

KORACH
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by Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Privacy is becoming a thing of the past. Thanks to Facebook and similar online programs. I now know not only what my friends had for dinner but they share pictures of what they are having for dinner with me!

Between those ever present security cameras, the fact that the government is apparently monitoring all my telephone calls and emails – the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution with its, “expectation of privacy” – is becoming, well, quaint.

The public domain has become brutal - and if by some chance the CIA NSA or the FBI misses some detail of your past life, the thousands of journalists or media reporters are sure to find it.

Incredible as it may seem, this is not altogether a new development and we can find precedent for it in this weeks Torah Portion. In *Parshat Korach*, we read that Moses, one of the great leaders of world history was subjected to a similar monitoring of his activities, his behavior and his every word and deed. He had his motives impugned, his integrity questioned, and even his right to lead radically challenged: Moses!

The challenge to Moses' leadership was led by a demagogue by the name of Korach. Korach may not have had at his disposal some of the advanced techniques available today but his intent and desire was no different that that which seems to motivate so many in the public arena in our day.

Some of the challenges that he and his followers leveled against Moses are recorded in the Torah itself. Our sages elaborated further on the confrontation. They pictured Korach as trying to discredit Moses by mocking his teachings.

Here is one exchange, dripping with a sarcasm and ridicule that would have made John Stewart proud: "You Moses have taught us. 'Do not rob the poor for he is poor' That's ridiculous! How can one possibly rob from the poor? Since he is poor, there is nothing to rob from him!"

To this taunt, Moses replied: "Yes, it is possible to rob the poor. The charity we are obliged to give to the poor man is rightfully his. When we fail to give it to him, we are indeed robbing him.

It's actually a pretty good response but I suspect no one heard it over the laughter and applause that had followed the original put down. And I have no doubt that the 30-second sound bite for the evening news 4,000 years ago was Korach's witty and clever attack and not Moses' thoughtful defense. "Torah silly" -charges Korach – “more concerned with the property of the poor, who have none, than the legitimate rights of the

middle class!"

Suspicion of our leaders – is as old as the Bible. It is much easier to make a living in the ridicule business than in the leadership business.

What Korach discovered and first proclaimed in this mornings Torah Portion has become today a part of politics 101 - elementary for any politician or any individual that seeks high office- when others go on the attack, there is little you can do but run for cover and hope the beast is attracted to another victim soon.

Yes, this sad truth was first taught to us by Korach, over 3000 years ago. And Moses was the first victim to learn how destructive such malicious demagoguery can be. Korach was jealous of Moses, *he* wanted to be the leader. It is also interesting to ask where was Korach up until now? Where was he when the Jews were back in Egypt? Where was he when leadership meant standing up to the most powerful despot of the ancient world in the name of an unseen God and demanding: "Let My People Go!?" Where was Korach when Pharaoh brought the entire might of the Egyptian army to bear on the Hebrews cowering on the shore of the Red Sea? Where was Korach when leadership meant climbing Mount Sinai to stand face to face with God Himself? But now, now that Moses has successfully led the people through these most trying of challenges and they are on the brink of entering the Promised Land, *now* Korach stands up and is prepared to challenge Moses' leadership and ridicule him.

Where was Korach when the times demanded real leadership? Nowhere to be found because the truth is he didn't really have a plan. The only thing he is good at is criticizing other people's plans. Sound like any politicians you know? Beware of those who are quick to criticize, but slow to offer alternatives.

Korach challenges Moses: "You promised us a land flowing with milk and honey... yet here we are still in the wilderness!" Nowhere does Korach offer a better suggestion for how to accomplish the goal of getting to the Promised Land, but he quickly learns he doesn't need a plan - vocal attacks on Moses leadership are enough to get him elected. My friends, **THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF LEADERS, THOSE WHO DO THE POPULAR THING, AND THOSE WHO DO THE RIGHT THING. DOING THE POPULAR THING WILL GET YOU INTO OFFICE, DOING THE RIGHT THING WILL GET YOU INTO HISTORY!**

Korach and Moses were interested in two very different goals. Korach was interested in popularity, in getting elected. He had no program; indeed he needed no program to achieve his goal. His was a message of fear and cynicism, and then as today, it was very very effective. Korach had a lust for power and he was willing to tap into every destructive force and negative emotion to win him office.

Yes, Korach is alive and well in 2013 -and he would make a good living as a political consultant.

I want to make sure I am not misunderstood. I am not at all arguing that our job is to support our leaders unconditionally – nothing could be further from what I am suggesting. Debate and discussion is not only necessary – but as a Jew –it is our lifeblood – it is what we do.

Health Care, Immigration, the right to privacy vs. national security, the role of the IRS – these are all critical and relevant issues that deserve and demand vigorous debate and discussion. But, debate and discussion is almost non-existent in our contemporary society – as it was when no one listened to Moses as he tried to respond to Korach's charges so long ago.

Is there debate and discussion on the floor of congress? Is there debate and discussion in the hearing and after hearing our leaders conduct? Is there even debate and discussion on what passes as news shows on the 24 hour News Cable Channels?

There are real issues here, significant issues which could and should be debated - but don't hold your breath – all I hear are Korach's quick to offer their sound bite, quick on the attack – but short on offering anything that might pass as an alternative.

I will give you a simple litmus test to help you distinguish between demagogues and true leaders, between people who are merely politicians and politicians who are true statesmen, between Moses and Korach: the politicians have small success in the near term and big failures in the long term while the statesmen have small failures in the short term and big successes in the long term.

The irony of Moses is that, if you think about it, he failed - but he was a great leader while Korach, almost succeeded (had it not been for the intervention of God Himself, he would have) but, he was a disastrous leader. You see the truth is that true leaders are destined to fail - because their goals are always far too ambitious.

At a recent conference on the Future of the American Synagogue – one of the discussion leaders challenged us by suggesting that synagogues today are too demanding of success. When the rabbi or educator or volunteer comes with a suggestion for a new program – the first question they are asked is: "Will it succeed?" And if we cannot guarantee success, the program will not be funded and the board will not support it. The problem, this speaker suggested, is that 70-80% of all new programs fail. And from our failures we learn and grow and eventually work our way to success. A willingness to try and fail and not have everyone criticize us, condemn us, and dismiss us is the necessary ingredient for the innovative synagogue.

It is so easy in politics, in organizational life and in our personal lives to let others take the lead, let them do the hard work, let them put their reputations, their kishke's on the line. And when they fail – which they most certainly will - to pounce and criticize and ridicule them - that is not leadership – but that is precisely the state of leadership in America today – and that is the problem our ancestors had to overcome before they could move forward to the Promised Land – and we too will remain paralyzed in the

wilderness till we learn to move forward and embrace true leadership.

It's time for us to smarten up! It's time for us to stop being the ignorant masses so easily manipulated by the demagoguery of cynical leaders. The next time a politician takes a pot shot, instead of laughing or applauding, why don't we ask, so what's your plan? The next time one of our synagogue leaders put forth an idea don't ask, "will it succeed?" but ask, "is it worth taking a chance – do you think we might learn something that will help us find our way forward?"

When reporters or politicians or board members tell us that their job is not to offer alternatives but merely to challenge the leadership, we must say that we will no longer accept cheap shots.

This mornings Torah Portion is a wonderful lesson in leadership. We must become more discriminating in our judgments. It was not until Korach was put behind them that the Children of Israel were worthy of entering the Promised Land. It is only when they came to appreciate the true magnitude of Moses' leadership that they were ready to move forward.

As we read it yet again this year, it should set us to asking: what is true leadership? If your only goal as a leader is to get elected, sell a newspaper or keep you job than it is easy to succeed. But, if your goal is to solve the great problems of your day, well then you will find success a little harder to achieve.

Are you afraid of failing? Have no fear, you will be in good company: Moses failed, Akiba failed, Lincoln failed, Wilson failed, every truly great leader failed! But it is time for us to become a little more sophisticated about the subject of success and failure! Leadership is not about entertainment, or 30 second sound bites for the evening news and success is not about getting elected but about moving the world a little closer to a noble goal.

Akiba died, tortured by the Romans - but the Torah that he died for survived. Jeremiah didn't live to see the rebuilding of the Temple, but the return that he prophesied, and worked so hard for, did come.

Moses may not have entered the Promised Land, his people did.

Korah may have been the man of the hour – but Moses was a man for the ages. Now more than ever we need leaders like Moses, who will solve the problems of today with a vision of a better tomorrow.