

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



LEADERS DEAL IN HOPE

Korach

There are many themes in Sefer Bamidbar, like the Census and the Journey, but none is as important to our times as Leadership. Much of our Book describes the superb leadership of Moshe Rabeinu. However, we've also got the leadership failure of the tribal heads during the tour of Eretz Yisrael, and, this week, we're presented with the true anti-leader, Korach. It's almost as important to fathom the failures like Korach as it is to pay homage to the paragons, like Moshe. So, this week we have the anatomy of a demagogue.

Let's begin with an argument about when this incident takes place. The Ibn Ezra based on the Talmudic statement 'there's no chronological order (MUKDAM U'ME'UCHAR, literally 'no before and after') in the Torah' (Mechilta of Reb Yishmael, Shira 7), claims that this event occurred during the time of the dedication of the Mishkan, back in Vayikra. The Ramban demurs. He argues that the rule of non-chronology can only be invoked if

there are overriding considerations. Here it's perfectly logical for this rebellion to take place at this time. Korach's claim about being a first-born had been festering since that earlier date, but only emerges now.

I really like the Ramban's comment, because it really rings true. Demagogues emerge when society is suffering, not during joyous celebrations like the Mishkan inauguration. Korach nursed his grievance waiting for the nation to be in turmoil. The Jews' reaction to the sentence of 40 years in the Wilderness provided a perfect storm for our villain. A Hitler or a Father Coughlin doesn't crawl out from under his rock during the Roaring 20s, but during the Depression.

The stated claim of the scoundrel sounds reasonable to the community in distress. In Korach's case, he was calling for the rule of primogeniture, birth order. Hitler and Coughlin claimed that the common man's sufferings were a direct result of the machinations of a Jewish Cabal. People in pain search for bogeymen.

But what was Korach's true agenda? I think the answer is so simple. It's hiding in plain sight. Many commentaries try to figure out the obscure statement: VAYIKACH KORACH, Korach took (Bamidbar 16:1). Rashi

says, 'He took himself to the side.' The S'forno says that he took his followers. B'chor Shor says he took the pretext of the previous incident. The Netziv suggests that he took people's hearts.

I think the answer is very plain. In Moshe's response to the challenge, he states, 'I never took anyone's donkey' (verse 16). Similarly, Shmuel makes a similar claim, 'Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey' (Shmuel Alef 12:3). Do you discern a design?

Great leadership is about giving and serving at the will of the polity. Usurpers are all about taking, and have no concern for the will or needs of the governed.

Two outstanding attributes of great leaders: First, they are not concerned for their personal honor and well-being. Second, they serve at the pleasure of the people, ready to leave when the people's will is made manifest.

I love the quote: A good leader takes a little more than his share of the blame, and a little less than his share of the credit (Arnold Glasow). Leadership should never be about one's glory, but one's inspiring others.

It's not a coincidence that Moshe is described as the most humble human

on the planet (Bamidbar 12:4). True leaders are quick to responsibility; slow to credit.

It's instructive that native Americans called leaders 'Great Father' or 'Great Mother'. I know that this flowed from the fact that their early political units were clans, but it's still significant. Great leaders see themselves as parents. This was clear when the last Patriarch, Ya'akov ends his life with blessings for his beloved children. Moshe recreates this moving scene and blesses their progeny, his flock, as his final act.

One last point which I learned from an insightful article by Rav Yitzchak Blau about the Netziv's approach to our episode: Be wary of passionate positions. There's nothing negative about private passion in a religious observance. However, when one witnesses passionate or zealous followers of so-called leaders, look out! Great leaders engender warmth and love; demagogues and charlatans engender intensity and rapture.

Korach is a prototype of leaders to shun. He represents all that is dangerous and threatening in unhealthy rulers and ringleaders. Thank God we have the alternative reality of Moshe. Moshe Rabbeinu is all that we could ever want in a leader: modesty, altruism and love. 