"The earth beneath them opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korach and all the property." (Numbers 16:32)

With this disastrous announcement, we have our eyes open to a profound ground-breaking story in the Parasha Korach!

We immediately ask what Korach did that was so terrible as to bring about such a horrific reaction from God, causing the earth to open up and swallow him along with his partners in crime and their households?

As we are told in the first verse of the portion that his fault was that: "Korach took (himself to one side) along with Dathan and Abiram" (Numbers 16:1)

The words “took himself to one side” are the clue to the core issue. Rashi (Medieval commentator - 11th century) goes on further to explain: "He took himself to one side to dissociate himself from the congregation, to contest the appointment of Aaron to the priesthood. This is what Onkelos (Tannic times commentator) means when he says “and he separated himself.” That is, “he separated himself from the congregation to persist in a dispute."

For us to understand why Korach was punished in such a drastic manner we first need to understand the critical phrase, "Va yikach Korach," which means, "he took (to himself)." By taking an opposing stance to Aaron he demonstrated his selfishness and lack of concern for his people. He put himself and his own ambitions ahead of the welfare of the community, causing a conflict within the community.

We know that throughout the centuries of human history people at all levels have often disagreed, and many times the conflicts are fierce and devastating. But not all disagreements need to end like this. Some disagreements can result in a healthy debate. In fact, when two or more sides have an argument, it is important to explore paths to a peaceful solution from which everyone can benefit.

A good example in Judaism of a healthy disagreement can be found in the constant "machloket," or “separation” between "beit Hillel ve beit Shamai." This is a reference to an ongoing debate between the school of Hillel and the school of Shamai, whose followers rarely agree in their arguments on Jewish Law.

If you have a legitimate grievance and /or disagreement, as Hillel and Shammai had on numerous issues, you are encouraged to discuss it rationally and respectfully (Pirkei Avot 5:20), abstaining from situations in which you find yourself aligned with people who are contentious and disrespectful and espouse conflict for conflict's sake.

This type of angry disagreement is seen in our society today as we frequently encounter divisive and harsh dialogue that leads to an escalation of anger and frustration. It seems that rather than talking and reasoning with each other in a thoughtful manner, we are instead quarreling with each other. In doing so we do not even try to listen to each other's opinion, and we end up unable to come to any mutual consensus and unable to preserve any respect for each other’s point of view. We are too busy arguing with each other to find a way to agree on anything.

Perhaps the reason Korach was cast into such a negative light in the Torah and rabbinic literature was not because of his actual complaints, but because of his bringing his dispute out in the open. Instead of approaching Moses and Aaron in a friendly, non-confrontational manner in order to build rapport, he chooses to surround himself with various malcontents and rabble-rousers who have different agendas than he does. In place of a civilized and courteous dialogue with the Israelite leaders, he provokes a rebellious confrontation brought on by individuals who indeed are evil and disloyal and wish to upend Moses' authority, which in effect represents a direct challenge to God's authority.

All societies need strong leaders and in a democratic system it is appropriate to challenge the leadership’s decisions. Yet I hope that such challenges would be offered in a way similar to that of the machloket, argument, between Hillel and Shammai – consisting of a productive discussion of the problems which ultimately results in solutions benefiting the future of the community, society and the country at large.

While the lesson is old, the application remains true even today in our modern world. As an example, the URJ is beginning to take steps to be more inclusive and conciliatory toward different political views that are not aligned with their agenda. They recognize that throughout the United States, members of the Reform synagogues are now, more than ever, seeking a balance of opinions, both from the clergy on the bima and also from the congregation. But is we enter into these discussion with a spirit of camaraderie, I am hopeful our outcome will be much better than Korach’s experience!