

What Korach Teaches Us About the Future of Unity



This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We're pleased to share it here on our website.

This essay was written amid the ongoing war in Israel, a context that shaped both its urgency and its vision of Jewish unity.

The story of Korach casts a heavy shadow upon us, reminding us of the destructive damage inherent in disagreements. However, our Sages of blessed memory, in their eternal wisdom within Pirkei Avot, teach us that another kind of disagreement exists—a *machloket leshem shamayim*, which will endure and ultimately yield positive outcomes. This insight awakens within us the need to examine the complex reality in which we live as a nation, as one large family, wherein profound differences of opinion frequently exist. How, then, can we bridge these gaps and aspire to unity, even when we disagree on fundamental matters?

Our starting point must be the basic and unshakable recognition that we are, first and foremost, essentially one family. This sense of belonging and shared destiny forms the foundation upon which bridges of understanding and acceptance can be built, even when there is not complete agreement.

How can we create unity even when we disagree?

The first and most essential difference lies in understanding the nature of the disagreement. In ordinary disputes, the goal is usually to win. However, just like in a marriage, as well as a unified nation, if one side wins, both sides lose. The true goal is not winning, but mutual growth and development.

What is the difference between winning and building?

When one attempts to win, they do not truly listen to the other side. While the other speaks, they are thinking about how to respond. If we want to build rather than to win, we must embrace the art of genuine listening. In Masechet Eruvin, we learn about the merit of Beit Hillel, whose rulings were accepted because they were pleasant and forbearing. Why should this be a consideration in accepting the rulings of Hillel? Does a person being agreeable indicate that they are correct? Indeed, it appears that their ability to truly listen to the words of Beit Shammai, and even to present Shammai's arguments before their own, is what enabled them to arrive at the truth. True listening allows us to remove our own "glasses" and put on the "glasses" of the other, to understand: Why does this person think differently from us? Even if we ultimately disagree with their opinion, the ability to understand the motivations and assumptions underlying it is a significant step toward bridging gaps and fostering closeness. The very act of genuine listening contains within it an enormous power to bring people together. When a person feels truly heard, when the other side sincerely takes interest in their position, tensions decrease and the possibility for peace increases.

Before Passover, a couple came to me with a difficult disagreement about the Seder night: whether to be at his parents' home or her parents' home. There are matters in which a rabbi need not make a ruling. I listened to them and helped them spend an hour hearing and understanding each other. After about an hour, I said to them: "Now decide for yourselves." They were disappointed. A few days later, the husband called me and said: "Now we no longer care what the decision will be. Each of us understands the other's perspective."

True listening makes room for respect for the other opinion, demonstrates that the other person truly matters to us, and is a central gateway to closeness, even when there is disagreement.

Another difference between winning and building is that when it comes to winning, the goal is an absolute decision, sometimes to the point of “subduing” the other side. When building, however, the aspiration is that everyone feels content and understood at the end of the process, even if their position was not fully accepted. There is supreme importance in making the other side happy, in showing that we care about their feelings, even after a decision that does not align with their desires. When the intention is for everyone to emerge happy, we know to express ourselves in gentle and pleasant ways; we know not to display triumph, even if our opinion prevails. We know how to give everyone a good feeling. In such cases, almost always, the other side will influence us, even if we maintain our position.

Often, the essence of the disagreement is not rooted in the topic of discussion itself, but in the manner in which things are said—the tone, the appreciation, and the love conveyed.

A disagreement for the sake of building, based on listening, understanding, and mutual willingness, not only does not harm, but can add and build, can elevate the relationship to new levels of depth and intimacy. This is true in marriage and also in *Am Yisrael*.

Every individual must constantly feel a connection to the community. Rav Kook taught us that the individual Israeli draws his soul from the collective of Israel.

The aspiration for unity does not require the blurring of identities, but rather the building of bridges of understanding, of complete willingness to truly listen, of a desire for love and construction.

Thank God, *Am Yisrael* is currently in a reality of 85% unity. We must work and aspire for everyone to join the movement of unity. In this way, we will suddenly discover that in most matters, we think in similar ways. We will suddenly discover so many good things, even about those who think differently from us. In this manner, the light of the Divine Presence will shine upon us, and we will merit complete redemption speedily.

Closing the Circle?

In one of the battlefields, the soldiers conducted a ceremony to welcome a new Torah scroll. There was great excitement, and everyone danced, rejoiced, and sang songs from Simchat Torah. A soldier who was there told me that suddenly a religious soldier stood up and said: “I am truly moved. I feel a closing of the circle. On Simchat Torah, I had to stop in the middle of the *hakafot* (processions) and leave for the battlefield, and now I am closing the circle and continuing to dance with the Torah.”

Suddenly, another soldier, who is not religious, said: “There is no closing of a circle here.” There was a feeling of discomfort around. Then the soldier explained: “I am not a religious person. I don’t go to shul, and I have never been to Simchat Torah in a synagogue. On Simchat Torah, you danced with the Torah and in the middle of the *hakafot*, you left for the battlefield. I did not dance. But now—we are all dancing together. This isn’t closing a circle, but opening a new one!”

With God’s help, may we succeed in opening new circles—in unity, in security, in faith, in peace, and in tranquility.
