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## Handling Opposition: Let the Earth Swallow or Rise to the Balcony

[Rabbi Mishael Zion](#) | [Text and the City](#) | Korah 2014

*Offered in prayer for the well-being and return home of teenagers Eyal Yifrah, Gilad Shaar and Naftali Frenkel, and for the better handling of arguments in the world.*

Once again, we live in a time of growing dispute and polarization. The political discourse is increasingly toxic, and instead of engaging in a deeper exchange, disagreeable ideas are tarred and feathered, labelled as outside the camp and intolerable. With one's back against the wall, it feels almost impossible to extend the other side the benefit of the doubt or find any sense in the arguments coming from across the aisle. It would be so much more convenient if the earth simply opened its mouth and swallowed up the opposition.

This is the fate of the opposition described in this week's Torah portion, Korah. In the heat of the desert, banned from entering the land until an entire generation dies, the Israelites mount a rebellion against Moshe and Aaron's leadership. Led by Moshe's cousin Korah and 250 irked chieftains, the rebellion is quashed in a series of miraculous acts, the first of which occurs when the earth swallows the rebels, tents and all. Famously, Korah's mutiny becomes the archetype of the illegitimate argument in Jewish thought:

An argument for the sake of Heaven will endure;  
But an argument not for the sake of Heaven will not endure.  
Which is an argument for the sake of Heaven? The arguments of Hillel and Shammai.  
Which is an argument not for the sake of Heaven? The argument of Korach and his company.

(Mishna Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers 5:17)

Yet, how does one know when an argument is for the sake of Heaven? Almost any argument can be viewed through the cynical lens of self-promotion (as we too often reduce politics to) or aggrandized to be about philosophical ideals and altruistic motives. Hasn't Korach's argument itself endured, eternalized by becoming the archetype of arguments that aren't for the sake of Heaven?

Rav Kook, 1888

Faced with this question, I reflect back on a letter written by [Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook](#) to his brother Shmuel in 1910. It contains a sweet story of brotherly love: Arriving in Jaffa, Rav Kook finds himself serving as the Orthodox rabbi of the resoundingly secular Pioneers of the Land of Israel. His faith in their work and support of them pitted him against the old world Orthodox leadership of Jerusalem, who labeled him a traitor to Jewish Law and Tradition. The argument became toxic when Kook justified a lenient ruling allowing the farming of the Land of Israel during the Sabbatical (*Shmitta*) year. Kook sought to effectively allow the secular Jewish farmers to continue to till the Holy Land, despite the Biblical declaration that once every seven years all agricultural work must be stopped and the land must be allowed to rest. His arguments were laid out in a small pamphlet called *Shabbat ha'Aretz*, "The Land's Sabbath", which he proudly sent home to his supportive brother Shmuel back in Lithuania. In Jerusalem's Old City the book was not received with the same excitement, to

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say the least. A vehement personal attack of Rav Kook was launched. Back in Lithuania Shmuel wrote to Kook to express his poor opinion the old guard attackers. Rav Kook's response reveals a surprisingly measured and ever relevant perspective about such disputes:

*Jaffa, 1910*

Shmuel, my beloved brother,

While your words are true and said in the spirit of justice and pure faith, it nevertheless behooves us to constantly expand our horizons, and to give every person the benefit of the doubt (Pirkei Avot 1:6). Even to those on a distant and undecipherable path! We must never forget that in every battle waged in the war of ideas, once the initial agitation subsides – lights and shadows can be found on both sides of the argument.

Indeed by attunement to Divine will we know that all human action and ideas in the world - large and small - are set and arranged by the One who Reads All Generations, to improve the world and brings about progress, to increase light and stamp out darkness. And even as we battle in fervor for those issues that are closest to our heart, we must not give in to our emotions. Rather we must always keep in mind that even those sentiments opposite to ours – have a wide place in the world, and that “the God who gives breath to all flesh” (Numbers 27:16) “has made everything beautiful for its time” (Kohelet 3:11).

This perspective must never stop us from fighting for that which is sacred, true and dear to us. However it can help us from falling into the net of small mindedness, contempt and irascibility. And may we instead be full of courage, serenity and faith in the God who loves Truth, who will not forsake his followers.

I would be most pleased if you use any opportunity which comes your way to exert your influence, quiet the spirits and increase mutual respect in your circles, as is fitting for people of integrity and wisdom, who know their own virtue and objective as clearly as daylight.

(Letters of Rav Kook, I:314)

Rav Kook does not question the motivations of his opponents, seeking to distinguish between “arguments for the sake of Heaven” and those which are not. Rather, he claims that all arguments are for the “sake of Heaven”, inasmuch as they eventually play a role in “improving the world and bringing about progress,

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A Letter by Rav Kook, from his Jerusalem years

increasing light and stamping out darkness”. He calls upon his brother to rise up to the balcony instead of falling into the net of “small mindedness, contempt and irascibility”. To recall – even as fight for our own opinions – that in some larger scheme of things the opposite force is also playing out an important role in the world. Treat them as a Shammai, Kook might say, not as a Korach.

Kook’s position is rooted in a modernist and mystical faith in the ongoing progress of the world. Yet it can still be valuable to those of us more cynical of modernist progress, or doubtful of a detailed mystical plans. In an age of polarization on one hand and relativism on the other, instead of seeking to push our opponents down into the bowels of the earth, we must hold onto two truths at once: that we can fight for what we believe in without falling into relativism, that we can believe in our own justice even as we respect those on the other side. As Kook urges his kid brother Shmuel, that is the only fitting way for someone who seeks to live a life of both virtue and integrity.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Mishael

p.s. an English edition of Shabbat HaAretz's Introduction, arguably the most important work of Jewish environmental spirituality is forthcoming from [Hazon](#) in honor of the upcoming Shmitta year of 2014-2015 and I'm looking forward to reading it. I'm also looking forward to reading the [new biography of Rabbi Kook by Yehuda Mirsky](#) sometime this summer...