



SERMON KORACH:ⁱ OPPOSITION

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 6 July 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

[1] In 1913, Rabbi Solomon Schechter – the founder of Conservative Judaism in the United States – was invited to give an address at the opening of a new building of Hebrew Union College, the Reform movement’s seminary. In his speech, Rabbi Schechter said:ⁱⁱ

[I have little] sympathy with [R]eform tendencies; of [that] I have never made any secret ... But there is also another consideration [...S]ome English statesmen speak of their opponents in Parliament ... as His Majesty’s Opposition. This sounds like a [contradiction in terms], yet it contains a deep truth, implying as it does that both His Majesty’s government as well as His Majesty’s opposition form one large community, working for the welfare of the country and the prosperity of the nation. The same principle may also be applied to [Judaism], there being room also for the opposition party [...T]here is hardly any phenomenon in Judaism in the way of sect or movement which has not served a certain purpose in the divine economy of our history.

I think that was rather well-put. Of course Progressive Jews and non-Progressive Jews have disagreements, many of them heartfelt, but we also have shared aims and values and should not see ourselves as out-and-out enemies.

[2] Judaism, in fact, thrives on opposition. The Talmud contains a fascinating rule that if a court unanimously finds someone guilty of a crime, that person is freed. Professor Amy Gutmann points out that this is “a paradox”: surely, she says, “*the more unanimous the decision, the better*”.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Numbers 17:1-13

ⁱⁱ Solomon Schechter, *Seminary Addresses and other papers* (New York: Arno Press, 1969): 240

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam J Zohar (eds), *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol 3: “Community” (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018): 413.

[3] But a 19th-century commentary, Even Yekarah, explains it with an analogy:^{iv}

In the realm of politics, any parliament which [is constituted] without any minority standing against a majority, is not competent to fulfil its purpose. It must be dissolved and new representatives chosen. This is because the human mind is prone to error. And not just on an individual level: a committee is equally prone to error. Thus ... everybody who has an opinion should be sure to state their case ... and to seek to undermine the case of their opponents, and after [...this] the majority will reach a valid conclusion. But this cannot happen if only one opinion is aired, without disagreement. The debate necessary in order to reach a valid conclusion has not taken place.

[4] A perfect illustration of this principle appears in today's parashah. Korach and his merry men rebelled against Moses's rule.^v They lost – quite spectacularly, following a showdown where their offerings to God were rejected – but something of them survived, and survives. We read: *The fire-pans ... became sacred*.^{vi}

[5] The fire-pans used in Korach's rebellion became sacred. Even though Korach 'lost', even though Korach was outvoted by Moses's historic supermajority, the remnants of his brave stand became sacred. They were even built into the altar of the Mishkan,^{vii} the centre of the Israelites' worship. They stood as a reminder of the importance of opposition; the importance of no leader having untrammelled power to rule free from criticism and scrutiny.

[6] Since 10pm on Thursday, there has been a lot of talk about the historic success of the Labour Party, and the opportunities they now have to reshape Britain. Moving into Downing Street is an enormous transition for a party which has been out of power for 14 years, and a few moments ago, Sir Keir Starmer's new administration was included in the prayer we always recite "*for those who govern our country*".^{viii}

[7] But I actually want to take a moment to think about the Conservative Party. Whatever we think about their politics, and I know that this room contains many different viewpoints, we have to

^{iv} Even Yekarah, Choshen Mishpat 20

^v Numbers 16ff

^{vi} Numbers 17:2

^{vii} Numbers 17:3

^{viii} *Siddur Lev Chadash* p 493



recognise that their constitutional significance is no less now that they have left Number 10. Labour has to kick into gear as an effective government; just as importantly, the Conservatives need to kick into gear as an effective opposition.

[8] Their fire-pans, outvoted as they were, need to be built into the front-benches of the House of Commons. His Majesty's Opposition has just as much of a sacred role in the leadership of our country as does His Majesty's Government. The larger the latter's majority, the more vital the former's job to serve as a counterweight.

[9] And so we pray: Eternal God, who has never been out of power, who has never lacked influence, we ask Your blessing for His Majesty's Opposition. We stand in awe of how majority becomes minority and minority majority, and pray that we may heed the words and minds of both. We seek the truth while recognising our own fallibility. Grant the Opposition the humility to accept defeat and the strength to grow into their new role; the ability to analyse and the composure to co-operate, for the good of our nation. Ruler, Sovereign, let human rule and sovereignty be distributed among us in the best interests of society, that we may grow in prosperity and stature, protect the vulnerable and listen to all. בן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

