

The Tactics of a Demagogue
Lessons from the Korach Rebellion

Korach 5780

I.

The word demagogue, a synthesis of two greek roots, the first *demos*, meaning people, and the second *gogue*, meaning gatherer or leader of the demos, seems innocuous enough: leader of the people.

And yet, if one looks at the Merriam Webster dictionary, one finds a far more insidious description, “a leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims and promises in order to gain power”, which is indeed more closely aligned with the colloquial usage.

And, it is equally more closely aligned with the central character, and villain, of this week’s Torah reading.

II.

Korach was, as our Sages were quick to point out, a man of some clear virtue. True, many of these were more tangential to his character, such as his aristocratic standing, being of the Levite tribe, as well as his vast riches, but some spoke more directly to his actual persona. Indeed, the Sages referred to Korach as a “*pikeach*”, a man of intelligence and insight.

Moreover, he was a man, according to the plain reading of the text, of considerable charisma. He is able to persuade men of great stature to join his insurrection, ראשי עדה, קדיאי מועד אנשי שם. He is, in fact, successful in achieving the status of a demagogue, literally leading the entire people, ויקהל עליהם קרח את כל העדה אל פתח אהל מועד, as he succeeds in gathering the entire people against Moshe and Aharon, in the moments just before his demise, and that of his closest followers.

What, then, were his tactics, and what did the Torah hope to teach us regarding the qualities of leadership which we ought to seek in our community?

III.

It seems to me that Korach, and by extension, all demagogues, employ three basic tactics.

First, as our Sages stated, there is no big lie without a small amount of truth.

Korach utilized this tactic to perfection, as so many autocrats have throughout history. Korach started his rebellion with a statement which could have been made by the Almighty Himself, and certainly, by Moshe or Aharon, **כי כל העדה כולם קדושים ובתוכם ה'**, the entire people are holy, and the Almighty is in their midst.

The notion of a sanctified people went back to Sinai itself, **ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים, וגוי קדוש**. And yet, as was so clearly demonstrated at Sinai, the intrinsic sanctity of the nation as a whole, and of each individual member of that nation, in no way precluded the concept that there could and would still be a hierarchy: **ומשה נגש לבדו אל הערפל: והם לא יגשו**, Moshe alone ascended the mountain for forty days and nights.

As such, Korach's linkage of a basic truth, the sanctity of the nation, with the insidious charge that, *ipso facto*, Moshe and Aharon were therefore usurpers in their positions of national leadership, was a complete non-sequitur. It lacked logical basis altogether. And yet, therein lies the first great tactic of the demagogue: with his charismatic and compelling personality, and a basic truth as his launching pad, he is free to make claims that have no grounding in reality.

Second, Korach, or any demagogue, must possess an acute sense of timing. As Ramban masterfully elaborates, the rebellion of Korach could not, and would not, have succeeded earlier in the Jewish people's sojourn in the desert. The Jewish people had

too much faith in the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, and too much to lose with respect to entering the Land of Israel. Only following the spies and the decree against an entire generation, that they would be unable to enter the Land, had the time ripened for Korach's radical message of revolution against the status quo.

The people had far less to lose, vis a vis their own prospects- either way, they were to die in the desert- and their sense of loyalty to Moshe and Aharon, who had brought them out of Egypt with a promise of entry into the Land of Israel, was greatly diminished. A demagogue knows when his time has come, and strikes while the proverbial iron is hot. A pathetic band attempting a putsch in a Bavarian beer hall can become the ruling party in the space of a single decade. Timing is of the essence.

And yet, Korach could have never had the kind of attraction which he had if he had only possessed a kernel of truth, that the nation was indeed holy, as well as a sense of timing. There is always a third element.

As recorded in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a demagogue makes a play towards "popular prejudices", or, in my own words, an exploitation of grievances.

Korach's outrageous claims, ungrounded in any reality, against Moshe and Aharon as having wrongfully seized power against the Divine will were successful precisely because of the widespread grievance against Moshe and Aharon at the time.

We must remember that at this critical juncture in Jewish history, whilst the entire nation was sentenced to death in the desert, Moshe and Aharon were destined to go on to the Land of Israel, albeit after forty years. It is only in next week's parshah, at Merivah, when Moshe and Aharon lose that privilege.

And, thus, despite unlimited facts to the contrary regarding Moshe and Aharon being mere agents of the Divine, Korach is successful, for a time, in exploiting the grievance culture directed at Moshe and Aharon, and telling the people exactly what they wish to hear: it was not their fault that things had fallen apart, but someone else, in this case Moshe and Aharon, the very people who seemingly escaped punishment.

The utter falsehood of this claim is obvious. Indeed, the Almighty had offered Moshe, in the aftermath of the sin of the spies, an opportunity to lead a nation composed only of his own descendants, and to destroy the entire Jewish people. For the second time in less than a calendar year, Moshe flatly rejected the offer, and saved the people.

IV.

Fortunately, the rebellion of Korach was short-lived. In the highly atypical environment of the desert, Divine intervention ensured that his closest followers were swallowed by the earth or consumed in a fire, with his fate being the subject of dispute.

But, the toxic admixture which Korach represented- kernels of truth, precise timing, exploitation of grievances to alleviate the *demos* of any responsibility for their own plight, but instead to blame unpleasant circumstances on some group which is allegedly denying the *demos* its true greatness- in this case, Moshe and Aharon- this calumny has brought untold suffering to civilizations across human history.

It is a lesson for all of us.

Leadership exerts a profound influence over society, and the Torah never sought to obscure that fact.

Demagogues, like Korach, tell the people convenient lies, about their own greatness. Leaders, like Moshe, tell the people hard truths, about actual failures.

Demagogues train people to point fingers and see shadows, to absolve them of responsibility.

Leaders inspire people to discover their own inner will and strength, to empower them to take responsibility, for themselves, and for one another.

Demagogues rally the many by singling out the few and the vulnerable.

Leaders ennoble the many by protecting the few and the vulnerable.

V.

There is an old Talmudic legend that the voices of those who were swallowed in the rebellion of Korach can still be heard to this very day, if one knows the spot. Faint voices can be heard from the netherworld, acknowledging guilt and extolling Moshe. As always, our Sages were prescient indeed, for the lessons of Korach's rebellion have continued to echo across the sweep of human history, until this very day.