



RABBI SACKS

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לעילוי נשמות: פינחס בן יעקב אשר איז ז"ל, עזריאל בן אריה לייב שרטנר ז"ל

The First Populist

The story of Korach has much to teach us about one of the most disturbing phenomena of our time: the rise of populism in contemporary politics. Korach was a populist, one of the first in recorded history - and populism has re-emerged in the West, as it did in the 1930s, posing great danger to the future of freedom.

Populism is the politics of anger. It makes its appearance when there is widespread discontent with political leaders, when people feel that heads of institutions are working in their own interest rather than that of the general public, when there is a widespread loss of trust and a breakdown of the sense of the common good.

People come to feel that the distribution of rewards is unfair: a few gain disproportionately and the many stay static or lose. There is also a feeling that the country they once knew has been taken away from them, whether because of the undermining of traditional values or because of large scale immigration.

Discontent takes the form of the rejection of current political and cultural elites. Populist politicians claim that they, and they alone, are the true voice of the people. The others, the

existing leaders, are sharing out the rewards among themselves, indifferent to the suffering of the masses. Populists stir up resentment against the establishment. They are deliberately divisive and confrontational. They promise strong leadership that will give the people back what has been taken from them.

In 2017, support for populist parties throughout Europe was running at around 35 per cent, the highest level since the late 1930s. Parties of the Far Right gained power in Poland and Hungary, and made a strong showing in Austria, France and Holland. In Southern Europe, in countries like Spain and Greece, populism tends to be of the Left. Regardless of what form it takes, when populism is on the rise, tyranny is around the corner. Human rights are dispensed with. The public grants the strong leader exceptional powers: so it was in the 1930s with Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. People are willing to sacrifice their freedom for the promised utopia, and to tolerate great evils against whichever scapegoat the leader chooses to blame for the nation's problems.

The Korach rebellion was a populist movement, and Korach himself an archetypal populist leader. Listen carefully to what he said about Moshe and Aharon: "You have gone too far!



The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Bamidbar 16:3).

These are classic populist claims. First, implies Korach, the establishment (Moshe and Aharon) is corrupt. Moshe has been guilty of nepotism in appointing his own brother as Kohen Gadol. He has kept the leadership roles within his immediate family instead of sharing them out more widely. Second, Korach presents himself as the people's champion. The whole community, he says, is holy. There is nothing special about you, Moshe and Aharon. We have all seen God's miracles and heard His voice. We all helped build His Sanctuary. Korach is posing as the democrat so that he can become the autocrat.

Next, he and his fellow rebels mount an impressive campaign of fake news - anticipating events of our own time. We can infer this indirectly. When Moshe says to God, "I have not taken so much as a donkey from them, nor have I wronged any of them" (16:15), it is clear that he has been accused of just that: exploiting his office for personal gain. When he says, "This is how you will know that the Lord has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my own idea" (16:28) it is equally clear that he has been accused of representing his own decisions as the will and word of God.

Most blatant is the post-truth claim of Datan and Aviram: "Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land

flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you want to lord it over us!" (16:13). This is the most callous speech in the Torah. It combines false nostalgia for Egypt (a "land flowing with milk and honey"!), blaming Moshe for the report of the spies, and accusing him of holding on to leadership for his own personal prestige - all three, outrageous lies.

Ramban was undoubtedly correct when he says that such a challenge to Moshe's leadership would have been impossible at any earlier point. Only in the aftermath of the episode of the spies, when the people realised that they would not see the Promised Land in their lifetime, could discontent be stirred by Korach and his assorted fellow-travellers. They felt they had nothing to lose. Populism is the politics of disappointment, resentment and fear.

For once in his life, Moses acted autocratically, putting God, as it were, to the test:

"This is how you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord: if these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord." (16:28-30).

This dramatic effort at conflict resolution by the use of force (in this



case, a miracle) failed completely. The ground did indeed open up and swallow Korach and his fellow rebels, but the people, despite their terror, were unimpressed. "On the next day, however, the whole congregation of the Israelites rebelled against Moshe and against Aharon, saying, 'You have killed the people of the Lord' (17:6). Jews have always resisted autocratic leaders.

What is even more striking is the way the sages framed the conflict. Instead of seeing it as a black-and-white contrast between rebellion and obedience, they insisted on the validity of argument in the public domain. They said that what was wrong with Korach and his fellows was not that they argued with Moshe and Aharon, but that they did so "not for the sake of Heaven". The schools of Hillel and Shammai, however, argued for the sake of Heaven, and thus their argument had enduring value. Judaism, as I argued in *Covenant and Conversation Shemot* this year, is unique in the fact that virtually all of its canonical texts are anthologies of arguments.

What matters in Judaism is why the argument was undertaken and how it was conducted. An argument not for the sake of Heaven is one that is undertaken for the sake of victory. An argument for the sake of Heaven is undertaken for the sake of truth. When the aim is victory, as it was in the case of Korach, both sides are diminished. Korach died, and Moshe's authority was tarnished. But when the aim is truth, both sides gain. To be defeated by the

truth is the only defeat that is also a victory. As R. Shimon ha-Amsoni said: "Just as I received reward for the exposition, so I will receive reward for the retraction."

In his excellent short book, *What is Populism?*, Jan-Werner Muller argues that the best indicator of populist politics is its delegitimation of other voices. Populists claim that "they and they alone represent the people." Anyone who disagrees with them is "essentially illegitimate". Once in power, they silence dissent. That is why the silencing of unpopular views in university campuses today, in the form of "safe space", "trigger warnings", and "micro-aggressions", is so dangerous. When academic freedom dies, the death of other freedoms follows.

Hence the power of Judaism's defence against populism in the form of its insistence on the legitimacy of "argument for the sake of Heaven". Judaism does not silence dissent: to the contrary, it dignifies it. This was institutionalised in the biblical era in the form of the prophets who spoke truth to power. In the rabbinic era it lived in the culture of argument evident on every page of the Mishna, Gemara and their commentaries. In the contemporary State of Israel, argumentativeness is part of the very texture of its democratic freedom, in the strongest possible contrast to much of the rest of the Middle East.

Hence the life-changing idea: If you seek to learn, grow, pursue truth and find freedom, seek places that welcome



argument and respect dissenting views.
Stay far from people, places and
political parties that don't. Though they
claim to be friends of the people, they
are in fact the enemies of freedom. 🕯