

Torah Table Talk

Leadership and the Public Trust

Parshat Korach

Numbers 16:1 – 18:32 / I Samuel 11:14 -12:22



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
“He was the perfect child”*

Not long after Samuel anointed Saul as the king of Israel, the prophet called the nation together to ‘inaugurate the monarchy’ and announce his coming retirement. The prophet was deeply disappointed with the people’s request for a king so that they could be ‘like all the other nations.’ To him this demand represented their lack of faith in God who was the only true king of Israel. Samuel had only anointed Saul when God commanded him to do so. Now, as he approached the end of his career Samuel made a point of telling the people that he had served them honestly and with no thought of personal gain. Similarly when Moses is attacked by the followers of Korach, he tells them that he has served the nation without expectation of personal gain of any sort.

Leaders have a special responsibility to protect the public trust and not to use their authority to enrich themselves. This theme is stated many times in the Bible and in the later Jewish tradition. Hardly a week passes today without some story of some story of the misappropriation of public funds by political leaders, or business executives who use their position to raid the coffers of publicly owned companies. While the idea of public trust may seem obvious, it is a common failing both in the past and today.

I Samuel 12:2-5 “Here I am! Testify against me, in the presence of the Lord and in the presence of His anointed one: Whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded or who have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you!” He then said to them, “The Lord is my witness, to your admission this day that you have found nothing in my possession.” (He) They responded, “Witness!”

Numbers 16: 15

Moses was much aggrieved and he said to the Lord: “Pay no regard to their offering I have not taken the ass of any one of them nor have I wronged any one of them

Exodus 23: 6-8

You shall not subvert the rights of the needy in their disputes. Keep far from a false charge, do not bring death upon those who are innocent and in the right, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer. Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear sighted and upset the pleas of those who are in the right.

Babylonian Talmud 8b

Our Rabbis taught: The charity fund is collected by two people jointly and distributed by three. It is collected by two because any office conferring authority over the community must be filled by at least two people. It must be distributed by three on the analogy of money cases (which are tried by a Beit Din of three). Food for the soup kitchen is collected by three and distributed by three since it is distributed as soon as it is collected. Food is distributed every day; the charity fund...whence is the rule derived? Rabbi Nahman said: Scriptures says: “And they shall take the gold.” (Ex. 28:5)

Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 38a

Rabbi Yohanan said: All the prophets were wealthy. And the proof? From Moses and Samuel...Moses, because he is quoted as saying, "I have not taken one ass from them" (Num. 16:15)--even as a fee. But perhaps it was because of his poverty? On the contrary, that Moses was wealthy is inferred from the verse "Hew for thyself" (Exodus 34:1)--the chips of the broken Tablets are to be yours [and will make you rich]. Samuel, because he is quoted as saying, "Here I am; witness against me before the Lord, and before His anointed; whose ox have I taken, or whose ass have I taken?" (1 Sam. 12:2) - even as a fee. But perhaps it was because of his poverty? On the contrary, that Samuel was wealthy is inferred from the verse "And his return was to Ramah [even though, wherever he went there was his home]" (1 Sam. 7:17), which Rava interpreted as meaning that he had his household with him wherever he went.

Rashi I Samuel 12:5

(Most translations say "They responded" while the Hebrew says "He responded." This led Rashi to conclude that this must be accepted literally. The "He" is God!) And He responded "Witness!" A divine utterance came forth and said (I bear) Witness! This is only one of three places where the divine spirit appeared in an earthly court of law.

Radak I Samuel 12:5

And He responded: (The "he" here refers to the entire nation) The entire Jewish people spoke as one. Therefore the word *vayomer* (he responded) is singular. The sages, on the other hand said that this refers to a divine utterance. The Holy One said, "You people bear witness on what is hidden and I bear witness on what is hidden...."

Questions to Consider

1. Why was Samuel fearful of the nation electing a King as its leader? How would this have served the nation's interests and what dangers were there in placing so much authority in one person? How do you think this relates to Samuel's comments about how he took nothing for himself as their leader?
 2. The Jewish tradition speaks of setting up a system of checks and balances in keeping leaders accountable to the public? How should we do this today?
 3. The Talmud suggests that many of Israel's leaders were independently wealthy. Why? Do you think independent wealth can help keep a person from corruption? What problems do people without wealth who are placed in a position of public trust face that wealthy people would not face? Should this be a consideration in electing public officials? Why or why not?
 4. Rashi and Radak disagree about the meaning of the final verse in this passage. According to Rashi why was it necessary for God to bear witness in response to Samuel's self defense? How do we often respond when public officials declare their innocence? Why don't we trust public officials – do you think this is a new phenomenon?
 5. People in positions of leadership and authority sometimes receive 'gifts.' What is the difference between a gift and a bribe? Is there a difference?
-

Torah Table Talk

is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored
by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York.

If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to
tabletalk@oceansidejc.org.

To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to
tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org.

To see an archive of sermons and TTT go to
<http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*