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Korach and the Meaning of Machloket

By Professor Daniel Statman

The minor rebellion of Korach and his followers against Moshe and Aharon is described by the sages (hazal) as a *machloket*. According to the mishna in *Avot*, it is a *machloket* of the bad kind, as opposed to the *machloket* of Hillel and Shammai, which are considered to be of the good kind.

The mishna explains the difference:

Every *machloket* that is for the sake of heaven is destined to survive; every *machloket* that is not for the sake of heaven is not destined to survive. What is a *machloket* for the sake of heaven? Like the *machloket* of Hillel and Shammai. What is a *machloket* not for the sake of heaven? Like the *machloket* of Korach and his congregation. (5:17)

What exactly is meant by saying that the good kind of *machloket* "is destined to survive"? R. Yonah explains that when those involved in the *machloket* act for the sake of heaven, then they will be blessed with a long life in which they will enjoy ongoing disputes on many issues (see his commentary to *Avot*). On this interpretation, what is destined to survive is not a particular instance of dispute between A and B, but the *state* of dispute between them. Rashbets connects this idea of the survival of the good *machloket* with the famous Talmudic saying about Shammai and Hillel, namely, that they both present the words of a living God (*Elu va-eluv divrei Elohim chayim*, Eruvin 13b), and, therefore, each position has its own intrinsic value.

On these interpretations, which seem to be a fair reading of the above mishna, there is nothing wrong with a *machloket* provided it is carried out with the right intention. Insofar as it for the sake of heaven (*l'shem shamayim*), the *machloket* is acceptable and even desirable, especially in R. Yonah's view. Parties who dispute with the right intention on one issue are rewarded with a long life in which to enjoy disputes on many other issues.

Yet, this view about the value of *machlokot* seems to contradict other sources which imply that a *machloket* is something to be avoided, even at a high price. A well-known illustration is Rabban Gamliel's response to R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus in the case of *Achai's Oven* (*bava metsia* 59b). The refusal of the latter to accept the ruling of the majority is perceived by R. Gamliel as a threat which must be dealt with using the harshest possible measure, excommunication. And when this measure creates cosmic disaster and threatens to drown R. Gamliel's ship, he stands on his feet, turns to God and says:

You should know that I didn't act for the sake of my own honor, neither for the sake of the honor of my father's house, but for your honor, so as not to proliferate disputes within the nation (*shelo yirbu machlokot b'Yisrael*).

This sounds like a very different picture than the one we saw above. While in the above readings of *Avot*, disputes are valuable and their proliferation should be encouraged, R. Gamliel regards disputes as a danger and wishes to eliminate them. Another source in this direction is the saying that the proliferation of disputes was a result of the deterioration in the level of the disciples of Hillel and Shammai: "When there was an increase in the number of students of Shammai and Hillel, who had not served their teachers sufficiently, then, too, there was an increase in the number of halachic disputes in Israel [*rabu machloket beYisrael*] and consequently the Torah became as two Torahs" (Sotah 47b). In other words, had the students behaved properly, disputes would have been minimized, if not totally eradicated and this would have been a desirable state of affairs.

I shall offer briefly two explanations for these differing views. The first contends that we face here a fundamental philosophical disagreement on the nature of truth. Some believe that, in some sense, truth is plural, hence disputes are natural and even desirable; the word of God reveals itself in a plurality of views, some of which are bluntly contradictory. Others believe that ultimately there is only one truth, hence disputes necessarily express a lack of knowledge, which typically reflects moral failure. In an ideal world, no disputes, no *machlokot*, would exist.

The second explanation makes a distinction between the two meanings of the Hebrew term *machloket*. This word is often translated as 'dispute,' but, often, this English term is too weak to capture the full meaning of the Hebrew concept. For instance, though Korach definitely had a "dispute" with Moshe, characterizing the event as such is serious understatement. Often (though not always) what is meant by *machloket* is much closer to a *quarrel* than to a mere *disagreement*. This is evident from the expression *riv* [quarrel] *u-machloket* which can be found in several sources, an expression which makes a tight connection between *machloket* and personal/social quarrel. On this interpretation, what is disturbing in the proliferation of *machloket* is not the proliferation of *opinions*, but the *social strife* that might follow from it. In an ideal world, disputes would be welcome. In the actual world, *machlokot* are often fueled by envy, lust and honor, and these, as *Avot* says elsewhere, remove a man from the world.

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