The current wave of populism and post-truth politics signifies a fundamental crisis of leadership. Vayakhel-Pekudei describes in painstaking detail the completion of the Mishkan, the travelling sanctuary in which the Israelites worshipped during their desert wanderings. It does not seem to have much to say about leadership. But I believe that in this week’s parashah, the Torah speaks precisely to this existential issue.

The Torah teaches us that the basic qualifications for leadership are integrity, knowledge and relationships.
Integrity: The Mishkan was constructed using valuable gifts donated by the people – but they brought too much. Rather than pocketing the difference, the craftsmen reported the surplus to Moses. Similarly, upon the completion of the work, Moses drew up detailed, public financial accounts (Ex. 38:21-29). Why? Midrash Tanḥuma explain that people inevitably suspect their leaders of corruption: “[Moses] eats of that which is ours and drinks of that which is ours….A man who is in charge of the work of the Mishkan, talents of silver, talents of gold, uncounted, unweighted and unnumbered – what else do you expect, that he should not be rich?” When Moses heard this, he said “By your lives! As soon as the work of the Mishkan is finished, I shall render them an account.”
Knowledge: Bezalel, the chief craftsman of the Mishkan, had the ability to work delicately with gold, silver, copper, precious stones, wood and textiles. But what kinds of knowledge does a leader need? We learn that Bezalel was endowed by God with four qualities: hokhmah, tevunah, da’at and melakhah (35:31). The first three of these words all refer to the same semantic field – knowledge, wisdom, reason, understanding. Various scholars have suggested that the words signify knowledge that comes from different sources. Hokhmah, for example, might be learned from a teacher, while tevunah derives from observation and da’at from logical inferences. What connects these with the fourth word, melakhah, which means work or craft?
Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (pronounced niko-makean-350 B.C.E.) suggests that there are two types of knowledge: theoretical and practical. Practical knowledge is what enables us to act and comes in two forms. Technical knowledge (techne) is like a set of instructions, for example the procedures an electrician goes through to diagnose and repair a fault. As the Torah's juxtaposition of knowledge and craft implies, this kind of practical know-how also draws on the theoretical, as in the case of an engineer who uses the insights of physics to design a new semiconductor. In contrast, practical judgement (phronesis) is the ability to respond dynamically to changing situations based on accumulated experience and reflection. This applies particularly to interpersonal fields such as teaching or politics, where the ‘material’ (other people) is highly complex, constantly in flux, and not amenable to a simple blueprint.
Relationships: An ability to work with people is the third marker of leadership. Our parashah not only highlights Bezalel’s readiness to share knowledge – ‘to give instruction’ (35:34) – but emphasizes that the construction of the Mishkan was a collective enterprise, funded and carried out by the people as a whole. The Torah, refracted through an Aristotelian prism, teaches that leading people requires its own forms of subtle knowledge based on experience and, crucially, the capacity for self-awareness and reflection.
More than one contemporary politician who could benefit from this lesson springs to mind. But modern democracy – unlike the Torah’s model – presents us, the people, with an opportunity and a challenge. If we want leaders with integrity, knowledge and the ability to work with people, it’s up to us to vote for them – and then hold them to account.