

Korach the Populist
(With thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)
Parashat Korach
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It was from the story of Korach, the man after whom today's *parashah* is named, that I came to learn about **demagoguery**. That was the label I came to understand should be attached to Korach: demagogue. That's where and when I learned what a demagogue is: in Hebrew School.

I learned that sometimes there are people who, like Korach, twist the truth, or distort facts, in order to achieve power. They make themselves all powerful, essentially stealing power from everyone else.

But that label, "demagogue," which comes from the Greek, meaning "leader of the people," always left me with a question: *Why do people choose demagogues to lead them?* What led the Children of Israel to put their trust in someone like Korach -- when they've been led so ably by Moses for so long? When one considers modern elected demagogues like Hitler the same question arises: Why? Why did people vote for him? How could they have enabled him to exercise so much power? You can understand how a *Stalin* could rise to the top: he didn't have to contend with popular elections. But *Hitler*? It was the German *people*, after all, who put him over the top. Why? (The case of Mussolini, another 20th century demagogue, is a little more complicated, but one can ask the same question. Because of Mussolini's widespread support, the King of Italy invited him, during a constitutional crisis in 1922, to form a coalition government. Mussolini thus received the reins of power legally from the King -- yet within a year, parties under his leadership won the support of a majority of Italians. Why? Why did the Italians willingly follow him?)



A response to that question came to me this week in a *dvar torah* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (which you can find [here](#)). He uses a different label to describe Korach. He calls him, “The First Populist.” That label, “populist,” makes things somewhat clearer.

For what is a populist? When I first heard the term, I thought it was a compliment. After all, a populist must be responsive to the popular will, right? Well, yes, but that’s not necessarily a good thing. For the popular will may be a **rational** perspective, or it may be an **emotional** perspective. And if it’s the latter, it is possible for otherwise intelligent and reasonable people to cast their lot with someone truly dangerous -- so long as he is responsive to their **emotional** needs.

In a [study of populism produced by Bridgewater Associates](#), which Rabbi Sacks cites in his *dvar torah*, we are given the “Archetypical Populist Template.”

(Incidentally, why would Bridgewater Associates, an international financial corporation, be interested in such a study? Because the study found that the Index of Populism in the developed world today is greater now than at any time since the 1930’s. Since Bridgewater Associates is interested in the political and economic climate of countries today and in the future, this is of serious concern.)

“Populism,” the study reported, “is a political and social phenomenon that arises from the common man being **fed up** with 1) wealth and opportunity gaps, 2) perceived cultural threats from those with different values in the country and from outsiders, 3) the “establishment elites” in positions of power, and 4) government not working effectively for them.

A feeling of being **fed up** leads people to want to put strong leaders in power, with the hope that they will “give them back what’s been taken from them.” (Sacks). That rarely happens. Instead, once such a leader assumes power, things begin to fall apart.

The reason is this:

“Populist leaders,” according to the Bridgewater report, “are typically **confrontational** rather than **collaborative** and **exclusive** rather than **inclusive**. As a result, **conflicts** typically occur between opposing factions (usually the economic and socially left versus the right), **both within the country and between countries**. **These conflicts typically become progressively more forceful in self-reinforcing ways.**

“Within countries, conflicts often lead to **disorder** (e.g., strikes and protests) that prompt stronger reactions and the growing pressure to more forcefully regain order by suppressing the other side. Influencing and, in some cases [in our day], controlling the media typically becomes an important aspect of engaging in the conflicts. In some cases, these conflicts have led to civil wars. Such conflicts have led a number of democracies to become dictatorships to bring order to the disorder that results from these conflicts.”

As Rabbi Sacks puts it, “When populism is on the rise, tyranny is around the corner.”

Between countries, conflicts typically occur because populist leaders’ natures are more confrontational than cooperative and because conflicts with other countries help to unify support for the leadership within their countries.

There is a lot of heat, and rarely very much light. The reason, as Rabbi Sacks puts it succinctly, is this: **“Populism is the politics of anger.”**

Now, what’s wrong with that?

To make a long story short, anger is a terrible basis on which to build or maintain a society, on which to govern a community.

Anger appeals to the worst part of ourselves. It is not a sound basis on which to mediate disputes. ... It’s not a sound basis on which to decide anything at all.

Rabbi Sacks takes his *dvar torah* in one particular direction: After establishing that Korach was indeed a populist, he reminds us that, in contrast, Judaism prizes *respectful* disagreement, and indeed insists on the legitimacy of arguments for the sake of Heaven.

I of course agree with that.

But I would like to focus on the **anger** element. When a political leader, like Korach, expresses resentment, even ostensibly on behalf of the people: watch out.

For anger has a way of engendering anger. Sometimes, when someone expresses anger, you can feel and see it ricocheting around the room. It happens in politics the same way.

Frank Bruni talked about this in a piece he wrote for the *Times* the other day.

He talked about the recent expletive-laden rant by Samantha Bee on her show, and the recent equally expletive-laden rant by Robert De Niro at the Tony Awards.

“When you answer name-calling with name-calling and tantrums with tantrums,” he wrote, “you’re not resisting, you are *mirroring* [your opponent]. You’re not diminishing [your opponent]. You’re demeaning yourselves.” (emphasis added)

When it’s all about anger, it is not constructive. It rarely takes us from where we are to a better future. It often leads to anti-democratic behavior.

Moses discovered that. In the wake of Korach’s rebellion, he engaged in a little autocratic behavior himself. He called on God to destroy his enemies -- which God did. But in fact, that display engendered even more opposition from the people. The people weren’t convinced by that pyrotechnic earth-swallowing demonstration. They continued to resent Moses, and it took a long time before they were free of their ambivalence toward him.

And as we know, it was Moses' expression of anger -- in striking the rock instead of speaking to it, which we will read about in next week's *parashah* -- that led to his being prevented from entering the Promised Land.

We need to be wary of leaders prone to anger, for anger can lead us not to see the whole picture.

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Populism, an expression of the politics of anger, is dangerous.

It's important, in promoting and choosing leaders, to hold one's negative emotions -- which can lead us astray -- in check; to choose leaders who are honest, rational and reasonable; who can look beyond themselves and their own egos to serve the greater good; who have compassion for others. Leaders who are able to engage in respectful disagreement -- disagreement that ultimately unites, rather than divides.

Shabbat shalom.