

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Servant Leadership

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“You have gone too far! The whole community are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above God’s congregation?” (Num. 16: 3).

What exactly was wrong in what Korach and his motley band of fellow agitators said? We know that Korach was a demagogue, not a democrat. He wanted power for himself, not for the people. We know also that the protestors were disingenuous. Each had their own reasons to feel resentful toward Moses or Aaron or fate. Set these considerations aside for a moment and ask: was what they said, true or false?

They were surely right to say, “All the community are holy.” That, after all, is what God asked the people to be: a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, meaning, a kingdom all of whose members are (in some sense) priests, and a nation all of whose citizens are holy.¹

They were equally right to say, “God is with them.” That was the point of the making of the Tabernacle: “have them make Me sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (Ex. 25: 8). Exodus ends with the words: “So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels” (Ex. 40: 38). The Divine presence was visibly with the people wherever they went.

What was wrong was their last remark: “Why then do you *set yourselves above* God’s congregation?” This was not a small mistake. It was a fundamental one. Moses represents the birth of a new kind of leadership. That is what Korach and his followers did not understand. Many of us do not understand it still.

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¹ Some suggest that the mistake they made was to say, “all the congregation *are* holy” [*kulam kedoshim*], instead of “all the congregation *is* holy” [*kula kedoshah*]. The holiness of the congregation is collective rather than individual. Others say that they should have said, “is called on to be holy” rather than “is” holy. Holiness is a vocation, not a state.

The most famous buildings in the ancient world were the Mesopotamian ziggurats and Egyptian pyramids. These were more than just buildings. They were statements in stone of a hierarchical social order. They were wide at the base and narrow at the top. At the top was the king or pharaoh – at the point, so it was believed, where heaven and earth met. Beneath was a series of elites, and beneath them the labouring masses.

This was believed to be not just one way of organising a society but the only way. The very universe was organised on this principle, as was the rest of life. The sun ruled the heavens. The lion ruled the animal kingdom. The king ruled the nation. That is how it was in nature. That is how it must be. Some are born to rule, others to be ruled.²

Judaism is a protest against this kind of hierarchy. Every human being, not just the king, is in the image and likeness of God. Therefore no one is entitled to rule over any other without their assent. There is still a need for leadership, because without a conductor an orchestra would lapse into discord. Without a captain a team might have brilliant players and yet not be a team. Without generals an army would be a mob. Without government, a nation would lapse into anarchy. “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 17:6, 21:25).

In a social order in which everyone has equal dignity in the eyes of heaven, a leader does not stand *above* the people. He serves the people, and he serves God. The great symbol of biblical Israel, the menorah, is an *inverted* pyramid or ziggurat, broad at the top, narrow at the base. The greatest leader is therefore the most humble. “Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3).

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The name to this is *servant leadership*³, and its origin is in the Torah. The highest accolade given to Moses is that he was “the servant of the Lord” (Deut. 34:5). Moses is given this title eighteen times in Tanakh as a whole. Only one other leader merits the same description: Joshua, who is described this way twice.

No less fascinating is the fact that only one person in the Torah is *commanded* to be humble, namely the king:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and

² Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, 1254^a21-24.

³ The well-known text on this theme is Robert K Greenleaf, *Servant leadership : a journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*, New York, Paulist Press, 1977. Greenleaf does not, however, locate this idea in Torah. Hence it is important to see that it was born here, with Moses.

follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees *and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites ...* (Deut. 17: 18-20)

This is how Maimonides describes the proper conduct of a king:

Just as the Torah has granted the him great honour and obligated everyone to revere him, so too it has commanded him to be lowly and empty at heart, as it says: ‘My heart is a void within me’ (Psalm 109:22). Nor should he treat Israel with overbearing haughtiness, as it says, ‘he should not consider himself better than his fellows’ (Deut. 17:20).

He should be gracious and merciful to the small and the great, involving himself in their good and welfare. He should protect the honour of even the humblest of people.

When he speaks to the people as a community, he should speak gently, as in ‘Listen my brothers and my people...’ (King David’s words in I Chronicles 28:2). Similarly, I Kings 12:7 states, ‘If today you will be a servant to these people...’

He should always conduct himself with great humility. There is none greater than Moses, our teacher. Yet, he said: ‘What are we? Your complaints are not against us’ (Exodus 16:8). He should bear the nation's difficulties, burdens, complaints and anger as a nurse carries an infant.⁴

The same applies to all positions of leadership. Maimonides lists among those who have no share in the world to come, someone who “imposes a rule of fear on the community, not for the sake of Heaven.” Such a person “rules over a community by force, so that people are greatly afraid and terrified of him,” doing so “for his own glory and personal interests.” Maimonides adds to this last phrase: “like heathen kings.”⁵ The polemical intent is clear. It is not that no one behaves this way. It is that this is not a Jewish way to behave.

“Ruling through fear is not the Jewish way to lead or to behave.”

When Rabban Gamliel acted in what his colleagues saw as a high-handed manner, he was deposed as Nasi, head of the community, until he acknowledged his fault and apologised.⁶ Rabban Gamliel learned the lesson. He later said to two people who declined his offer to accept positions of leadership: ‘Do you think I am giving you a position of honour [*serarah*]? I am giving you the chance to serve [*avdut*].’⁷ As Martin Luther King once said “Everybody can be great...because anybody can serve.”

⁴ Hilkhhot Melakhim 2: 6.

⁵ Hilkhhot Teshuvah 3: 13.

⁶ Berakhot 27b.

⁷ Horayot 10a-b.

C. S. Lewis rightly defined humility not as *thinking less of yourself* but as *thinking of yourself less*. The great leaders respect others. They honour them, lift them, inspire them to reach heights they might never have done otherwise. They are motivated by ideals, not by personal ambition. They do not succumb to the arrogance of power.

Sometimes the worst mistakes we make are when we project our feelings onto others. Korach was an ambitious man, so he saw Moses and Aaron as two people driven by ambition, “setting themselves above God’s congregation.” He did not understand that in Judaism to lead is to serve. Those who serve do not lift themselves high. They lift other people high.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Sacks". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.