

Loyal and Disloyal Opposition ***Shabbat Korach 5777***

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Near the end of my invocation for the United States Senate on January 31, I prayed: “Let the minority manifest an opposition that is as loyal as it is robust.” No, I did not pray only for the minority – in that case, Senate Democrats – that day. I prayed for all Senators, and I directed other words specifically to the Republican majority. Tonight, though, as we read from the Torah about the fate of ancient Israelites who objected to those in power, I address myself to those in our community who generally oppose the current presidential administration and congressional majority. More broadly, I ask us to consider, whoever is in office, and how we may manifest fierce opposition, loyal to our nation and its democracy.

Korach, Datan, and Abiram, the rebel leaders in this week’s portion, are widely viewed by our tradition as much worse than disloyal. Moses, with God’s support, rules the rebellion impermissible, even punishable by death. The rabbinic sages justify the divine decree, distinguishing between two types of argument. Some disputes serve holy purpose; others, do not. Which arguments are “for the sake of heaven?” Differences of opinion about how best to interpret and apply the teachings of Torah. Which are forbidden? Those like Korach’s, about who’s in charge, particularly when God vests the power in the appointed leaders.

Our American leaders are not divinely appointed. Instead, they are democratically elected in accordance with the United States Constitution. Every single time we elect a President, roughly half the population is unhappy with the result. Since January, some folks have taken to calling Donald Trump, “Not my President.” Columnist John Brummett calls him the “second place president.” We needn’t strain our memories to recall eight years of declarations that Barack Obama wasn’t in office legitimately. And before that? Many contended that George W. Bush literally stole the election.

These charges, whether from the right or from the left, are the worst kind of Korach-style rebellions, tearing at the fabric of our society. President Trump’s call on our forbearance is a strain, given that he was chief among those who defamed his predecessor, persistently putting forward the racist “birther” lie. Nevertheless, we owe allegiance to the process by which each President is chosen, fidelity to the result, and honor to the office. George W. Bush, Barack

Obama, and Donald Trump were all legitimately elected president by the process our nation has established. Only if the President is President of all Americans can we support or resist his initiatives.

Winston Churchill famously said, “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried.” American democracy is particularly fraught. Presidential election democracy is indirect, through the Electoral College. Voters in reliably “red” or “blue” states can be taken for granted. Individual citizens’ votes have different weights, with votes in sparsely populated states counting more than those in populous states. Some states suppress votes of minority, elderly, and the youngest voters, through voter i.d. laws, closing polling places in certain neighborhoods, and curtailing early voting, among other techniques. Gerrymandering distorts democracy: In some states, a party’s congressional candidates may garner half the votes but only one-third of the seats. Still, the solution is to resist those systems and work to change them, not to deny the results in accordance with the law as it stands. Disloyal opposition threatens anarchy and violence, two of those “other forms” of government that are much worse than democracy.

If we look back to the Torah, though, I wonder whether the rabbis were right. Are Korach’s band of rebels really complaining about who God has selected? Are they disloyal? Or are they legitimately objecting to the process? Rabbi Edward Feinstein writes, “For the Rabbis, Korah becomes the personification of manipulative demagoguery, personal greed, vicious envy, unquenchable craving for power, exploitation, arrogance, and rebelliousness.” But Feinstein then asks us to examine the rebels’ claim. They’ve heard God say that the Children of Israel constitute a “kingdom of priests.” Not outrageously, then, do they ask why they need a specifically designated priest to act as an intermediary between God and the people. Rabbi Feinstein concludes that Korach is “a holy rebel,” since he correctly cites God’s word in challenging authority.

Perhaps the most significant problem with the Torah portion is the punishment for questioning God, Moses and Aaron. The Earth opens up to swallow all the rebels, with hellfire extinguishing 250 souls. Rabbi Feinstein protests: “Korah is an irritant, a source of aggravation, a challenge to authority and accepted practice. It’s no wonder we want to bury him. But a living community of conscience and spirit needs a Korah.”

Violence should not be Torah’s response to sacred disagreement, and it must not be ours. America needs holy rebels.

What America does not need is violent rebellion. Just over a week ago, James Hodgkinson, apparently motivated by opposition to the President and his party, sought to murder his ideological nemeses, firing a semi-automatic rifle at congressional Republicans and others practicing for an annual interparty baseball game. The House minority whip, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, was severely wounded, with others sustaining less serious injuries. The carnage could've been much worse, but for the heroism of two Capitol Police officers, who killed Hodgkinson in a gunfight that left them wounded.

James Hodgkinson might have been mentally ill. He had a history of domestic violence. He should not have been permitted to own those weapons, which he legally possessed. Because he was killed in the attack, we will never know the full extent of his motivation. Still, based on his social media rants and affiliations, we do well to understand the gravity of the fact that an American citizen attempted to resolve a political disagreement with violence.

Violence, including political assassination, is neither new nor unique to our country. Political violence is a horrific and growing global scourge. John Wilkes Booth murdered President Lincoln in order to install a southern Democrat as President, hoping that President Johnson would be more congenial to rebellious southern states. Yigal Amir assassinated Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin out of perverse religious conviction to stop the Oslo Peace process. Terrorists style themselves "freedom fighters," whether their motivation is twisted religion or an extremist right- or left-wing ideology.

In the wake of last November's election, many people remonstrated with opponents of the newly-elected President. We must give him a chance. Our country is already sufficiently divided, they said, and continued dissent is divisive, at least until election time rolls around again. Now, last week's violence may suggest that our divisions are life-threatening, so we should quiet the discord.

Ross Douthat, a conservative columnist, wrote in the wake of the Republican baseball team shooting, "[W]e have . . . to keep our bearings – which includes remembering that hot political rhetoric is a normal part of high-stakes debate, . . . Only incitement is incitement. Police what you say for lies, for slander, for stupidity, for simple vileness. . . . Abjure the sword, the gun, the bomb. Don't parse your every word for what a maniac might make of it. This is a free country, and still, thank God, a mostly peaceful one. Say what you believe."

This week, the loyal opposition loudly lifts up its voice in support of health care for America's most vulnerable citizens, in the face of a devastating threat.

A loyal opposition doesn't shy away from fighting for justice: for climate justice, for racial justice, for economic justice, for reproductive justice. We don't silence our concern for immigrants, for LGBT equality, or for our Muslim neighbors.

A loyal opposition may even work to correct our democracy's imperfections.

A loyal opposition does pay attention to concession speeches, whether offered by Secretary Clinton or by Senator Sanders, following in the footsteps of Senator McCain, Vice-President Gore, and countless others before them. A loyal opposition acknowledges that Donald Trump was indeed elected President of the United States last November. He is the President of every citizen, those who supported his candidacy and those who opposed it. We must not let him forget it any more than even his harshest critic should ignore that reality, however distasteful. The same ought to have been true of those who voted against each of his recent predecessors.

A loyal opposition emphatically does not take up arms to overturn an election.

A loyal opposition embraces Rabbi Feinstein's regard for Korach as a holy rebel. And let us pray that fire not consume us.

Amen.