

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

A Kindly Word for a Political Opponent?

Last week I was pleasantly surprised to read supportive and sensitive words from a politician about his rival. To give you a little background: South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg was struggling to address an unfortunate shooting in his town. A police officer fatally shot a black man. The officer was wearing a body camera but it was not turned on. The officers in South Bend are required to keep their cameras on. Many in the South Bend community were outraged. When Mayor Buttigieg attended a gathering with the protestors he was confronted with a strong message of anger. This account received national attention. But what was not widely broadcast was the reaction of one of the Mayor's political opponents.

An article in the New York Times (Monday, June 24) reported the comments of Oliver Davis, a black member of the South Bend City Council and a sharp critic of Mayor Buttigieg. When asked how the Mayor fared in the protest meeting, Oliver replied: "If he cries and sheds tears then people say he's weak. If he doesn't shed a tear people say he's cold. If he gets angry, people say he's out of control. If he has a flat face and doesn't say anything, people say he doesn't feel our pain." Oliver continued that he admired the Mayor's courage for wading into a crowd of protestors and grieving relatives: "Very few people could have withstood what he went through without completely losing it."

More interesting to me than the Mayor's "courage" was the fact that a political opponent chose to offer a measured and generous message. Instead of taking advantage of a wounded foe, Oliver lifted the discussion to a mature and adult level. What a refreshing change of pace!

This week's Torah portion, *Korach*, includes a darker, more familiar political confrontation. Korach, a leader of the tribe of Levi, together with Datan and Aviram, princes of the tribe of Reuben, whipped up a revolt against Moses and Aaron. The rebels employed classic and effective rhetorical strategies in an attempt to overthrow

the leaders of Israel. To gain power, they rallied protestors to challenge the right of Moses to lead:

³ *They combined against Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Eternal is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Eternal's congregation?"*

⁴ *When Moses heard this, he fell on his face. (Numbers 16:3-4)*

At first glance, their complaint is well-founded. Indeed, everyone is of the sacred covenant. So why is a leader needed? But on closer inspection, it is easy to see that their issue is not that no one should have the privilege of leadership. Rather, their true aim is to overthrow Moses and install themselves as the new leaders. Note how they twist the miraculous exodus from Egypt:

¹² *Moses sent for Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come! ¹³ Is it not enough that you brought us from a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, that you would also lord it over us?"*

¹⁴ *Even if you had brought us to a land flowing with milk and honey, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you gouge out those men's eyes? We will not come!" (Numbers 16:12-14)*

This important passage of the Torah causes us to wrestle with an embarrassing weakness of human character. Why is that, instead of coming together and respectfully debating different ideas, our leaders so quickly devolve into mockery in order to score political points? Sadly, the loser in those selfish tactics is not the so-called "opponent." Rather, the general public is the loser. We all are the victims when potential leaders value their selfish aspirations more than the greater good.

Councilman Oliver Davis provided a wonderful role model. We can only hope that others will follow his lead.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rick

Rabbi Rick Rheins