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### **Leadership in Anxious Times**

"I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." It is rare that a rabbi begins a High Holiday sermon with the words of Thomas Jefferson quoted by Kareem Abdul-Jabar, but wisdom knows no boundaries. Growing up in America, there are some things that I have always had the privilege of taking for granted. Whether there was a Republican or Democrat in office, love of country and respect for the values of a democratic Republic reigned supreme.

In this respect, I always felt deeply thankful for being an American Jew, not only because this country saved my ancestors from inevitable murder in Europe, not only because this country provides me with the religious freedom and tolerance to wear my Jewish identity proudly in the public sphere, but also because American democracy and Judaism

share something far deeper in common: our freedom is derived from values, goods, and a system of laws that cannot be seen, but whose authority is placed beyond challenge. In both Judaism and American democracy one man or woman cannot be God and cannot reign supreme. To be a patriotic American and a faithful Jew, you need to have the intellectual ability and spiritual resilience to protect and obey the authority of a system of laws --- and not the dictates of a single human being. And when we do not have the spiritual fortitude to uphold those values and that way of being in the world, we have failed as a people chosen to bear and transmit the jewels of these two incredible civilizations.

I am both a rabbi and a human being. I like anyone else have biases and preferences, political and otherwise. Mel always makes fun of me that I have the worst poker face in the world -- I am woefully transparent even when I try not to be. At the same time, I take seriously the laws of this country that prohibit me from campaigning for or against any candidate from the bimah -- these laws strengthen our country and make American Judaism better. Our leaders today are just as flawed as

Moshe Rebbeinu and King David, most likely even more so -- none carries the endorsement of our God in Heaven. As I have said many times before, if you mine a tradition as diverse, global, and ancient as the Jewish tradition, you can find texts and values to substantiate any political or philosophical point of view. This is what makes Judaism so difficult, so enduring, and so much fun! What I can do, and what I believe I must do, is to bring the most relevant Jewish texts and values before our community in order to help this congregation make the best decisions. As a teacher and a moral authority, it is my job to share my understanding of Torah and Jewish civilization to navigate decisions that are difficult and crucial, both as individuals and as Jewish community.

There are many texts in the Jewish tradition that illustrate how to be an ethical and effective leader, often through stories of failed attempts at political leadership. The most relevant examples of failed leadership and poor political choices are most certainly found in the stories of Korach and the Jewish people's desire to elect a king in the Book of Samuel. These two stories are coupled together as a Torah and haftarah

portion because both convey stories of the Jewish people choosing the wrong leaders for the seemingly right reasons.

In parashat Korach, the Israelites are resentful of an elite whose positions of leadership are ostensibly undeserved, representing an affront to the inherent equality of all individuals. “If all of us are children of God, if all of us are members of God’s cherished people, then who are you to rule over us? Why are your opinions and choices more valid and influential than ours? And if you are such wonderful leaders, then why are we in a worse situation now than we were as slaves in Egypt?” These are the questions that sow the seeds of rebellion against Moses and Aaron. However, our rabbis teach us that the resentment of the people, however justified, was not legitimately shared by Korach. Rather, he exploited their desperation for his own personal gain.

Korach was a master manipulator. The Art Scroll commentary on the Torah observes, “As is typical of would-be usurpers who must start a popular following to succeed, Korah posed as a champion of the masses and tried to discredit Moses.” Korach positioned himself as a man of the

people, standing up for the little guys and those who lost their inherited positions of authority when Moses and Aaron were appointed to leadership. Beyond the damage potentially caused by Korach's mendacity, he posed an even more grave threat to the Israelites:

Rabbi Hersh Goldwurm submits that once Korah found an excuse to challenge Moses' legitimacy, it was a short step for him to deny the Divine origin of the commandments and hold them up to ridicule -- for if Moses could be suspected of appointing his brother Kohen Gadol in an act of gross nepotism, why could he not be accused of fabricating commandments that had no basis in logic or God's will? (821)

The Israelites had a variety of strong and weak leaders over the course of their history. The unique danger of Korach, however, was that he not only challenged the leadership of the current ruling elite, but also sought to bring down the entire system of governance. Korach was not the equivalent of a less talented or wicked king in later Jewish history; he

stood alone in the damage he could cause to the Jewish polity, the Israelites' relationship to God, and their survival. It is for this reason that Korach's attack on Moses and Aaron is not considered one of the legitimate and celebrated debates in Jewish history. We learn in the Mishnah:

Every argument that is [for the sake of] heaven's name, it is destined to endure. But if it is not [for the sake of] heaven's name - it is not destined to endure. What [is an example of an argument for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What [is an example of an argument not for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his followers.  
(Pirkei Avot 5:17)

The Jewish tradition of debate and intellectual pluralism does indeed have limits. When you strive to make your community better, when you are inspired by a desire to serve the public good, when you debate in order to refine your understanding of ultimate Truth, then your opinions

and assertions are celebrated by the Jewish tradition, no matter how difficult the ensuing conversations may be. However, when you challenge the status quo for personal gain, power politics, or to attack the authority of God, you have crossed a line. Not all arguments make us better, and not all opinions are equally valid. From a Jewish perspective, intentions and character matter, and when your intentions are impure and your character is lacking, you are not worthy of positions of leadership: religious, legal, intellectual or political. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explains why not every individual can exercise leadership equally at all times, despite the inherent equality of humanity:

It is true that every Jew, from the sage to the seamstress, is innately holy, but there is another aspect of holiness that depends on personal merit. The greater a person makes himself, the greater his degree of holiness. In all his speeches in this chapter, Korah referred only to the communal, common holiness. Moses never did. He spoke only of the individual whom God chooses. Moses acknowledges the national holiness, but he added that leadership

depends on personal merit, and it was in this that Aaron was superior to his detractors. (Art Scroll)

Sometimes we believe that it was twitter and social media that democratized our understanding of truth and political power. However, the desire to unseat elites that are perceived to be ineffective and inattentive is nothing new. Sometimes our resentments are very justified, and other times they are not, but we must always be aware of the true intentions of those who claim they can provide equal power, wealth, and authority to everyone.

At times it is not equality we desire, but rather someone that will take charge to protect us and ensure societal order. This is the example of failed leadership we see in the Book of Samuel. Before Saul was appointed the first human king of Israel, the Jews had another king: God. God made the Divine will known through prophets, but God's authority was supreme. When the Jews were threatened by the Ammonites, however, an invisible, incorporeal Sovereign was not going to cut it, even if this was the very Sovereign who created the world,

freed the Israelites from slavery, revealed the Torah, and led the Israelites to the Promised Land. But alas, it was not enough for the Israelites. In the face of their anxiety and fear, they wanted to be like all the other nations. At this moment, they preferred a king that they could see, touch, feel, and hear, even if he could never be as powerful as God. Even though God and the prophet Samuel were disappointed in the Israelites, and even though they considered the Israelites' request to be sinful, they obliged them nonetheless. Ultimately, the chain of Israelite kings descended from the first king, Saul, became increasingly corrupt and disconnected, they forgot to whom they were accountable and strayed from the path of Torah, and we were exiled from our land as a result.

Easy choices made out of fear may quell immediate anxieties, but they lay the path for our eventual unraveling. The more difficult paths -- when we follow the rule of law and recognize the sovereignty of God, despite all of the difficulties involved -- these paths are the ones that sustain us and provide us with the long-term safety, stability, and the security needed to achieve our missions in the world. We cannot

worship at the feet of an invisible set of laws, we cannot experience the Divine in a traditionally tactile way, but idolatry is a path that inevitably leads to sin, corruption, and arrogance. As Americans and Jews, we must always remember our foundational values and truths.

Democracy is difficult and life as a Jew is rarely easy. Both require consistent sacrifice. Both require faith in truths and values that are unseen, yet reign supreme. Both require a quest for Truth and justice in a diverse and dynamic polity. These challenges make both citizenships invaluable, but incredibly difficult to maintain, especially in anxious times, especially when political and religious elites fail to lead equitably, justly, and take the concerns of their people seriously. But they are our birthrights nonetheless, and they are the best systems of self-governance we have to date created and maintained. In her book, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), author Danielle S. Allen teaches us this:

Of all the rituals relevant to democracy, sacrifice is preeminent. No democratic citizen, adult or child, escapes the necessity of losing out at some point in a public decision... An honest account of collective democratic action must begin by acknowledging that communal decisions inevitably benefit some citizens at the expense of others, even when the whole community generally benefits. Since democracy claims to secure the good of all citizens, those people who benefit less than others from particular political decisions, but nonetheless accede to those decisions, preserve the stability of political institutions. Their sacrifice makes collective democratic action possible. Democracy is not a static end state that achieves the common good by assuring the same benefits or the same level of benefits to everyone, but rather a political practice by which the diverse negative effects of collective political action, and even of just decisions, can be distributed equally, and constantly redistributed over time, on the basis of consensual interactions. The hard truth of democracy is that

some citizens are always giving things up for others. Only vigorous forms of citizenship can give a polity the resources to deal with the inevitable problem of sacrifice. (28-29)

This coming election is not only a competition between two candidates or two visions of America's future. It is also a public discussion of what American citizenship means, which democratic institutions we want preserved, and what kind of elite should be making the core decisions for our country. The Bible nor the rabbis could have ever imagined the kind of democracy we live in today -- the Bible favored theocratic rule, and the rabbis an intellectual meritocracy. But the lessons we can mine from our tradition are about the nature of just and effective leadership. Moses and Aaron, God and Samuel, should have been more attentive to the needs and the desires of the people they led. Their judgment of those they led -- and lack of concern for their struggles -- led to a crisis of faith in the entire system that brought them into power. At the same time, we learned as Jews that leaders who promise Messianic realities, radical equality, and unwavering certainty

in uncertain times, rarely lead us to the promised land. They may speak to a core part of us, they might calm us when we are gripped by fear, they may let us feel like everyone else, but they will ultimately lead us to betrayal and ruin.

In this year to come, let us challenge ourselves to take the difficult path and the just path. Let us learn from our textual tradition about how to identify the leaders we need instead of the leaders we want. Let us pray for the welfare of our government, its leaders and advisors. Let us maintain our faith in democracy, despite the sacrifice and delayed gratification it inevitably requires. Let us take the wisdom of our tradition and the strength of our faith into the voting booth. It will indeed make us better Jews and the citizens our nation requires us to be.

Shannah Tovah.