been like that for the last few *months*: all the emails, and text messages, and Facebook posts welcoming me to the temple. It's already so clear to me what a warm, caring, loving, and welcoming congregation my family and I have joined.

We are deeply grateful to be here.

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So...what a time for a rabbi to start at a new congregation!

The country is in turmoil, and so is the world.

The stock market, the gas prices, inflation, the war in Ukraine, school shootings, violence in the subways and on the streets of New York City, crisis at the border, and, of course, the Supreme Court.

The overturning of Roe v. Wade – probably the biggest political event in 50 years – happened just one week ago today.

It's not exactly how I'd hoped to start my time here. But it *is* the elephant in the room, and it would probably be tone deaf if I, as your new rabbi, didn't say anything about it.

Now, this is not going to be a sermon about abortion or about politics.

I just want to acknowledge that there is a lot of angst in our country right now. You're feeling it, and so am I.

You may be feeling a lot of different emotions: anger, fear, sadness, anxiety, shock – like the country you knew is coming apart and headed toward a dark place.

Or maybe you're feeling more positively about the outcome, and you're hopeful that the country can work through the challenges ahead.

Whatever you are feeling – however you see things – please know that I am here if you want to process it.

I want you to know that I am not here to judge you or to tell you how to think. That's not my style.

As you will come to know about me, I am deeply committed to *intellectual pluralism*.

Pluralism the belief that there can be more than one way that good, intelligent, and thoughtful people might see the world – and that our lives and our community are *enriched* by listening openly, sincerely, and empathetically to people whose views are different from our own.

In Pirkei Avot, the Sages say that disagreement that is “for the sake of heaven” – meaning: when people of good and honest intentions disagree respectfully – is healthy, and we shouldn't be afraid of it;

while disagreement that is “*not* for the sake of heaven” – meaning: when people argue just to be disagreeable or try to tear each other down – is harmful to everyone.

The best example of disagreement for the sake of heaven, the Sages say, is the ongoing dispute between Hillel and Shammai, the two major schools of thought in early rabbinic times.

Hillel and Shammai disagreed about pretty much everything, but both sides argued for their respective views because they genuinely believed their position was the *best* one for the *community*.

That's why the Talmud says about them: "*eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim hein*" – both Hillel's view *and* Shammai's view contain *some* element of divine wisdom.

Neither was completely right, and neither was completely wrong. Both positions were *partially* true.

To believe in the principle of pluralism is to accept that, no matter how right we think we are, people who see things differently than we do may have some things right, too – and we can grow our minds and deepen our relationships by giving them that benefit of the doubt and listening to what they have to say.

It doesn't mean we have to *agree* with them, but it *does* mean we respect them as human beings.

Hillel and Shammai disagreed vehemently with each other, but in the end, they respected each other enough not to cancel each other, but to keep the conversation going.

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The counterpoint to Hillel and Shammai is Korach, whose story we read in this week's parashah.

At some point in our journey through the wilderness, Korach and a group of his friends decided they'd had it with Moses telling everyone else what to do.

"We know God made you the leader," they said, "but you're taking things way too far. The power has gone to your head and we're sick of it.

"You may have the title, but you don't have our trust or respect. God says *everyone* in this community is holy, and our opinions matter, too."

It's a reasonable critique – one that may not be unfamiliar to those of us in positions of leadership *today*.

--Just because you're the CEO doesn't mean people will follow you.

--Just because I'm the Senior Rabbi doesn't mean I have all the answers, and it doesn't mean others don't know better than I do.

Respect, credibility, authority: these things have to be *earned*.

--They have to be earned by building relationships and showing people you care about them.

--They have to be earned by making space for others, by trusting and believing in them, by empowering them, and by listening to them and being open to their points of view – even and *especially* when you disagree with them.

--They have to be earned by challenging people directly when necessary, and not avoiding hard conversations just because they're uncomfortable.

These are lessons I have learned during my 14 years as a rabbi.

--I learned them first and foremost by failing at these things – again and again.

--I learned them by listening to honest and hard feedback from people I care about – colleagues, congregants, family, and friends.

--And I learned them by being open to *learning*: by accepting that, no matter how sure I am about my way of doing things, there are other – and perhaps *better* – ways to do them.

Maybe Moses could have become an *even better* leader if he had listened to Korach's critique – but he didn't *have to*, because the earth opened up and swallowed Korach and his followers whole.

That may tell us something about the Torah's view of leadership: in this case, at least, the model seems to have been more hierarchical than collaborative.

Or maybe not.

The Sages say that Korach's rebellion against Moses' authority is an example of disagreement that is *not* for the sake of heaven.

Not because Korach's feedback wasn't legitimate and *not* because it wasn't at least partially *true* – but because Korach's *intentions* were not *sincere*.

See, Korach didn't really want collaborative leadership; he just didn't like that *Moses* was the one chosen to be in charge instead of *him*.

In other words, Korach's rebellion wasn't about elevating *other people's* roles and opinions; it was about elevating *Korach* – *his* role and *his* ideas – over everyone else's.

He sought *not* to help the leadership become better, but to tear it down.

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As I begin tonight as your new rabbi, I seek to emulate Hillel and Shammai.

--I will strive, first and foremost, to be a leader who *listens*, openly and empathetically, to my team members, and our congregants, and our leaders.

Not to *agree* necessarily, but to listen, and collaborate, and work together to elevate each other and create outcomes that are greater than the sums of their parts.

--I will strive to be a leader who makes room for others – both professional and lay – by empowering you to be *creators* of Jewish life, and pursue your ideas and passions, and mentor you where I can, and not take up too much of the space myself.

--And I will strive to be a leader who is *pluralistic*: to partner with you to nurture a culture that values and embraces diversity of opinion – religiously, intellectually, and spiritually;

One that makes room at the table for everyone who wants to be there;

and one where all our members can feel safe and included by just being themselves and thinking and expressing themselves freely.

In that spirit, please know that I invite you to disagree – with me and with each other – for the sake of heaven, so that together we can strengthen our connections and enrich our community.

I know I will not be perfect. Far from it.

I will fail sometimes to live up to this standard. And when I do, I want you to call me on it.

I want you to challenge me directly and honestly – not to be disagreeable, but because we all care about each other, and we care about this congregation...

And that's how we're going to make TBE the best version of itself it can possibly be.

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Thank you again for welcoming me so warmly. I am so excited to begin this journey with you.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Stoller